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A company's baby boomer-aged caretakers allow older clients to retain their independence at home

Across the generations, a kind of give-and-take



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She was one of few women to get a graduate degree from Columbia University in the 1930s. She lived on her own. She never had children and remained single until she was 43, in an era when the popular radio show "Our Gal Sunday" began with the question: "Can this girl from a little mining town in the West find happiness as the wife of a wealthy and titled Englishman?"

Georgiana Quinlan has always been independent.

Her age — 102 — hasn't changed her attitude. But it has caught up with her body. She bounced back from a stroke about 10 years ago and survived colon cancer at age 95. Now she's legally blind — the result of macular degeneration — and needs some help getting around.

Quinlan's stepson, Bill Novack, and his wife, Ilene, look out for her. But they also rely on a growing service that pairs baby boomers with those of earlier generations. The idea is for people like Quinlan to retain their independence while getting some assistance and even

STAFF PHOTO / CHIP LUTHERLAND / chip.lutherland@heraldtribune.com

Rosemary Hanssen, 61, left, from Senior Home Companions, walks with Georgiana Quinlan, 102, in her Sarasota neighborhood last month. "They get someone to talk to, someone to have a meal with, someone to be a friend," said Judy Cuppy, the agency's president and owner.

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friendship.

"She's reached the point where she needs someone in the house," said Ilene Novack, who shares round-the-clock caretaking duties with her husband. "Senior Home Companions has been our person who comes in and gives us our respite."

The agency, which recently opened a new branch in Charlotte County, serves nine counties in Florida and has offices in Georgia and Indiana. There are 88 companions in Manatee, Sarasota and Charlotte counties, where close to 30 percent of residents are over the age of 65; the companions offer relief to families caring for an elderly relative.

Companions spend time with clients, doing their laundry, taking them grocery shopping or to get their hair done, traveling with them and even evacuating them during a hurricane.

"They get someone to talk

to, someone to have a meal with, someone to be a friend," said Judy Cuppy, the agency's president and owner.

Companions spend between 12 hours a week and 24 hours a day with their clients. The rate for the service is \$13.50 an hour.

"We keep the same person on the job," said Cuppy, adding that a 24-hour shift would be shared by a couple of companions. "A different person coming to your door all the time is very confusing for the elderly."

In August 2002, the Novacks, who live across the street from Quinlan in Strathmore Riverside Villas in Sarasota, hired Senior Home Companions to fill in when they take vacations and to relieve them on weekends.

"You need to get away and have a private life," Ilene Novack said.

It took time for Quinlan to find the right fit — some talked too much. Then Rosemary Hanssen came along.

Soon after Hanssen arrives

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at 8 on Saturday mornings, she and Quinlan, who wears glasses with clip-on shades flipped up, hit the pavement arm-in-arm for a stroll up the block.

Quinlan, whose second husband was 88 when he died four years ago, isn't shy about her intentions.

"I'm looking for a fellow," she said. "I even have a yellow dress: Dress in yellow, catch a fellow."

Unfortunately, most men in her neighborhood have dogs, she said. A real turnoff.

Still, she slips into the bright yellow dress with a large, white collar embroidered with black stitching and accented with large, shiny black buttons.

"She picks up her legs and

struts out there," said Hanssen, who cares for three clients. "She's social with her neighbors."

Quinlan and Hanssen, 61, also spend afternoons sitting outside, talking and singing along to musicals like "Gigi" and "My Fair Lady."

"She can't see them, but she can sit there and sing all the words with them," Hanssen said.

By this time, Hanssen knows all the words, too. Nothing gets them going more than that scene in "My Fair Lady" when Audrey Hepburn's Eliza Doolittle sheds her lady-like inhibitions while cheering at the Ascot horseraces and blurts out: "Move yer bloomin' arse!"

"That's our favorite part," Hanssen said. "We go hysterical."

Hanssen has been spending weekends with Quinlan, whom she calls "a tough broad from Brooklyn," since March. She pours Quinlan's customary morning bowl of Crispix or

bite-sized Shredded Wheat, or, when she's in the mood, Froot Loops, and a banana.

It's part of her job to prepare Quinlan's meals: a few pieces of walnut, a thumb-size slice of Danish and half a sandwich for lunch; lemon pepper chicken from Publix, sweet potatoes and peas for dinner.

But the meals are served more as obligations between moments of friendship.

"She tells me a lot about her life," Hanssen said, "how she went to Europe, sailed on a boat to Italy, went to France."

Their relationship is a generational give-and-take.

"She's a very lovely girl," Quinlan said of Hanssen, who reads to her from books like "Mayflower" by Nathaniel Philbrick.

Hanssen listens to Quinlan's stories about the Great Depression. Quinlan absorbs Hanssen's youthful energy and doesn't hesitate to pepper her with questions about what life is like for a "girl" these days.