

Local

Caregivers' support group 'like family'

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🕒 02.08.19

Brenda Bailey Little bounced into the meeting -- fashionably late. That's the norm for her, she teased.

Before taking a seat, the Hartford woman filled a paper plate with dip and vegetables. She also grabbed a bag of popcorn.

Green River Area Development District's office feels like home to her, and the people in the room seem like family.

Since 2002, GRADD has been Little's go-to agency. Back then, she was caring for her aging father, who lived independently in Owensboro.

GRADD helped install motion-activated cameras in his home so she could keep a watchful eye on him from her home in Hartford. GRADD helped locate a phone system that sounded an alarm and played recorded instructions when it was time for her dad to take medications.

GRADD's assistance helped Little's father live independently another three years.

And, at some point, Little started attending GRADD's monthly caregivers' support group meetings, which take place at 1:30 p.m. the first Thursday of each month at GRADD's Owensboro office, 300 GRADD Way. The support group is for people who are caring for loved ones -- with any diagnosis -- who are 60 and older.

"At first, I thought, 'I don't need that,' " she told fellow members of the support group Thursday afternoon. "But, then, I got hooked on the people. They became like family."

Although she didn't know it at the time, that monthly support group would help her navigate another tough time in her life. Little later cared for her husband, Bill, at home until his death on Dec. 1.

She still attends the monthly meetings -- even though her caregiving days are over.

"GRADD helped me more than anything," Little told fellow members of the support group Thursday afternoon. "More than my church, more than my family, more than anything."

Kelli King, GRADD Family Caregiver Coordinator, said the meetings are small. Usually, up to six people attend.

For two hours a month, caregivers come to GRADD to chat about problems, share tips and reminisce about loved ones who passed away.

"The hardest part about caregiving is after the fact," said one group member, who cared for his wife until she died more than a year ago. "I thought the 24 hours and 36 hours (of caregiving) were hard, but there's nothing to compare with sitting at the breakfast table alone."

Little lamented that she still buys groceries for two. After 64 years of marriage, it is difficult to adapt to life as a single person.

Support group members confessed to each other about frustrations, guilt, frayed nerves and lack of sleep.

But, they admitted, they'd do it again in a heartbeat.

Sometimes, a guest speaker shares information at the monthly meetings. This month, Debbie Resing, an account executive with Amedisys, was invited. Amedisys is a home health care agency.

However, Resing felt like a member of the pack. She took care of her mother for about a decade.

"Do you ever look back and wish you had done things differently?" Resing asked the group. "Ever wish you'd done more?"

Heads shook in agreement. Everyone in the room understood the feeling.

Little said a lot of caregivers may think they can't spare two hours a month visiting with a support group.

"Even if people know about it, they don't think they need it," Little said. "But they do."