



*Ayélé's job in assisted living is more than health care. "I'm a listener, counselor, confidant," she says. "They know they can share with me and it's safe. That's a big part of helping with their feelings of security and happiness."*

## The *joy* of CAREGIVING

by Kelly Cheramy

Some days are difficult. They can be emotionally draining and physically exhausting. They can begin or end with the loss of someone special. Even so, all days are worth their emotional weight in gold. That's the sentiment of caregivers who truly understand their beautiful human profession in the circle of life. They hold a deeply rooted belief that they are part of something bigger, that they play an important, even sacred, role in life on this earth.

Some people are born already wired with the patience and compassion of exceptional caregivers. Others fumble through the often painful lessons of life and learn along the way. But all

who exhibit the spirit of joy in their work have something in common; they transform the process of their jobs into the art of good living. Their art is a joy for all.

### **AYÉLÉ: GREAT-GRAND-DAUGHTER OF A KING**

The story of Ayélé (pronounced Ah-YAY-lay) represents those who are, in various ways, born to serve. Her great-grandfather was a king whose duty was to protect and serve his people in the West African nation of Togo. But because that patriarchal society hands the crown only to men, Ayélé's link to royalty was broken with the next generation.

Instead, as the only girl in her present-day family, Ayélé was anointed caregiver for her ailing grandmother, the daughter of the former king. Ayélé, thanks to the way she is wired, provided royal care for her beloved grandmother who passed away at age 91.

"My grandmother said that if I were to take care of old people in my career, I would be blessed for doing such good work for God," she recounts. Further reinforcement of this idea comes from her faith. "The Bible says that white hair is a crown of glory," Ayélé says. "I think it's beautiful." This

more common crown and spiritual knowledge provides the directive for Ayélé to serve others.

Ayéle, whose father was a physician assistant in Togo, is a certified nursing assistant for Attic Angel Community's assisted-living households. For five years, before coming to Madison, she was a midwife in Togo caring for moms and babies. The differences between those jobs lie in the pace and drama of life, as well as the wisdom and perspective that come with age.

"Sometimes there's no sense of yesterday or tomorrow. There's only

now," Ayélé explains about providing care for seniors. "It's kind of freeing. You can be who you are, and you can be your best self in that moment."

**The people Ayélé cares for every day become, in a way, friends, and some even like family. "Of course, it is my job, but I care about them and think about them even when I'm gone."**

#### **MARY: DAUGHTER OF REAL LIFE'S LESSONS OF LOSS**

Painfully and bravely, Mary has weathered so many of life's storms

before finding her true calling as a certified nursing assistant in Attic Angel Community's independent-living apartments.

Mary, the oldest of three children, was just four years old when her father died unexpectedly. She helped her mother keep the household running, and those life lessons never came too early. The family later moved to Scotland to be near Mary's grandmother, and less than two months later, Mary's mom passed away. At the tender age of 13, Mary was the head of her family.

At 17, Mary moved herself and her twin brothers to the United States to

*"I love to come to work, and I love the residents," says Mary as she checks in on Sam in the independent-living apartments. "It doesn't feel like a job; I feel like I'm spending time with my friends."*



live with their American grandmother. Within that year, their grandmother suffered a massive stroke, and Mary helped with her care until her grandmother's death.

With amazing resilience, deep faith, and clarity about the work before her, Mary moves forward confidently in her own life and in service to others.

"When I first began working with seniors as my career, I questioned my choice. I wasn't sure I could do it," Mary recounts. "It was very emotional because I've lost so many people in my life." Within days, her doubts vanished. "This IS for me! I view the residents as though they could be my grandma or grandpa, and I can get through a lot with families. I feel like I've found my calling. I thank God for that all the time."

Mary's joy comes from knowing she is helping seniors and their family members in a way that she is uniquely qualified to do. "I found my purpose! I'm fulfilled," she says.

Each day begins with a prayer on Mary's way to work—asking for help and guidance for herself and the residents. Once at work, she remains open to how each day will unfold. "I go wherever the day takes me. The biggest thing for me is the Golden Rule. I treat people the way I would want to be treated."

Sometimes easier said than done, Mary admits, because health issues and personalities have a way of raising tensions. But she understands that there is usually more to the story than what's obvious. "If you're patient enough, you can always find a way to connect and help them through whatever is bothering them."

Mary also learned that, through no fault of her own, not everyone is

going to like her. She rests in the knowledge that she always does her very best for them. "I believe the customer is always right. If I get it wrong, according to their preferences, I try again. I can't just walk away; this is my job."

Such differences in perspective fascinate Mary. "I respect that they've lived their whole lives before me, and they know more than I do," says Mary, whose bedtime reading includes many memoirs. "They light up when they're invited to reminisce, and I love hearing stories about their lives. It's uplifting work."

Mary's brand of loving care first grew from vivid memories of her own mother caring for elderly neighbors, often taking them dinner and checking in on them. In the present day, she draws inspiration from the very people she serves. "I know some of our residents have been through a lot, and they're my role models too," she explains. "There are a lot of survivors among us."

*Kelly Cheramy is the outreach coordinator for Attic Angel Community.*

*Photographs by Andy Manis.*



Photograph submitted by Kelly Cheramy

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