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Q&A: Jewish Healthcare Foundation 'Caregiver Champion' Roseann Martino

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When Roseann Martino's father comes home from the day-care facility he attends, there is no guarantee that he will recognize his daughter right away. But then she sits him down in his chair and hands him his favorite cookie, a pizzelle, and suddenly he is home.

Martino, 57, of William Penn Highlands, is a champion. Not in the sporting sense of the word, but in everyday life. Martino is one of the Jewish Healthcare Foundation's "Caregiver Champions."

The Foundation has its "champions" host six-session "Learning Circle" programs for people who want to learn about — or have been thrust into the position of — caregiving. Martino said the program has been endlessly helpful in what she said can be "an overwhelming experience."

"It can help the individual deal with the responsibilities and stress of providing care to a loved one. There is a desperate need for our communities to reach out to caregivers and support their efforts," she said. "This program is one way to provide that support."

Martino talked with the Progress recently about the program, which will sponsor Learning Circle sessions beginning Feb. 23 (pre-registration required by calling 412-594-2569):

Why did you decide to get involved with Jewish Healthcare Foundations' "Caregiver Champions" program?

I have been a caregiver for 10 years for both my mother and then my father. I became involved in Caregiver Champions because I believe that the six-session program provides individuals with the information that I wish I had available to me when I began caregiving.

What are some misconceptions people have about caregiving?

I don't believe anyone is ever prepared to be a caregiver. Their personal plans for the future are interrupted when circumstances lead them to this responsibility. Some are lucky enough to have the support of family and friends to help in their caregiving duties but many do not. The people that have attended the (Foundation's) Learning Circles often talk about being thrown unexpectedly into this situation. They struggle to be a good caregiver to their parents or spouse while at the same time

taking care of their own families and maintaining their own health. Caring for a family member is a rewarding experience but can also be exhausting and stressful. It involves a physical, emotional and time commitment. No matter how much planning goes into the day, a caregiver must always be flexible. The rewards, however, are ongoing and personal for each caregiver – and worth every minute to care for someone you love.

What is the most challenging aspect of being a ‘Champion Caregiver’?

Reaching the caregivers that can benefit the most from the program. Getting the word out to the community and convincing caregivers to attend the sessions is a major objective. Most caregivers do not feel they "have the time" for this type of program but the personal price that many caregivers pay to their own health makes it critical to "take the time" to participate ... Many of the caregivers in our sessions say they feel very alone and overwhelmed by their responsibilities. This program allows them to see that they are not alone and that they can begin taking control of their situation through knowledge and information.

What aspect of the program has turned out to be the most rewarding for you?

As a Caregiver Champion I feel rewarded when, over the course of the six sessions, I see the change in many of the caregivers that have attended the Learning Circles. The group comforts each other by offering suggestions and support. But most often it is a time to laugh, share experiences and take some time to recharge. I feel rewarded when participants leave the program feeling more confident with ideas and resources to make their caregiver experience a little less overwhelming. As a personal caregiver my reward comes from knowing that I did the best that I could to improve my parent's quality of life and provide long lasting memories.

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