

OPINION

Embracing the loss of independence

Johnelle Donnell, Columnist

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(Photo: Torin Halsey/Times Record News, AP)

My 95-year-old mother has lived at Presbyterian Manor Healthcare for five years. It took an act of God to get her there.

Being the strong personality that she was, she and Dad just worked out their roles and remained married until his death in the '80s. With Dad gone and the five children finally grown, Mom was like a bird liberated from its cage. This free-spirited Norwegian struck out across the country multiple times to "catch up" with lifelong friends and relatives. Her habit of pulling off on the side of the road for quick naps concerned us, but what could we do?

Somehow I ended up on the front lines in the battle over Mom's independence. First there was the issue of her dangerous driving. While leaving our home, she rear-ended someone parked in our driveway, then called them the next day to say she "might" have hit their car, assuring them she had good insurance and asking them not to tell me about it. Then she missed a stop sign and totaled two cars. Knowing she could never learn a new dashboard, she searched for another minivan exactly like the one she wrecked. Our friend the car dealer called me, as he watched her drive off from his lot, saying, "Johnelle, your mother should not be driving!" When

I asked why, he exclaimed that she had hit his car as she was leaving the lot, then just backed up and drove off! He wouldn't let me reveal to her that he had snitched because, he said, "I like her too much."

As I began to investigate, her insurance agent admitted he had *only* reported four of her wrecks the past year, I learned she had someone on retainer to fix her dents and scrapes, her pastor confessed his parishioners were always on the lookout as she entered the church parking lot, her doctor announced he was powerless in the situation, and, finally, I contacted Adult Protective Services. They sent a nice young man out to try to convince her to stop driving. When he reported back to me, he said, "I really liked your mother." She had even showed him the eye chart she practiced on because she was going to have to renew her license, and she also mentioned she was concerned that she hadn't gotten a notice in the mail yet. He suggested I go to the DPS office promptly with my concerns because she was planning to go there and check into it in a few days. I went straight to DPS that day, only to find my sweet mother standing in line.

She was happily surprised to see me until she discovered I had become the enemy as she fought to retain her independence. We stepped out of line and sat down, and I presented all the evidence I had collected confirming she was a hazard on the streets.

After many confrontations, she begrudgingly surrendered the borrowed minivan. She opposed having a driver, instead alternating between friends and family for transportation, remaining active in her church, the Adult Literacy group, Silver Sneakers exercise class at the "Y," and many other activities, until she began having falls, joint replacements, and other surgeries.

Life was overwhelmingly complex for all of us as Mom desperately clung to her independence. We arranged transportation, meals, medications, etc. She fiercely resisted caregivers. She told one of them, "Well, I love you, but I wish you would just disappear until I need you."

I'm not saying God caused her to fall and break limbs twice in just nine months, but He did reveal to everyone, including Mom, that she could no longer live alone.

If I live long enough, I, too, will resist that inevitable final move. Today Mom holds no grudges. God has done a deep work in her heart, and she is grateful for the life she has lived and the love that surrounds her. She concedes she is where she needs to be at this stage in her life. She has shown me that even when you are dealt what appears to be a losing hand, it is important to recognize the love that arranged it, be appreciative, and make the most of it.

Johnelle Donnell is a member of the Times Record News Community Editorial Board

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