

Missouri's 2017 Caregiver of the Year: Nancy Wray!

Since June, Tom's MS had progressed to the point that he needed full time care. Nancy, a full time school teacher, was scheduled to return to work after being off for summer vacation; however, Tom was in need of a full time caregiver while she worked (not just someone to come in and feed him lunch). Nancy and Tom were faced with a very difficult decision. After many prayers and shed tears, it was decided that it was in Tom's best interest for him to enter a nursing home. As Nancy expected, Tom was initially upset with her for not being able to care for him any longer, but he is now comfortable with his new home.

After his arrival at the nursing home, Nancy continued to care for Tom in other ways. It began with simple things like hanging curtains and bringing pictures from home. Then it grew into decorating for the seasons. She added a wreath to his door, air freshener for his room, sheets for his bed (flannel for cooler weather), matching blanket for his lap while in the wheelchair, snack drawer, etc. "Anything to let him feel the love of our home and my heart." A container to give out candy at Halloween was added to a shelf in his room. Fall decor on top of his wardrobe (closet) made his room feel homey. After Thanksgiving, she invited all the kids and grandkids to his room for a Christmas decoration party. "We decorated his room with lights, holly, and love."

Tom's health has continued to deteriorate. Yet, making sure he has his daily Pepsi, a sweet snack, family and friends stopping by... as well as his health needs continues to be Nancy's priority. Facebook friends have helped to decorate a wall full of cards in his room. "He is still the most wonderful man in the world to me. I want to make sure he is comfortable."

Nancy admits, "Caretaking is hard. No one has any idea how hard it is until you do it. There are days that I get cranky. I don't feel like I deserve to be the caregiver of the month or year."

When asked what advice Nancy has for anyone supporting caregivers, she says "Be there to listen and to give them encouragement. There's just not enough support for caregivers. Tell them that you like the way they are caring for you or your loved one and that you support their decisions. Be sensitive to the caregiver's feelings and know that when you offer to help the person being cared for, that it can come across as though what the caregiver does is not good enough. As a caregiver you take things personal."

When asked what advice she has for other caregivers, Nancy says, "It is important to take time for yourself, where it's just you, so you can put yourself back together. Spend time with God. Take yourself to a movie. Do what you enjoy. You will feel guilty. The person you are caring for may make you feel guilty also but you have to take care of yourself in order to take care of them. You have to be intentional about it and schedule it."