

Heather Rea

For **Heather Rea**, caring for her aging mother was a long and often challenging journey.

For years, Heather's mom, Sheila, was able to live on her own in a townhouse in Oakville, Ontario. Heather and her mom would take turns visiting one another several times throughout the year.

In 2007, Sheila began arriving at Heather's for her visits with plastic bags filled with paperwork - bank statements, bills and house taxes. "I work in Geriatric Psychiatry and I didn't see it," says Heather. "She was losing her ability to plan and organize."

In the summer of 2007, Heather asked her mother, "Would you like to see what I do at work?" Heather asked her to perform basic tasks, like drawing a clock. She was unable to do it. Heather suspected her mother was suffering from a form of dementia. A diagnosis of Lewy Body Dementia was soon confirmed.

Sheila returned to Oakville and was able to stay in her home for several months thanks to the help of neighbours, who kept a close eye on her and took her to appointments and to the grocery store. "They wouldn't have considered themselves caregivers, but they were," says Heather.

Heather visited in April and says her mother was "not looking good." During a visit to her family doctor, Sheila was teary and sad. The doctor prescribed medications. When Heather returned in May her mother had declined further. Due to her pre-existing dementia (which results in a fragile brain), the combination of disease and medications triggered a Parkinson's-like condition that prevented her from even getting up out of a chair on her own.

"She was up five times a night to go to the bathroom and she couldn't get up by herself. I was afraid she'd fall," says Heather. "I was originally supposed to be there for a week. I talked to my husband after three-and-a-half weeks and he jokingly asked, 'Heather, are you ever coming home?' I'd left him with a teenage daughter and our dogs." Heather put her mother on an urgent placement list for nursing home care. While waiting for the placement, Sheila fell and broke her right hand. Heather took her to emergency. At the hospital, she explained her situation to the hospital-based home care coordinator, who started working on her case. After many phone calls, the coordinator indicated, "There's a bed. She needs to look at the facility and move in within a day or two."

Heather managed to negotiate an extra day to get her mother ready. "My mother was leaving the home she'd been in since 1972 to go into long-term care. She wasn't happy."

During this chaotic time, Heather's co-workers were a great support. "The team was extraordinarily supportive of all of these challenges," says Heather.

Once Heather got her mother settled, she flew home. Periodically, she'd fly back to Oakville, sign her mother out of the nursing home, take her back to her house for a few days, then take her back to the nursing home. Thanks to the

care at the nursing home and the changes in her medication, her mother began to improve. She was bright, intelligent, talkative and could walk with the help of a walker.

Heather did something almost unheard of. She asked the nursing home staff, “Do you think my mother’s good enough to go into assisted living as long as she has assistance with meals, housekeeping, laundry, getting in and out of the tub and with medications?” Nursing home staff supported this decision and Heather asked her mother if she wanted to move to Halifax to the Berkeley, where she’d be closer to Heather and her family. She was game for the move. A group of five friends from Halifax and Ottawa mobilized themselves to come to Oakville to help with the move.

Friends and family made frequent visits and phone calls to Sheila many days of the week. Within a few months, Sheila started having falls. She was admitted for a month to the Geriatric Assessment Unit, where Heather says, “They tuned her up as well as possible by providing a comprehensive medical assessment, and making cautious changes to her medication, all with the aim of improving her quality of life.” She was able to return to the Berkeley, but it became increasingly difficult for her to manage.

Heather went on vacation in April of 2009, leaving her son and several good friends with instructions to call if anything happened to her mother. No sooner had Heather left than her mother had a fall. She’d broken her hip.

Heather’s mother spent her 85th birthday and seven weeks on the Orthopedic Unit. She would never walk again.

Sheila was a World War II Veteran and she and Heather had agreed that if she needed an increased level of care in Halifax, she would apply to go the [Veterans’ Memorial Building \(VMB\)](#). She moved to the VMB, where Heather and her family visited frequently. “The staff on V5E were wonderful,” says Heather of the care her mother received.

Before long, Sheila stopped eating, was hardly drinking anything and it was decided to stop administering her pills and offer comfort care. During her mother’s last two days, Heather moved in and stayed with her until she died. “We just kept her comfortable for those days. She died June 19th, 2010 as the sun was coming up over Citadel Hill,” says Heather.

Of course, the journey didn’t end with her mother’s death. Heather grieved and continues to grieve the loss of her mother. Just as much, she celebrates her life and the fact that she was able to care for her in her last years with so much support from family, friends, co-workers and the medical professionals involved with her care.

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