

Prompt: What have you learned through your experience volunteering with an older adult?

“That’s how David was,” the woman fondly explained, “he always made sure to walk me home.” I had met Jane (an anonymity pseudonym for privacy purposes) a mere fifteen minutes prior to her detailed story about her late husband. As she spoke, her eyes glossed over and she gazed slightly to the left as if she was seeing a memory unfold somewhere within the petals of the gerbera daisies on the wallpaper. Her stories teleported me to a small Iowa town in 1946, and I felt as if I was watching Jane and David fall in love in front of my eyes. In reality, it was 2020 in a memory care facility in Maplewood, Minnesota that I volunteered at regularly to spend time with the residents.

My first day at the memory care facility I played bingo and was assigned to help a woman with a mild form of memory loss: Jane. Her hands were tucked neatly within one another, placed just below the quilted heart on her sweater. She sat elegantly with both feet on the floor, but was visibly suffering the grip of Age. She smiled at me and welcomed me at the place next to her, and we exchanged formalities. She wore a beautiful gold ring, and when I asked her about it her eyes lit up as if she had been waiting for me to mention it. “It was a gift from my husband,” she explained warmly. She struggled to remember my name, but when she talked about David her speech was clear and stories detailed. “My favorite thing about him,” she said as she admired her ring, “was that he always made sure to walk me home.” She repeated this line multiple times a session, and I always wondered of its significance.

Weeks would go by and I would talk to Jane every time I went there. We shared stories about when we learned to drive and exchanged laughs when she would poke fun at the nuns at her primary school. Most days, Jane and I neglected to pay attention to the bingo numbers being called and lost ourselves in the stories we would share. Her voice was smooth, and she had the

power to take me into her memories. I stood on the dock when David came home from the Navy and sat in the pews of Saint Jerome Church as they got married. I was there when she mourned the loss of her only child, and I observed as she found a new love in painting. As time went on, I noticed that her memory began to slip. She would forget simple phrases and repeat herself more. That is when I found out she had very little time left to live.

The last time I saw her, she grabbed my hand and looked me in the eyes. It felt like a montage at the end of a movie. Her stories flashed before me as she softly said, “thank you for walking me home.” Tears welled in my eyes as I realized I had been her escape. I was her new David. That is when I understood what she meant. David did not just walk her to her physical, tangible home. He helped her find who she always wanted to be. I remembered her telling me about how she had lost herself after the death of her child. With righteous anger but gentle acceptance she said that David “brought her back.”

He brought her home.

Since that day, I have continued to volunteer with the elderly, and have made a myriad of meaningful connections. Jane inspired me to continue on the path of helping the elderly, and helped me come to the indomitable resolution that I want to be a nurse. Because of her, I have an intimate appreciation for loving support and subsequently strive to make my presence one that emanates compassion. As a nurse, I want to be a guiding light on the path of others as they find who they were meant to be and learn to love life again. I will walk others home. I want to show others that life is beautiful, no matter the circumstance, and hold them in their most terrible pains.

And that's how Jane was. A woman with unparalleled and unconditional love who, with her hand in mine, taught me how to love as well. She helped me find who I was meant to be. She walked me home.