

**HEROES OF GERIATRIC CARE:
THE JOHN A. HARTFORD FOUNDATION
STORY CONTEST**

Submitted by:

Dana Territo

Director of Services

Alzheimer's Services of the Capital Area/Charlie's Place

3772 North Blvd.

Baton Rouge, LA 70806

225.334.7494 225.572.9250

services@alzbr.org

Geriatric care.

When I think of that terminology, I am reminded of my childhood home in which I shared with my parents, eight siblings, a maternal grandmother and a paternal grandfather. Home was a geriatric center of sorts, though at the time, I was not aware of the term. My grandfather had heart disease. My grandmother developed cancer, and at 10 years of age, I moved into her bedroom to assist her. The care of my grandparents seemed so natural, all of us as a family making sure their needs were met. My love for the elderly population grew through them; values instilled in me by my parents of honor, respect and dignity woven through the fiber of our rearing. My foundation for geriatric care was spawned.

Home and *Love*.

Studies show that 80% of Alzheimer's care is given in the home. The stress on families caring for a loved one with Alzheimer's or dementia is unfathomable, and Alzheimer's disease now precedes heart disease and cancer as the most costly disease ever. Caregivers, for the most part, are determined to keep their loved one home for as long as possible, because home is that familiar, comfortable place full of memories and regular routines, and *love*.

I have many stories in my over 20 years in the geriatric arena. I could write more on how taking care of my grandmother influenced my vocation now. I could write about Peggy, who was the instrument that began my journey in the world of Alzheimer's, as I had companioned her in her care as a volunteer for over 20 years. I could write about my experiences in working in a specialized dementia unit of a long-term care facility. And, I could always write numerous stories of working with a Senior citizen group in church ministry, of which I was formerly employed.

However, since my journey of geriatric care truly began with the love I experienced in giving and receiving at home, I began again, or *returned so to speak*, in geriatric care at a home environment I particularly love: Charlie's Place. Charlie's Place, the Alzheimer's Services Respite Center, is that "home away from home," a social model day center that has been twice named a Dementia Care Program of Distinction by the Alzheimer's Foundation of America and

was also named the 2008 Day Center of the Year by the National Adult Day Services Association. Further, it's becoming a national model of which others are endeavoring to imitate and follow.

Charlie's Place is that geriatric care remembered from my childhood. For me as its Director, Charlie's Place means a quality of life for individuals affected by Alzheimer's or dementia and their care partners. A "family" staff insures the utmost in exemplary, loving care, and person-centered, person-valued care, just like home.

We have up to 15 clients a day, six hours a day, five days a week. When a client walks through the door of Charlie's Place, he/she is at home, safe and secure, with others who love him/her.

My story is all about love.

Dr. Narses Barona and his wife came here from Columbia, South America, and Narses obtained his Ph.D in chemical engineering, giving 33 years of service at Ethel Corporation until his retirement. He is brilliant in his craft, speaks seven languages, and became an American Citizen in 1976. Dr. Narses and Luz are the epitome of a beloved, committed marriage, almost inseparable, never wavering from caring for each other.

Luz needed care for Dr. Narses (he insisted we address him in that manner) at least one day a week so that she could work and run errands and tend to other responsibilities. She enrolled Dr. Narses in Charlie's Place. She drove him to the front door his very first day, kissed him on the cheek, then drove away. Dr. Narses looked over his shoulder and became uneasy.

A cup of coffee and introductions to other clients may ease his anxiety, we thought. Within the hour, however, his anxiety grew to great fear, his behavior escalated, and he started searching for exits from Charlie's Place. Redirection was futile.

"You call my wife to pick me up! I want to go home!" His Columbian accent and persistence elevated.

"Luz will be back in a little while. Won't you stay here with us at our home?"

“It’s against the law to keep me here against my will! You call my wife this minute!”

“Please stay just a little longer. We are going to exercise, then play some music, then.....”

“I said I want to go home!” his voice and anger heightened. “You get my wife!”

The other clients became anxious, too. Dr. Narses was stirring the proverbial pot.

All alternative options failed. We called Luz and embarrassed over Dr. Narses’ actions, she came to pick him up.

Not giving up, we asked Luz to bring Dr. Narses back the next week. I kept thinking of ways to keep him busy and to trust that he would enjoy a purposeful day at Charlie’s Place. I compiled some engineering books and put them on a table. *This would do the trick*, I thought.

Same verse. Second chapter.

Dr. Narses paced and paced after he arrived. A couple of hours at Charlie’s Place and it was déjà vue all over again. He was not interested in any books. He had one goal: going home to his wife.

With years of working with the elderly population, in particularly those with Alzheimer’s or dementia, and my skills tested, I proceeded in redirecting Dr. Narses with things familiar to him; talking about his wife or his children or his country of birth. Unfortunately, these topics didn’t interest him. My next step was interesting him in a “job.”

“How about helping me with a mail out, Dr. Narses?” I have some letters that need to get in the mail today. Could you help?”

“What is it that you want me to do?”

“I need these letters on the table put in envelopes. Would you like to help me?”

“How much will I get paid?”

“Well, we can negotiate. What is your hourly rate?”

“You cannot afford me!” his annoyance continually revealed.

