

## A QUARTER CENTURY OF CARE

BY DEBORAH CARR

*The transition from independence to assisted living is difficult for the elderly and a source of worry for those who love them. Susan Dixon, owner of Serenacare, knows this intimately. She also knows that cultivating a relationship of trust with family is an integral part of caring for their elders, and critical for the ease of transition.*

*Susan owns and operates two assisted living residences in Moncton: one with 13 residents at 4 Briarlea Drive, and the second with 18 residents at 15 Lady Russell, all private rooms. This summer, she celebrates 25 years spent easing that transition for families, and holistically caring for the body, mind and spirit of her residents.*

### RURAL BEGINNINGS

Caring for the elderly is less about business and more about vocation for Susan. Her respect and appreciation for seniors started during her rural childhood. She grew up on a large cattle farm and pheasant preserve in Albert County, and the family business also included a special care home.

As the eldest of five children, in an incredibly busy home environment, Susan carried considerable responsibility: she watched over her siblings, participated in 4-H, cared for beef cattle, catered for sports at the pheasant preserve, helped with the special care home, and held summer jobs in a variety of Albert County businesses.

"I have great memories of growing up on the farm," she says. "Mom taught me to cook and clean, but local women also had a hand in preparing me for hard work, facing challenges, solving problems. It was all so collaborative. This instilled a sense of community, family and work ethic."

Her upbringing taught her self-reliance. Her first entrepreneurial foray was operating a summer café in the Old Bank Museum in Riverside-Albert when she was fourteen. She did all the cooking and serving herself. At the end of the summer, after paying back her \$500 loan, she pocketed \$100 for her efforts. The experience, she says with a laugh, was far greater than the sum of her profits.

In 1994, at only 23 years of age, Susan launched Serenity Senior Living. Her first seniors residence, Mount Royal Eldercare, was a small home in Moncton's West End.

"I was so young when I started," she says.

She lived on site with her initial three ladies. She soon expanded to seven and hired Tammy Leaman to help. Tammy remains an integral part of Susan's life and business.

"Susan and I have worked together for nearly 21 years," says Leaman. "A big part of what has held us together is that we like each other and share similar values. We're like family. My mother's best friend, my grandfather, aunts, and several other relatives lived in our home over the years."

Nine years later, Susan built a large 24-bed residence called The Briarlea. She later sold the business and built the two smaller residences that she now operates as Serenacare. "I realized, at one point, that smaller is better. It allows us to offer more individualized care and attention to each resident."

She reflects on her growth as a business owner. In her 20s, work was all about 'a race to the finish line,' as she focused on establishing and building her business. "At first, I didn't realize the difference I was making, what my residents mean to me, and what I mean to them. I wasted all those beautiful moments. But in my 30s, I really came to understand the significance of what we do as caregivers, and today I'm filled with gratitude for all that they bring to my life."

The tremendous sacrifices the elderly have made in their lives, and the losses they've endured, have left them with a resiliency that she finds remarkable.

### A SENSE OF BELONGING

Ginny Hill remembers her mom, Arlene Dernier, as a vital, independent lady who loved nice clothes, pretty scarves, still colouring her hair and of course her lipstick at 99.

In 2016, she was "sharp as a tack" and still maintained the family home her husband built. She'd been a widow since 1974, but living alone was becoming increasingly stressful and lonely for her.

"We helped with meals and visited every day," says Ginny, "but at that age, you shouldn't be running your own home."

When Arlene was hospitalized, her daughters realized it was time to move her to an assisted living residence.

"I said Mom, I don't know much about homes, but I'm going to find you a Cadillac of a place," says Ginny.

When she met Susan and toured the residence, Ginny knew she'd found the right place. "It was so inviting. Like walking in the back door of someone's home." The first time she took her mother to see

it, a staff member stopped to fix the back of the elderly woman's hair. "It was just like a daughter would do," Ginny says, "and that's exactly how they treated her."

Susan says the transition starts before anyone moves in. "We begin by listening carefully with the intention of learning what's important to both resident and family members, and by building trust and relationship. We

get to know the resident intimately—their particular likes, dislikes, wants, needs, interests and also those who love them."

Nothing is too much to ask...whether it be particular foods or portions, warm blankets, clothing care, daily newspaper, visits with friends, birthday celebrations, or even on one occasion, an in-house wedding so a resident could watch her son get married.

During her three years in residence, Arlene appreciated the family

like atmosphere of the Special Care Home. The atmosphere was so pleasant that neighbours and friends were more apt to visit. And the staff made her feel included and important. "They shared their lives with her, which made her feel like their grandmother," says

"A big part of moving to this type of home is making sure everyone gets exactly the right amount of care and attention. And that includes the family as well as the resident."

- Susan Dixon

Ginny. "When we'd take her out somewhere, they'd hug her goodbye, and when we'd bring her back, she'd walk in and call out, 'I'm home!'"

Ginny also noticed her mother's health condition improved dramatically with the daily attention and care. Without the stress of caring for herself and her home, she thrived right up until a few days before she passed.

"They were compassionate and caring right until the end. I believe Mom may not have lived as long if she'd remained at home."

For some clients, it's been a generational relationship. Four of Susan Burke's family members have been under Susan's care: her dad, aunt, mother-in-law and now her mom, Midge McLeod.

