

Caring for the Caregiver

Program Provides Avenues of Hope

By Michele Hayunga



Geraldine McSwain has spent much of the past three years caring for her sister who has Alzheimer's disease. She thought she was prepared for the job because their mother had Alzheimer's too, but the disease affected her sister differently.

"My sister was very feisty at the beginning, and that was completely new to me," McSwain said. "I needed someone to work with me on how to do a better job of helping her."

Fortunately, McSwain was able to connect with the Fairhill School for Caregivers, a Cleveland, OH-based program that offers free education, training, and support to hundreds of caregivers each year. Throughout the aging network, organizations like Fairhill are developing innovative programs to meet the growing needs of family members caring for elderly loved ones.

McSwain enrolled in Fairhill's Introduction to Caregiving course and continues to attend

workshops and support groups there. "I learned that you can't be afraid to ask for help, both inside and outside of the family,"



Judith Fisher, Senior Guest House associate, demonstrates the use of an assistive device in the kitchen of the Fairhill School for Caregivers, where caregivers can learn about new products and services to help their loved one.



Fairhill sponsors an annual Opportunity Fair, where caregivers can learn about paid and volunteer positions.

McSwain said. “They showed me that I have to take care of myself if I want to be there for my sister.”

A One-of-a-Kind Classroom

In order to get a full picture of how the Fairhill School for Caregivers is changing lives, it’s helpful to understand the program’s unique setting. The school is part of Fairhill Center, a 9.65-acre campus that is home to more than 25 nonprofits focused on successful aging. The organizations include an inter-generational charter school, programs for grandparents raising grandchildren, and a guest house for homeless older adults.

The school itself is housed in Fairhill’s Care and Caregiving Center, a converted townhome with over 250 assistive technology

devices. They range from relatively simple products, like raised toilet seats and grab bars, to cutting-edge video phones and appliances that use sensor technology.

“We try to give caregivers lots of ideas about how they can keep their loved ones at home longer,” explained the school’s director Stacey Rokoff, a licensed social worker. “Some of the items are as little as a dollar, while others cost tens of thousands of dollars.”

“A lot of the things seem like common sense, but they’re easy to overlook,” McSwain said. “For example, having rugs on the floor can cause the person you’re caring for to trip and fall.”

Even experts who visit often walk away with strategies they never considered before.

SUPPORT FOR A DIFFERENT KIND OF CAREGIVER

While the Fairhill School for Caregivers supports people caring for a loved one with illness or disability, the larger Fairhill campus also provides help for intergenerational families. In Cuyahoga County, OH, more than 12,000 households are headed by older adults caring for grandchildren—or kinship caregivers.

Fairhill offers information and referral services, as well as support groups and recreation activities. The campus is currently raising money to convert some of its buildings into special housing for intergenerational families.

To learn more about the Campaign for Kinship Village, visit www.fairhillcenter.org/Campaign.htm. ♦



Stacey Rokoff (right), a licensed social worker, conducts a caregiving class at Fairhill. Classes focus on issues such as nutrition, activities of daily living, diseases, and how to handle difficult situations.

Rokoff recalls giving a tour to a contractor and physical therapist. They left very excited about the idea of labeling cabinets with pictures to help a loved one with Alzheimer's.

A Curriculum for Caregivers

Many of the caregivers who come through Fairhill's center enroll in the school's introductory caregiving class. The six-week program began in 1999 as a pilot and has expanded to include workshops and a monthly support group. Today, Fairhill is able to offer these services free of charge with support from the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging and the Cleveland Foundation.

"The School for Caregivers came about because we recognized that caregivers need an education program," Rokoff said. "Our idea was to give them information they might need down the road, so they wouldn't have to figure everything out in a moment of heightened stress."

Classes are taught by Rokoff and masters-level social work interns, as well as nurses, attorneys, and physical therapists who volunteer their time. The curriculum focuses on information and skill-building techniques in six key areas (see sidebar).

