

I'm Sorry...

by Cheryl Buchholtz, PAC Mentor

To my beautiful, compassionate aunt who was like a mother to us! You opened your home and your heart to us for many years as we grew up. The last day of school, I would get ready for dad to drive us to Alliston to stay at your place for the summer holidays. I couldn't wait to get there to see what you had bought for me from Fuller Brush!

We could, at that time, eat off of your floors they were so clean. Buster was the luckiest dog in Alliston; he was so loved with cooked liver every night. (I still remember that smell. Yuck!) He was brushed and vacuumed daily and even had his own couch. I remember the birds singing while you cleaned their cage.

As I had my own family, you once again loved them as your own...always having ham available for Lance, calling him the "Ham Man."

After Uncle George passed away, something happened that I could not understand at that time. Dad would call me and say, "Aunt Ray called and said that you were sitting in the window and won't get out and help with a damn thing." Dad asked if I could call you. I would call you, but you would get upset with me because *how could I be Cheryl on the phone and be in the window at the same time?* The call never ended well; for this I would like to say I am sorry that I made you angry. I should not have argued with you, but rather went with the flow and validated your feelings at the time. Then, dad would call again and say, "Aunt Ray called, and you left your dog there and never returned to pick it up. Can you call her and tell her that you have your dog?" Once again the call didn't go well, and I want to say that I am sorry. I had no right to make you feel that way when I asked you if you were drunk. I, once again, should have validated your feelings, thanked you for taking such good care of my dog, and reassured you that I would pick the dog up soon. We would come to visit; you had so many cats, and you were slipping on your housework. We couldn't stay long as there was no where to sit, and the smell from the cats was very unpleasant. But in your defense, your love for the cats was noticeable. There was no longer ham there for Lance, the Ham Man, and there was not much food in the fridge for you, but there were cases and cases of cat food! Once again, I need to say sorry, and that this should not have happened to you. If only we would have had the awareness about dementia that I have today, I could have found you the proper assistance in Alliston. Living in Oshawa, Ontario 100 miles away from you was not easy for you or us. I'm sorry this must have been so hard for you. I will never forget the time that we all stopped in before our family reunion, and you asked, "Who are you?" My heart sank...I replied, "You know me, I'm Cheryl." You replied, "You are like hell Cheryl; she is up the street." (I would have been up the street as a child.) I started to cry, and you said, "You are not Cheryl. You are his (pointing to my brother) other wife." I'm sorry that I got angry with you when thinking about how you could possibly forget me. I was like your little girl! How could you do that? I went out to the car so upset. Once again, I'm sorry for both of us. This was hard for both of us.

I'm sorry that I stopped visiting, feeling *why should I go see her when she doesn't remember me?* I'm sorry that I was not thinking of you nor the changes that were happening to your brain. I did not know that your brain was dying; all I knew was that I did not like this new person.

When your cats were taken away, and you were in the newspaper, dad called me. "Can you call Aunt Ray? She is pretty upset that they came and took her cats." I called you as dad had asked, but you had no idea of what I was talking about. I hung up the phone thinking, *darn alcohol*. The next call was "Aunt Ray was found outside at 3:00 a.m. waiting for her ride to work." (She had not worked in 40 years.)

Aunt Ray has been taken to a long-term care home. I remember my first visit when I asked the nurse to please be gentle with you, reassuring them that you are a different person than you used to be. Aunt Ray, I'm sorry that I wasn't able to help you more, but now with the dementia awareness that I have learned from Teepa Snow and her PAC team, I will help others.

Cheryl Buchholtz is a Personal Support Worker with twenty years of long-term care experience. She has a passion for partnering with and supporting people living with dementia. Through her strong connection to people of higher needs, Cheryl is able to see them for who they were, while loving and respecting them for who they have become.

Cheryl has served on the Behavioural Support Ontario Team for five years. With the knowledge, awareness, and skill that she has gained from PAC, Cheryl is not only supporting people living with dementia, she is also consulting and providing ongoing support to care partners as they live the journey of dementia-related challenges. As part of the PAC Team, Cheryl serves as a Support Mentor, guiding new learners through the PAC certification process. When not working, Cheryl loves spending quality time with her husband, two adult children, and five grandchildren. Best not leave her white shepherd, Quazzy, out, as he is the biggest child of the household.