

September Caregiver of the Month: Janet Colvin!



A Pajama Party Buoy Caregiver and Her Sick Daughter

Several days a week, Janet Colvin, 72, and her two daughters, Pam, 52, and Cindy, 46, have a pajama party. As the three snuggle into their nightclothes early—around 3 p.m. or 4 p.m.—the brain cancer diagnosis Pam received in January is temporarily forgotten. The three scoop up ice cream and watch old movies in Janet’s home in St. James, Missouri.

“It’s better than sitting around and worrying about things,” says Janet, who has been a caregiver for Pam since February, after Pam had surgery to remove an aggressive brain tumor bigger than an avocado.

Soon after the surgery, Janet drove Pam, who does not have a car, to her radiation and chemotherapy treatments five days a week, for six weeks. The doctors’ and lab appointments have lightened to three days a week now, but tomorrow, Janet and Pam, a former certified nursing assistant, head to St. Louis at 5:30 a.m., to the Center for Advanced Medicine at Washington University for a special treatment.

“Sometimes, if Pam has an out-of-town appointment, we save up and stay in a hotel. We take our own sandwiches and chips because the rooms have refrigerators. We try to make it nice. It’s so hard to make the two-hour drive up and back the same day.”

It’s a wonder Janet can drive at all. Though she scoffs at her own health issues, she has rheumatoid arthritis (RA), lupus, fibromyalgia—a widespread musculoskeletal pain accompanied by fatigue—scleroderma, a hardening and tightening of the spine, and a shoulder that still aches from having been replaced in the last two years.

Despite those conditions, Janet also manages to be a caregiver for her 92-year-old mother, Dorothy Norris, who suffers from a “little” dementia, a humped back and osteoporosis, and lives about four miles away from Janet in her own, one-story home. Janet provides all of her mother’s meals, drops them off, manages her mother’s medications, and ensures her mother takes them. It’s been that way for five years. But on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, a paid caregiver now does her mother’s laundry, mops the floors, cleans the bathroom and makes the bed.

“I can’t do those things anymore because of my shoulder and RA,” Janet says.

When asked how Janet copes with her caregiving duties and her own health issues, she says, “My doctor tells me to lighten my stress. But I don’t want to talk about how I feel. I don’t want sympathy. I raised three children by myself. And I lost a son, a grandson—he was only 18 and died on his graduation day—two brothers and a sister, all within the last two years.

“I get by keeping my faith. If you lose your faith, you don’t have anything.”

She smiles. “A pajama party every few days also helps.”

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