

Discovering Art

My father became an acclaimed artist *after* his diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease.

BY DANIEL C. POTTS, M.D.

The best man I've ever known, Lester Eugene Potts, Jr., died one year ago last September from Alzheimer's disease. His wife, a selfless caregiver, was at his bedside. I was at his bedside, too. I am his son, a neurologist, and a newly inspired advocate with a story to tell—a story about caregiving, the preservation of human dignity, and the indomitable beauty of the spirit.

Watching Alzheimer's ravage our family, I often felt inadequate as a physician, a less-than-capable advisor as we walked this road of denial, guilt, hopelessness, and loss. It soon occurred to me that I had inadvertently overlooked the needs of caregivers. Subsequently I felt compelled to change my practice and focus more attention on caregiver health, even if this just meant listening to their stories.

Soon enough, I was given my own story to share. When Dad could no longer be managed at home, he became a client at Caring Days, a faith-based dementia daycare center. The longest-running facility of its kind in Alabama, Caring Days incorporates a rich assortment of stimulating activities in a safe and affirming environment. Its professionals espouse a model of caregiving in which remaining talents in each client are sought out and developed—and, in some cases, new ones identified—thereby preserving dignity and self-worth. At Caring Days everyone smiles, and love is the rule of the day.

Prior to enrollment, Dad had largely stopped smiling, no longer able to employ his many gifts. A child of the Great Depression, he was proud of his work ethic. Failing cognition had cost him a job for the first time, and he could no longer perform such tasks as hammering a nail or lighting the Christmas tree.

The staff and programs of Caring Days proceeded to mend this broken man and gave him back joy and pride. My father's cognition, behavior, and mood all improved, and my mother was given true respite as a result. But then came the art.

Lester, a rural lumberman, had never painted a pic-

ture prior to his enrollment at Caring Days. But there he was, instructed in watercolors by a retired artist as part of a college outreach program. Dad became an artist of national acclaim *after* his diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease! He painted, in all, about 75 original watercolors. For some, a template was used; for most, he just painted what he knew. Toward the end, when language had left him, he chose familiar childhood images: a saw, his father's hat and shoes, trees. These last works are the most poignant.

Caring Days' staff saw in Dad a capable man who had lost his "art"—those innate talents which helped provide his identity and sense of self-worth. Looking past his affliction, they saw creative potential concealed behind the

"silent" eyes of Alzheimer's. Seeing Dad struggle with his hammer, they gave him a paintbrush. Through his new-found gift came healing, not only to heart and spirit, but to mind and body as well. His condition subsequently stabilized.

Dad's gift so inspired me that I became a poet, and my poems are featured alongside my father's paintings in *The*

Broken Jar, a book donated to Caring Days for the institution's benefit. Lester's story has been the subject of several media pieces, and was the impetus behind my selection by the AAN as a national advocate. My platform is the creation and support of dementia daycare centers in which art and other therapies are utilized to preserve dignity for the patient and respite for the caregiver.

Dad's story teaches a lesson, whether we be caregivers, patients, or healthcare professionals: No matter what the affliction (our own, or that of our loved ones or patients), we are all artists, gifted with unique talents and capabilities that remain or may be developed. The art is greater than the artist, and has power to preserve self-worth, communicate with others, and paint for the spirit when the body has failed. It remains our duty to provide the canvas. NN

Daniel C. Potts, M.D. is a practicing neurologist and assistant professor at the University of Alabama.





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for a day like this
with his son.

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