Burke says she'd never even consider another home.

"Serenacare has been part of our family for over 14 years. My first contact with Susan was in 2005 when my dad, Arnold McLeod needed more physical care than we could provide."

Arnold was a long-time educator, and a well-known volunteer and busy board member with many Moncton-area organizations, but a muscular disorder destroyed his mobility.

"For Dad, this was very hard," says Burke, "but they treated him with such dignity and respect. Every week a group of his buddies showed up and they set them up at a table and provided tea while they played bridge together."



Norval McConnell with his mom, Alcha McConnell, and sister Katherine Paunins.

When Susan Burke's mother-in-law was in end of life, although she'd not been a resident, Susan was able to provide palliative care. "Connie was only there for three weeks, but they treated her like she'd been there all her life," Burke recalls. "They doted on her, loved her, treated her with great care. The common thread for all our family members has been the dignity and true caring that her staff give to every resident. Earlier, when my Aunt Pearl died, I was sitting with her all night and Susan saw I was getting tired and offered to get someone to give me a break. They're aware that in times like that, the family needs care too."

Her mother, Midge, joined the Lady Russell family in 2015. Although she once swam 15 lengths of the pool, she now requires help with all daily activities. Burke finds it hard to watch her mother's abilities diminish. But the staff seem to know exactly when she needs to be alone, and when she needs a hug.

"I tell Mom she's living in a posh seniors hotel! Good food, regular hairdos, nails polished, beautifully dressed each morning," says Burke. She never sensed that the staff felt tending to residents was anything but a pleasure.

She pauses. "I think a lot about Susan's work ethic, commitment to excellent care, her desire to have her staff be the best they can be. As soon as I come in, someone greets me by name and tells me where Mom is. That's very important. They recognize that I belong here too."

Midge's friend, Alcha McConnell, turned 99 this year, and is one of the oldest residents. Widowed in 1997, she'd lived in an assisted living senior's apartment for many years, filling her hours with day trips, card games, visits with friends. But it became harder for her to care for herself and her children were concerned. Three years ago, after a medical emergency, she



The Serenacare special care home at 4 Briarlea Drive in Moncton.

moved into the Lady Russell residence.

Now, while she enjoys the companionship of others, afternoon music and activities, her son, Norval McConnell, and his sister, Katherine Paunins, visit daily and enjoy the peace of mind.

A retired principal and volunteer sports coach, Norval appreciates that his mother is encouraged to be as active as possible.

"This is the perfect scenario," he says. "Mom used to read a lot, but her eyesight and hearing isn't so good now, but she still does everything she can. She gets up early, plays bingo, goes to all the meals and excursions, is rarely in her room. Last fall, she knit dozens of pairs of mittens to donate to schools in the Moncton area."

He notices that caregivers are always present, accessible and accommodating, ready to chat with family or spend time with each resident, no matter their ability to engage. They pay attention to little things. "She hates to waste food, so they portion her meals perfectly for her."

He says Susan's hands-on approach is evident whether she's digging in the dirt and planting flowers for the outside deck, organizing a birthday party or keeping them informed on business matters. "She's so personable and makes you feel safe and welcomed...not just an owner/operator."

### PRIDE AND PURPOSE

Susan has a very low staffing turnover, leading to continuity of service and close working relationships. Tammy acknowledges that her boss is "fussy" and expects a lot from her employees. But no more than she expects for herself. "She listens to us and wants to hear our opinions. Working at Serenacare has given me great pride and purpose in my life."

Maggie Allain has been with Susan for ten years. Although her shift starts at 6 a.m., she always arrives an hour early to get organized. A veteran caregiver, she appreciates the teamwork and close relationships between staff. "We get along because we all want what's best for the residents."

She can't picture doing anything else. "We're one big circle. You bond with the residents. Each has their own stories and

personality, their family becomes yours, and when you lose one, you all mourn together. We're all here for one another."

Danielle Keenan McLaughlin, a 29-year-old mother of three, found her niche here five years ago. Susan sensed she'd be a good fit with the other staff members and although she had no special training hired her regardless.

"I lived with my grandmother from a young age, so I have a special bond with the elderly. Maybe this is my way of giving back."

"She sees things in you that you don't necessarily see in yourself and this makes you want to do better."

- Danielle Keenan McLaughlin

Danielle recalls her seven year old daughter accompanying her during a shift, and how she watched her work. Danielle later heard her telling friends how mommy helps people. "Now she pretends she's a caregiver and helps her stepmother," she says. "It's really sweet."

Both residents and colleagues are extended family now. "I learn a lot about being a mom as they share their own life experiences. They've taught me to enjoy life, slow down. I've learned that life is precious. You see them on their last days and understand that life is really family and love."

And this, says Susan, is what it's all about.

"We're the caregivers of people who carry all this history around with them. They've had such an impact on other people through their lives through their interactions. And I get a chance to look after them, to show my appreciation for who they are, and the lives they've lived. We're caring for the whole history of that person...all they were and all they are."



Susan Dixon and resident Helen Coster share a moment.



Residents at Serenacare enjoying a meal.



Residents at Serenacare enjoying some social time.



Susan Dixon and some of her team at Serenacare.