

FEATURE

Seminars helped woman cope with caregiver role

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

Last June, Tonya Dickens-Johnson of Rochester, age 31, had to face a challenge she hadn't anticipated coming so early in her adult life — living with her mother.

Dickens-Johnson didn't need her mother's care — her mother needed hers. It's a situation more and more people face each year as the country's population ages, according to Sister Anne Maloy, RSM, director of the Mercy Center with the Aging in Brighton. For 17 years, the center, which is sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy, has been using workshops and seminars to educate nonprofessional caregivers, primarily family members called upon to take care of an older relative, Sister Maloy said.

Raising two small children with her husband, Dickens-Johnson, who also works, noted balancing the demands of her busy life is difficult as it is. Having her mother live with her was one more ball she wasn't quite sure she was ready to juggle.

Yet Patricia Dickens, 55, definitely needed attention, her daughter said, because she was gradually becoming overwhelmed by the circumstances of her life. Diagnosed with diabetes a few years back, Dickens stopped working in 1992 after she injured her back while working for the New York State Department of Transportation. She lived in her own apartment, but in the past few years, Dickens began having trouble remembering things, and was gradually finding it harder to take care of herself.

In the months since, Dickens has come to realize that learning how to live with diabetes was taking a huge toll on her when she was living alone. Additionally, Dickens said she has been struggling with depression for the past couple of years, and only recently has been given the type of medicine apparently effective enough to treat it.

With the idea that it would be a temporary situation, Dickens moved in with her daughter to try to get her life back on track. Yet, no matter what living options Dickens-Johnson presented to her mother, nothing seemed amenable to her. Eventually, Dickens-Johnson realized her mother really did not want to move back out on her own.

"I never ever dreamed I'd be living with my mother because she's young relatively," Dickens-Johnson said. "I was just really stressed. I was in denial."

Her mother said she and her daughter had trouble seeing eye-to-eye at first.

"At first she wasn't able to understand what I was going through, and she was pushing me to function like I used to function," Dickens said. "It was like cats, and it was crazy."

In search of answers on how to live with her mother, Dickens-Johnson went to an independent living center for seniors and met a woman there who told her about Mercy Center's educational programs. Dickens-Johnson eventually attended a six-week series of two-hour educational seminars last fall at Rochester General Hospital called Care for the Caregiver/Senior.

The series is free, and open to caregivers and older adults. It is co-sponsored by The United Way of Greater Rochester, the Monroe County Office of Aging, the B. Thomas Golisano Foundation and the Sisters of Mercy. Participants are asked to donate \$35 to cover the cost of a bulky community resources guide.

Dickens-Johnson said she found the seminars uplifting because for the first time she met other people who had to take care of their older relatives.

"I enjoyed meeting somebody who was able to identify with the things I'm going through, and just having some people who knew what to do and find the resources," she said.



David Wallace/Photo Intern

Tanya Dickens-Johnson (left) helps care for her mother, Patricia Dickens, in Dickens-Johnson's home. The stained glass piece hanging in window was made by Dickens.

The sessions cover such topics as the aging process and sensory impairment in older adults; caregiving and mental health; family dynamics and communication; community, home, hospital and nursing home care; housing options; legal issues or "elder law"; financial planning; health care proxies and the spirituality of aging.

Last fall marked the first time the seminars were held on the grounds of area health systems offices like Rochester General, the Mercy administrators said. Previ-

ous seminars had been held in such sites as Catholic parishes and other churches; through school districts for their employees; and area colleges. Sister Maloy added that Mercy Center hopes to enlist the cooperation of businesses and corporations to host such seminars down the road.

As for Dickens-Johnson and her mother, both women said their relationship has improved markedly in recent weeks, and Dickens said her health and mood are better. Dickens-Johnson credited the Mercy seminar series for helping her better understand what she could do to help her mother get through her struggles. She added that it's never too early for an adult child to participate in the seminars, even if his or her loved ones are in great shape.

"You never know when your parents will (need) another level of care," she said.

Times and places for the next Care for the Caregiver/Senior Program are listed in the Calendar on Page 14. For more information, call the Mercy Center with the Aging at 716/244-5190.

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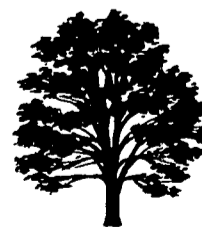
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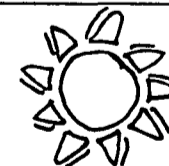


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