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CAREGIVERS

Helping elderly stay at home

By Jeannie Kever
REGIONAL REPORTER

For Carol Lauterbach, as for so many other people grappling with illness and indignities of age, the fear spread beyond pain or even death.

Not that she felt at home in the uncharted territory that she'd entered when doctors said she would need immediate surgery for a brain tumor; not that she welcomed the debilitating side effects of the radiation therapy that followed.

But she also feared the loss of independence, the thought of leaving her home and the neighbors who

had become such an important part of her life.

It is never easy for anyone to admit, but the 73-year-old Lauterbach needed help.

Preferably, help from someone with whom she could find common ground.

Enter Home Sitting Seniors of Florida.

The brainchild of an advertising executive and a social worker looking for second careers, the 17-month-old company seeks to capitalize on one of Southwest Florida's most plentiful natural resources: active older people who want to do something meaningful while earn-

ing extra money, and retirees who need help to remain independent.

As company co-owner Tom Kennedy said, there is a natural affinity among people who understand immediately that "Ike" refers to Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, not to the former husband of rock star Tina Turner. People who realize that accepting a helping hand is just another phase in the evolution of life.

The company matches people who need assistance — not skilled nursing care, but help with such chores as taking a shower, grocery shopping, fixing meals, and address-

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STAFF PHOTO: MIKE LANG
Pauline George, left, waters a plant for Carol Lauterbach, who is recovering from brain cancer, at Lauterbach's Sarasota home.

Caregivers help elderly stay in their homes

ELDER CARE FROM 1A

ing Christmas cards — with those who can call upon a lifetime of experience to aid their peers.

"The concept of keeping people in their homes is very important," said Judy Cuppy, a former social worker who joined Kennedy in founding the company. "It's important to have their pictures around them, their things."

And it is important that a caretaker be a peer, she said, rather than someone who may be younger than the client's grandchildren.

"They say, 'We can sit down and talk to you,'" said 74-year-old caregiver Peg Law, who has worked for Home Sitting Seniors for 1½ years. "They need to be with someone who likes to talk to them. I feel I'm doing a lot of good."

Law, a retired secretary, had cared for her own mother for 10 years, often with the help of home health aides. But the companies she used sometimes sent a different person each day: people who didn't know her, didn't know her mother; didn't know the daily routine, or where things were kept in the kitchen. And Law saw the small disruptions that could follow.

Home Sitting Seniors pairs clients with caregivers from Bradenton to Venice, trying to match personalities as well as schedules.

A well-traveled client may enjoy spending time with a caregiver who can discuss the exotica of Singapore or the castles of Germany, Kennedy said. Those with pets generally prefer animal lovers.

That individualized match is a key to the value of Home Sitting Seniors, said Patsy Bergsrud, a discharge planner at Doctors Hospital of Sarasota.

The company is included among the list of agencies that the hospital supplies to patients needing help with the transition from hospital to home. Bergsrud used the firm to help her father for about seven months.

"Seniors helping seniors is just unique, because that's what they do," she said.

Beyond age, however, the compatibility of personalities and mutual respect must also be taken into consideration.

"We're about the same age," Pauline George said as she began to explain why she and Lauterbach are a good mesh of caregiver and client. "She's an intelligent woman. Hopefully, I am, too. She's uncomplaining, tolerant with all the misfortune she's had."

Finding their niche

Company co-founder Tom Kennedy spent 21 years in the advertising business, working first in Washington, D.C., and then in Atlanta before moving to Sarasota three years ago.

Soon, he met Cuppy, who had recently moved from Indiana.

They began looking for a niche, something that was needed in Southwest Florida but not yet available.

"If we can keep seniors in their home another week, a month, a year or two, then we've accomplished what we set out to do," Kennedy said.

He said that Home Sitting Seniors follows a concept that has been tried elsewhere in the United States but not in this part of Florida: pairing seniors who want or need work — their numbers have increased as interest rates plunged and stayed low, reducing the investment income of many retirees — with seniors who need some help.

The service costs \$10 an hour, \$130 for a 24-hour shift. The caregivers receive 70 percent, Kennedy said.

The agency provides caregivers for as little as four hours a day, three days a week, up to 24 hours a day. The caregivers don't do heavy housework, but will fix meals, wash dishes, and do laundry and other light chores.

They don't provide medical care. They can remind people to take medication, Cuppy said, but they can't dispense it. Caregivers can help clients get into the tub or shower, but can't bathe them.

Most caregivers are in their 60s or 70s, although some are in their 50s, Kennedy said. Most are non-smokers, because most clients don't smoke and don't like caregivers who

Each one must have a current driver's license.

Kennedy said he looks for intangible qualities: "A very caring person, compassionate, sincere. A senior who has a background of taking charge," and will be comfortable guiding clients through activities like planning menus, buying groceries and making appointments.

"We found folks that are very capable, people in their 70s and 80s that still play tennis."

They found people who wanted and needed to work, but weren't interested in bagging groceries or flipping burgers.

Kennedy interviews all potential caregivers in their homes, looking for clues to their personalities and backgrounds. He and Cuppy then check their references and employment histories.

Clients hear of the service through hospitals, social service agencies and word-of-mouth. Often, sons and daughters call, desperate for someone to keep tabs on aging parents.

Each client, too, is interviewed personally, as Kennedy tries to determine who on his roster of caregivers will be the best match. Then the client and caregiver meet, with Kennedy present, to see whether they are comfortable together. If they are not, he said, he finds somebody else.

A helping hand

Carol Lauterbach heard about the service as she recovered from brain surgery at Doctors Hospital last August.

"The doctor said he wouldn't let me go home unless I had somebody with me 24 hours a day," said Lauterbach, whose husband had died last spring.

"I could have gone into a nursing home, at least temporarily," she said. "I didn't want to leave my home. I have lovely neighbors."

After four weeks, she needed help only 12 hours a day; now, she uses the service just four hours a day.

She completed radiation treatments about a month ago, and gradually has begun to do more for herself. She has resumed driving and cooks most of her own meals.

Originally from Wisconsin, Lauterbach and her husband had moved to Sarasota from Florida's East Coast seven years ago in order to be near her son. Her health was good at that time, although her husband's lengthy illness had been stressful.

She had no warning of a lymphoma growing in her brain.

"I didn't even know I had it," she said. "I was just all of a sudden that I talked funny, like I said I needed to go to the pool to get some meat for dinner."

"It happened overnight, from Sunday to Monday."

A friend noticed and called her son. He took her to the doctor that Tuesday. By Thursday, she was in the hospital, awaiting surgery.

Lauterbach is recovering, but it has not been easy. Radiation stole her hearing, as well as her hair.

"The radiation really takes everything out of you," she said. "For weeks, I couldn't eat. And of course, it makes you very, very tired. I'm still very tired."

"At first, I couldn't even walk to get the mail. I still feel I need somebody to do certain things. Pauline even wrote out my Christmas cards."

George, who went to work for Lauterbach last fall, had first heard about the agency through an acquaintance.

"I must be honest," she said. "The financial angle was essential. My husband and I don't have sufficient income. This seemed a nice way of earning it at my age."

George, 71, and her husband moved to Sarasota from the Virgin Islands about six years ago. She had been a licensed Realtor, accustomed to dealing with people. But her husband is a diabetic, and as his health worsened, they'd decided to move to Florida to be near their son and better medical care.

A former commercial artist, she's adept at printing thank you cards and handling other correspondence for clients.

"I love to cook, and I like to sew," she said. "I do anything people want."