

2: SPECIAL OCCASIONS – A FAMILY CHRISTMAS

Christmas 1996 for the Brown family was, in their own words, ‘a bit of a nightmare’. They had all gone to stay with Mrs. Brown senior, aged 83. Mrs. Brown was completely disorientated, and almost as soon as everyone arrived and placed presents under the tree she began moving and unwrapping them. Gentle nudges from the family to distract her were totally ineffective, and soon Mrs. Brown was spending her time either arguing with someone about who was doing the chores, or asking the same anxious questions over and over again: ‘Is it Christmas?’ and, on being told that it was, ‘Where’s my family?’ After one day of this, the family were at their wits end and Mrs. Brown was in tears saying repeatedly, ‘I want to go home.’

Following contact with SPECAL in 1997 Mrs. Brown’s daughter Jennifer began to develop a Care Profile for her mother.

Primary theme

Jennifer’s initial list of her mother’s hobbies, skills and interests contained 21 entries, including the Toy Library, ballet, scooters, and celery (a reference to the old days down on the family farm). In the end ballet was selected, and Jennifer dug out of the attic an ancient, much-loved pair of ballet shoes which had not been the subject of much attention for at least thirty years. These shoes, with their pink satin ribbons, became a crucial prop. Reference to them triggered again and again a lost world of achievement which had lain dormant for such a long time. As the family monitored conversations, they drew up a list of words and phrases which provided further links, and these were gradually linked to Mrs. Brown’s daily activities of each new day. When the phone rang unexpectedly, making her jump, words were cued in to trigger thoughts of a particular dance movement associated with rather strident music. On a windy day Mrs. Brown talked of the trees ‘dancing around’, and this phrase proved an excellent cue to trigger more dancing stories. A frequently asked question asked by Mrs. Brown was ‘What’s the weather like?’ and it became a simple matter to reply in a way which brought in the dancing trees, in a conversation which soon skipped its way to ballet. Tales of dancing solos, in which Mrs. Brown had dressed up Jennifer, aged 5, as Little Bo Peep and Little Miss Muffet, led to conversations about clothing which proved most helpful to the carers during dressing and undressing routines. The last word at bedtime was always something

to do with applause. Jennifer identified 'sore feet' as The Health Theme. There was an easy link to Mrs. Brown's well-proven prowess on the ballet floor, and having 'ballet-dancer feet' served as a highly acceptable reason for Mrs. Brown resting up with dignity whilst someone else did the chores. This eased the situation at home when other people arrived to help. As time went by, Mrs. Brown became visibly more relaxed, and better able to sort for herself several things which had caused problems the year before, and she became less anxious generally.

As Christmas drew nearer, Jennifer decided to talk to all the family members and explained that another family Christmas together might not be quite the nightmare this time. She produced a plan for the whole Christmas period, with a duty rota whereby each member of the family took it in turns to be responsible for Mrs. Brown's well-being. She involved the children, and sent out a script well ahead so that everyone could rehearse their lines. Mrs. Brown's favourite music was playing all the time in the background over Christmas, and a special themed tea towel was selected as another crucial prop.

Early in the New Year Jennifer wrote to SPECAL about what she called 'our SPECAL-led Christmas':

"I shared my enthusiasm and passed on my new found wisdom via some notes which I gave to all the family a few days before assembling at Mum's for Christmas. The family all made a considerable effort and the children, especially, seem pleased to have a brief to follow and really rose to the challenge, enjoying their ability to accept the same stories instead of moaning, 'You've told us that before, Grandma.' So, despite our concerns about a big family Christmas, the SPECAL approach was fantastic and really worked. The props worked a treat and Mum really enjoyed the constant music. One of the highlights for me was the family in the kitchen on Christmas Day doing various jobs, Mum with tea towel in hand thinking she was helping and everyone singing along to 'Mistletoe and Wine' and other songs. Mum was so happy. That was, I think, a great 'Moment of Care'."

The following year, Jennifer decided that her mother would benefit hugely by moving into a nursing home. The Care Profile was established and well-proven, and it was just a matter of transferring the routines to the safety of a home where the staff would always be available around the clock and could get to know her mother. She chose a nursing home close to her own home, in the face of great opposition from the care professionals in her mother's own area some two hundred miles away. She planned the move with

army-like precision, following the transitional care plan that she had prepared along SPECAL lines. To the professionals' intense surprise the move went 'remarkably well', with her mother only 'dipping a couple of times' and only then on amber and a long way from any red. Jennifer summed her feelings up after a few months:

“The fact that my mother is there is mind-blowing. I never thought it could happen like that. It all went just as you said, and the advice is logical and obvious when you explain. I was weepy the first day and felt dreadful that I had let her down. Now I see her having cups of tea, partying, chatting away, latching on, very happy. She hardly asks any questions these days. If she does ask ‘What are we doing here?’ the answer is ‘having a holiday’, and when she says, ‘Would you like to go now’ I give a grateful nod, a smile, a kiss – whatever – because the ultimate consent has been given.”