

For twenty-three years of marriage, Sandra depended on her husband for everything. However, complete dependence is not always healthy and that is the situation in which Sandra found herself after her husband had a massive heart attack and died immediately, right there in their home.

After the ambulance left, Sandra did not know what to do. She quickly realized that her total reliance on her husband had left her with no friends, no way to access money or any details about their income, assets or debts; she was overwhelmed. She didn't even know how to bury her husband or how she could possibly pay for a funeral.

She called her only relative, a quasi-estranged sister who lived in Los Angeles. At 4 a.m., the sister emailed Jewish Family Services and asked for help. Before 8 a.m., Marina, a Geriatric Care Manager from the Older Adult Division at JFS, arrived on the doorstep of Sandra's home. What they found, however, was more than just a grieving widow.

It took Sandra a few minutes to get to the door. She was very unsteady on her feet and could barely walk because she was so hunched over. In addition, she was missing most of her teeth, her hair was severely matted and it appeared if she had not bathed for some time. The house was in similar condition; there was not even a clear path to follow to get to the kitchen table. The floor was stacked with newspapers, magazines, boxes, canned food and clothing. Sandra apologized profusely for the mess and said that her husband collected everything and couldn't bear to throw things away.

Sandra and Marina discussed the most immediate need: getting Sandra's husband buried. A call to a local funeral home and things were quickly arranged, including getting the cost of the burial donated. Sandra's concerns about money were further eased when JFS provided emergency assistance funding to cover any remaining funeral expenses. Marina was honored when Sandra asked her to accompany her to the service.

During these initial conversations, it was easy for Marina to recognize the reliance Sandra had on her husband for all aspects of her life, and she skillfully began crisis intervention to assist with Sandra's many urgent and pressing needs. While the hoarding and cleanliness issues immediately revealed an unsafe living environment, Marina soon learned of the significant financial management concerns, health care issues and personal exploitation that Sandra had also been living with.

A few years previously, Sandra and her husband had "adopted" a man from the local rescue mission and this man had offered to serve as a caregiver for Sandra and her husband. However, it was evident that this individual had no training, expertise or interest in caring for Sandra – past,

present or future. JFS quickly terminated this relationship and became Sandra's main advocate after earning her trust and building a connection with her.

During the intake process, Sandra answered many questions about her mood, health and ability to live independently. Her responses were a cry for help:

Are you satisfied with your life? – no

Do you feel that your life is empty? – yes

Do you feel happy most of the time? – no

Do you think it is wonderful to be alive right now?- no

Do you feel that your situation is hopeless? – no

The answer to that question truly made Marina recognize that Sandra was not necessarily grieving for her husband, but for herself. Grieving for a life lost, potential abandoned. Then and there, Marina committed herself to making sure that Sandra would find personal satisfaction during the last years of her life.

First, Marina made a referral to get Sandra started with mental health counseling as a baseline support system for all the changes in her life that were going to come, and come fast. She also made arrangements for home delivered meals seven days a week, helped her complete her Medicare application and another application for Senior Care, to help reduce the cost of medications.

Sandra had not left the house in over ten years. No doctor's appointments, no grocery shopping, no walk around the block. She did not know what her monthly income was or what expenses there were. She did not know how to shop for food, how to get medicine or balance the checkbook.

Marina prepared an assessment of Sandra's finances and learned that she and her husband owned multiple properties. After more phone calls and research, Marina discovered that the properties were all in disrepair, the tenants rarely paid their rent, and the mortgages were much larger than the value of the buildings. Marina consulted with her JFS supervisor who contacted a JFS Board member willing to offer pro bono legal advice on how to handle the various estate issues.

During one of their frequent conversations, Sandra mentioned to Marina that she wanted to get rid of the houses and identified her goal as living in an apartment that she could afford with other seniors and where she could receive supportive living services. Marina contacted a real estate agent and Sandra was able to sell the properties and furnishings to a buyer in exchange for assuming the debt. The next step on her new journey was to move into a women's shelter where she was given her own clean room, a sense of safety and the ability to participate in their group

support sessions. The staff at the shelter was able to provide Sandra with assistance improving her skills of daily living, taught her how to shop and cook some basic meals and were able to offer her compassion and emotional support because of their experience with women fleeing abusive situations. Marina remained in constant contact with the shelter employees to offer her advice and guidance working with an older adult. After not leaving her home for decades, Sandra quickly made several friends and learned to use the city bus system as a means of transportation. Sandra, who formerly described herself as “a prisoner of her life”, soon reported to Marina that she is free, able to buy things for herself, manage her own finances and feels like she knows where to turn for help as she needs it.

After building up her confidence over 3 – 4 months, Marina suggested to Sandra that it was time for her to take even more responsibility and move into her own apartment. Because of Sandra’s lack of rental history, JFS provided a letter of support to the landlord at a nearby senior apartment building. Marina coordinated Sandra’s move, helped her purchase some basic furniture and JFS was able to provide her with other basic necessities to set up her kitchen, bath and bedroom because of the generous donors to the JFS “wish room.” She quickly acclimated to her new living arrangements and now enjoys dinners and social activities with her new friends. She even started painting again. She said painting allows her to tell her story and express the rollercoaster ride of her life (see attached picture).

The one thing you will notice about Sandra is that her smile still reveals that she has very few teeth left. After many gentle offers to make an appointment with a dentist, Sandra kindly told Marina, “Having no teeth is the link to my past. Every time I smile, I can appreciate how far I have come.”

Three years later, Sandra continues to receive care management from Marina, although it now is minimal assistance with oversight and direction. As Sandra says, “without Marina I wouldn’t have known what to do and where to go and I would have never imagined life the way it is now - - wonderful.”

