

Maggie

Maggie was a 78-year old woman who became my roommate in the nursing home where I live. She was a native of South Boston who liked to talk politics. A member of her family worked for Joseph P. Kennedy, patriarch of the Kennedy family. She was connected by blood or marriage to Marty Walsh, current mayor of Boston, and to William "Billy" Bulger, former President of the Massachusetts Senate and brother of the infamous Whitey Bulger. Whitey led a life of crime and was convicted in 2013 of having murdered 11 people. Whoever was interested in Boston politics would have found her interesting.

One of her daughters worked with Vice President Al Gore on climate change and on both of President Barack Obama's campaigns. Maggie once said to me "Just think of all those deaths in the 1960s", referring to those of President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. She was a fervent Democrat, asking me if I had voted for Hillary in the primary, and had heard President Obama on T.V. singing Amazing Grace?

As interesting as these conversations with Maggie were, they are not what I most remember about her; it was her personality. She was a spitfire, always making staff and myself laugh with unexpected comments. She knew what she wanted - for breakfast scrambled eggs, oatmeal and apple juice, only white bread and coffee. Sometimes a simple request like "Go get me some towels." was followed by a series of questions - "Are you coming back?" "Will you do it?" Or, in another example "I have to call my brother." "Can you get me the phone?" "Can you get it for me right now?" "Can you call him and make sure he's coming?" "Ask him to bring me a cup of coffee from Dunkin' Donuts."

Her style was persistent, not perseverative or attention-seeking. Adorable, never negative nor demeaning to staff. I remember her also telling one of our best nurses "I like you. You are gentle." The same nurse told me "We all liked her and found her funny because of the unexpected things she said." One CNA likened her to a parrot as she often repeated what was said to her. She was endearing, a real character.

An aspect of her requests that really impressed me was that her style of making them was straightforward, even if repeated. She turned her call light on, and then sometimes yelled out to get help. As expected, staff were distressed by her yelling, seeing it as disruptive. What some staff saw as behavioral and annoying, I applauded because she only called out for a reason, for something she really needed. She never accused nursing assistants of neglecting her, or being slow to respond with questions like "Where have you been?" "What's going on?" "What took so long?" She never succumbed to thinking she wouldn't get what she needed.

I thought she was empowered, not afraid to assert herself to get her needs met in a timely manner. She never rationalized that staff were doing the best they could. She never gave up until she got what she needed, as she seemed to know she was entitled to proper care. When she received what she wanted she was thankful, happy, quiet. I was proud to see her confronting the unfinished regulatory business of improved staffing ratios in her own way. Once, while her brother was visiting, he told her not to be impatient, and said he was embarrassed at her style. Not me. She never whined, cried, begged or used abusive language. She never became defeated or passively withdrew, felt sorry for herself but always maintained her dignity.

Maggie had come to us with kidney failure, needing to start dialysis. She really wanted the dialysis and expected to return to her apartment in Boston, but the outcome was poor. The attempt to place a fistula into her arm was not successful, and something went wrong with the shunt placed into her chest as she suffered a rapid decline and quality of life. I knew something serious had happened when she returned from dialysis one day on a stretcher instead of in a chair. The way she looked at 4 pm the day she died - weak, difficult to wake up, unable to talk but only to stare, troubled me. I called her brother to make sure he intended to visit that evening, without telling him of my concerns. Only 10 hours later, her code blue was called at 2 am and we lost Maggie, one of many that leave our planet here at our nursing home, or are transported on an emergency basis to a local ED never to return.

Given how many have left us, one might think we would forget them, but that's not true. Each resident is unique. In Maggie's case her spirit survives. I had held out hope she would do well, but she didn't. She is one of those I most miss and continue to mourn.

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