

CAREgiver

MAGAZINE

Remembering



Yvonne Zanos



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PRINTED IN THE USA
PITTSBURGH PA
POSTAGE PAID
PERMIT NO. 503



Pamela Vingle, project manager for the Jewish Healthcare Foundation, front, and Roseann Martino and Darlene Beward Perrotta, Caregiver Champions, participate in the first facilitator training for the Caregiver Champions Program.

Caregiver Champion Program introduces concept of salons

By Dona S. Dreeland

Conventional salons can offer patrons many things — from beauty treatments to fashionable discussions about the arts and all things literary.

But Pittsburgh's Jewish Healthcare Foundation had another kind of gathering in mind when the staff created the Caregiver Salons, in conjunction with its new Caregiver Champions Program. Funded by a \$300,000 grant from the Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, the three-year pilot program is designed to support and empower caregivers of frail, older adults in Allegheny County.

Responding to the needs of caregivers reinforces the Jewish Healthcare Foundation's mission to support the provision of healthcare services and education and "to respond to the medical, custodial and other health-related needs of elderly, underprivileged, indigent and under-served persons in the Jewish and general community throughout Western Pennsylvania."

The salons, facilitated by one of the Champions, will meet in neighborhoods once a month. Those attending will be able to share their stories, exchange tips and information, and hear from experts on a variety of subjects related to home healthcare, the aging process and their changing lifestyles.

"No two groups will be exactly the same," says Nancy Zions, chief program officer. Each group will lead itself and

members will deal with common issues and the specific caregiving situations they find themselves in. The staff feels that by encouraging caregivers to share the knowledge they have accumulated over the years, those who are just taking on the new role in their own family can benefit.

The Caregiver Champions Program began with the training of six volunteers to facilitate their own neighborhood groups. The first salon was held in Squirrel Hill in February.

Several of the volunteers are caring for a friend or relative, according to Beth Polonchak, project coordinator. "Others assume a recurrent role as a caregiver because they have a passion, a drive and the capacity to balance numerous responsibilities."

No two caregivers are alike. Some can keep a list of 20 things to do and not find it daunting, Zions explains. Others can have two things on their list and become frustrated.

But, she points out, there are qualities that distinguish those who have done well in their new role: resiliency, support from others, fortitude and ability to handle complex problems, successes and setbacks, among others. "You have to come to a peace in what you do," says Zions.

The hope is that the salon sessions will help caregivers take better care of themselves, learn of caregiving resources and related information. As Polonchak explains, "Caregivers are often exhausted, frustrated, burned out and overwhelmed. In their mission to provide care for their loved ones, they have neglected their own needs."

With more care going on in homes and communities rather than inside institutions, families are challenged to adjust their lives around their new circumstances. And with the miracles of medicine, a caregiver's role might last for 15 years.

"It's a kind of 'life interrupted,'" says Zions. "A caregiver's life becomes secondary. It's consumed by responsibility."

Both women caution those in a caretaking relationship: "Don't forget about yourself. Find a way, if only for a few minutes each day, to pay attention to yourself. Take a walk, have a cup of tea, chat with a friend ... find a moment and exhale."

Salons, they point out, can offer a perfect time for some self-care. Finding out you're not alone in your concerns and frustrations is refreshing in itself. And while the salon is taking place, the Jewish Healthcare Foundation offers respite care for the loved one at home.

If the Caregivers Champion Program, open to caregivers of all races, religions and backgrounds, is successful in Allegheny County, the foundation plans to expand the service to the region. "We'd be happy to do it," says Zions. **CG**

To inquire about becoming a Caregiver Champion or to learn more about the upcoming Caregiver Salons, contact Beth Polonchak at 412-594-2569 or polonchak@jhcf.org or Pam Vingle at vingle@jhcf.org or 412-594-2583.

Allegheny County is home to 208,000 adults, age 65 and older, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The United Way of Allegheny County reports that 40 percent of older adults live alone; nearly 33 percent of older adults develop some form of disability between the ages of 65 and 75; and 50 percent of those older than 75 have a disabling condition.