Anxiety elevated, Dr. Narses once again found the front door of Charlie’s Place. This time he pounded the glass windows overlooking the parking lot, yelling “Take me home! Take me home!”

“Please come help me, Dr. Narses,” I insisted, gently, to no avail.

“Here is \$20. You call me a taxi right this minute. It is against the law to keep me against my will. I will tell the police!”

“Just stay a little while. Luz will come get you in a little while.”

The pounding on the glass became so severe, we were all fearful it would shatter. For his safety, we called Luz, and again, she came to pick him up.

The team at Charlie’s Place is very persistent, and we became well aware of the struggles Luz was experiencing as now, we had experienced her struggles ourselves. Determined for Luz to have some time she needed for respite, we asked her to try again the following week.

More reading Dr. Narses’ bio. More exploring what we could possibly do give him a purposeful day at Charlie’s Place, and wanting desperately to have him stay a whole day.

Same verse. Third Chapter.

Luz dropped Dr. Narses off at Charlie’s Place. He walked in, had his coffee, then began pacing. For a few hours, we kept him occupied with one-on-one conversation, with music, and just accompanying him on his pacing. But, again, he found the door. He found the glass window and began pounding. Again, his demands to go home erupted.

He was from Columbia, He had a Ph.D in Chemical Engineering. He had two children. He and Luz were married on Christmas Day in 1958. They both love to dance. I could certainly find enough cues from his learned bio to dialogue.

I began to fail.

“Tell me about Columbia.

Silence.

Tell me about your work.

Silence.

What does your daughter do?

I have two children.

I know! What are they like?

Silence.

Where do you and Luz like to dance?”

He was clearly agitated at my questions. “You call my wife! I want to go home!”

“Come sit for awhile with me. Y’all were married on Christmas Day, weren’t you? How did the church allow that?”

Ignoring me, he reiterated, “I told you I want to go home! Now!”

I was thinking church. Then church started me thinking about his faith. His faith started me thinking of his spirituality. (He and Luz were devout Catholics) I got it.

“Dr. Narses, will you pray with me?”

His outburst took a 180 degree turn. He got quiet. There was a pause.

“Won’t you say the ‘Our Father’ with me? Will you sit here and say that prayer with me?”

He sat down. I pulled my chair and sat directly in front of him. I repeated my question.

“Will you say the ‘Our Father’ with me?”

“In what language?” he asked quickly asked, rather arrogantly, but also very sincerely.

Smiling, I replied, “Let’s try English.” I put my hands gently on his knees and bowed my head.

His anxiety once again spewed. “Only my wife touches me!”

A lesson to me about cultural differences. I was offering a consoling touch. He interpreted as inappropriate. But, after offering him a sincere apology, we bowed our heads and prayed. He trusted me. He trusted our home. And, at that point, he began to love.

He stayed the rest of the day and now comes every Wednesday to Charlie’s Place.

Moreover, Dr. Narses and Luz are now great advocates for our organization and Charlie’s Place. They attend sponsored social events for families, support groups, educational conferences, and other meetings. They are our extended family, and Charlie’s Place is their extended home.

Almost two years ago, our organization hosted a “Faces of Alzheimer’s” photography exhibit. Luz and Dr. Narses were the first to sign up to be photographed. Their poignant photo of the two of them dancing together in such a loving embrace is a favored photo out of the 65 photos displayed. It is a constant reminder to me and others that there remains a quality of life in our aging population, despite any impairment or any disease and that love truly conquers all. Luz and Dr. Narses are surely conquering Narses’ journey with Alzheimer’s, and I, along with the staff, strive each and every day to make that journey one of enjoyable and purposeful “present moments.”

The internationally renowned priest and author, Henri Nouwen once wrote: “When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.”

I'd like to think, and more so, promote, that Geriatric care is that *friend who cares*. Geriatric care is more than just managing and rendering various types of health and social care services. It is about being a friend. A friend is compassionate and loving. A friend respects and honors. A friend offers a place to stay when needed. And true friends stick together, no matter what happens.

Charlie's Place is geriatric care exemplified. It is home to every heart in the geriatric world who strive not only to build and continue a quality of life for every deserving aging individual, but also a means to change the stigma attached to geriatric care and to deliver best practice, person-centered, person-valued, and person-honored, *LOVING* care.

My grandparents thrived at our home, amidst loving individuals who did not look at their age or circumstance, but met them where they were and respected and loved them unconditionally.

Dr. Narses found home. He found "friends who cared" at Charlie's Place. He now embraces this love and gives it back each day he is at the center.

Luz is smiling these days and continually tells us, "Thanks, over and over again! Everything you do is excellent."

Thanks are not needed. Good geriatric care is a privilege. And, every client that walks through the doors of Charlie's Place is an individual we are honored to serve and to love.



*“Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be, the last of
life, for which the first was made.”*

– Robert Browning

Luz and Dr. Narses Barona,
married on Christmas Day,
1958, have always shared the
“dance.”

Narses’ diagnosis and journey
with Alzheimer’s disease has
not stopped their “life”
waltzing.....





*Luz and Dr. Narses Barona
From the Faces of Alzheimer's Photo Exhibit
Alzheimer's Services of the Capital Area/Charlie's Place
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Photography by Aaron Hogan, Eye Wonder Photography
November, 2011*

