



“Sunflowers” Stand for Quality: A Tale of Connection and Relationships

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The subject of this year’s Consumer Voice Challenge is “Stand for Quality,” and I have been thinking about what that means for me almost four years into my life as a nursing home resident in long term care. In my first months and years here, I had a different view of quality than I do now. Quality of life and care was more basic and practical. It was less about connecting to people in my world on any emotional level, and more about finding a way to live in this new world with less control, choice, and independence.

Over time the emphasis on the need to insure the success of practical connections, such as making sure I got the therapy I needed or that the changing meds were all correct, changed to more social and emotional ones. I knew I was receiving good medical care from all the staff

here. I also began to understand there was more to my relationships with staff than a good med pass! Connections to other residents and staff also became more important as the years passed because outside visitors inevitably lessen. I became more active in arts and crafts in Activities as that field expanded. After about two years here, we residents were even able to have accessible raised garden boxes to tend.

It has always bothered me that the view from the windows on my wing is fairly barren. There is landscaping but it is not really visible to bedridden residents. I mentioned this a few times but never really pushed for changes. I thought sunflowers would be a good idea and while people on staff said they agreed, somehow understandably no one had time to follow through on a purely aesthetic issue.

In planning for a craft show about a year ago, I mentioned to my activities person that I loved sunflowers and had always painted them. In fact 30 years ago when I began to paint as part of therapy, they were the first things I painted. I had not painted them for some time, and have none of them on display with my art work in my room. My worker, who by then I trusted a great deal, challenged me to use a piece of scrap wood to create a sunflower garden painting to sell at our show. She knew painting was becoming a greater challenge as macular degeneration worsens and a hand tremor grows! The resulting painting appears at the beginning of this essay.

One of my biggest fears with vision changes has been becoming more isolated. But I am learning that I am surrounded by folks who do not want that to happen either, and that brings me back to the sunflowers outside my window. For the last about three years I have had an Asst. Director of Nursing who was a challenge for me to connect to. He is a he, and sometimes that is rough for me in staff relationships. Over time I came to understand that his quiet and direct way was not uncaring, it was simply his way.

Last summer, my ADON surprised me with a visit that was not about medical appointments. He told me that one of my plants that I had put outside in the courtyard was not doing well. He asked my permission to try to save it. I had no idea what a fierce gardener he was. And after that plant began to thrive, I asked his help with another one.

As that connection began to grow, so did others that help my emotional well being. A few months ago a new aide remarked on my plants in my room and mentioned she was starting sunflowers from seed. When she heard of my interest in outside planting she offered to bring some seedlings in. The end of 2018 also had brought in a new administrator, who is strongly in favor of residents' pro-activity in our home! So my aide brought several seedlings in and after a time outside and inside, they were ready to plant.

Since this part of the yard is not currently accessible for walkers or wheelchairs, our ADON offered to do the planting. It took a considerable amount of digging and readying the soil, but he did it all. At one point I told him how bittersweet this is for me. The resident who I had originally thought of as benefitting from tall plants outside, had recently passed away. He

responded that he missed her too, and maybe we should place a plaque outside near the sunflower garden in her memory.

Several times a week I see our ADON outside checking, watering, and pruning the sunflowers. He stops in and gives me a count of the yellows and reds we have. I can see a green blob but cannot discern the individual flowers. But the description of where they are on the plant was enough to help me create my own work that's possible for me to see. I am not sure how I would be doing if I did not have growing relationships with people like my ADON and others who understand that residents need more than the basics to thrive.

This year is about gratitude in the midst of loss. So for me, "sunflowers" and the people who help me continue to grow stand for quality. And here they are as I envision them!