For caregivers, it's all about being able to access the right resources when they're

The Fairhill School for Caregivers offers a core course covering the following topics:

1. Taking Charge of the Caregiving Situation

- Challenges and joys of caregiving
- Stress management
- Home safety tips
- Transfer technique training

2. Increasing Your Caregiving Tools

- Self-care for the caregiver
- Community resources
- Communication skills and decision making

3. Normal Aging vs. Disease Process

- Normal memory loss vs. dementia
- Consideration for hiring in home help
- Overview of normal aging

4. Nutrition and Activities of Daily Living

- Nutrition basics
- Nutrition and the older adult
- Hands-on training for assisting with daily living

5. Dealing with Difficult Situations

- Changing roles and relationships
- Behavior management
- Assistive technology

6. You're the Master of Your Decisions

- Legal issues
- Palliative care

ready, Rokoff stressed. She recounted how one student was initially reluctant to attend the session on legal issues because she felt it was way down the road. Fortunately, Rokoff was able to persuade the student to change her mind.

"A few days later, she called to let me know that her father was rushed to the hos-

pital over the weekend,” Rokoff said. “She said what she had learned in class gave her the confidence to make decisions and feel more in control of what was happening.”

Support and Services

In addition to the core caregiving class, the school offers weekly one-hour workshops on topics like open communication and stress management. Once a month, Fairhill holds a “Day for Caregivers” with education sessions, community resources, and group discussion.

Recently Fairhill began offering one-on-one counseling through a grant from the Western Reserve Area Agency on Aging. The school also hosts a monthly Saturday support group where caregivers can learn from each other.

De Jeter, who cares for her aunt and mother, wandered into the support group one day because they were playing her favorite game—bingo. She ended up winning a spot in the introductory caregiving course and has stayed involved ever since.

“The experience really opened my eyes,” Jeter said. “It gave me the tools and resources I need to be able to help myself.”

For example, Jeter’s aunt is fairly independent, but she needs a lot of help bathing and getting dressed. Mornings used to be a struggle, but with the communication skills she acquired, Jeter was able to convince her aunt to accept help from a home health aide. “The aide only stays for an hour, but that makes all the difference,” she said. “Everyone is much happier now.”

Another important lesson for Jeter was not to lose sight of her own life. By setting goals and learning where to access support, she was able to transition to working outside of the home several days a week. Jeter loves her part-time jobs providing benefits counseling to seniors and doing office work for a home care agency.

“What I really learned is how to ask for help,” Jeter said. “Yes, it’s important to care for your loved ones, but you’re not going to be the best fit if you completely stop experiencing life yourself.”

Community Care Fairs

Getting caregivers to acknowledge their own needs is Rokoff’s biggest challenge. Each year, she works to get the word out through Fairhill’s three annual Care Fairs, which draw an average of 200 people.

The fairs offer people in the community an opportunity to visit with service providers, participate in workshops and screenings, and enjoy entertainment and food. The goal is to help caregivers self identify and begin connecting with resources.

“Partnerships are critical to the success of our care fairs,” Rokoff stressed. “Since Fairhill is a collaborative campus, there are several community agencies on hand that provide outreach.”

Each February, Fairhill hosts its Safety Fair, which covers topics ranging from identity theft to wandering concerns. May is dedicated to the Opportunity Fair, where caregivers can learn about paid and volunteer positions.

“A lot of caregivers become so immersed in the person they’re caring for that they don’t think about what’s next for themselves,” Rokoff said. “We help them connect with community agencies like RSVP or Senior Strides, which helps older adults build resumes and find jobs.”

Fairhill’s third resource festival is the Memory Fair, which is co-sponsored by the Alzheimer’s Association. The event features a renowned guest lecturer on Alzheimer’s research, as well as an exhibit hall and caregiver workshops.

Through all of its outreach, the Fairhill School for Caregivers aims to be an entry point for caregivers to access services. “Caregiving isn’t a sprint—it’s a long distance marathon,” Rokoff said. She hopes the school will be able to support caregivers through every step of the journey.

To learn more about the Fairhill School for Caregivers, visit www.fairhillcenter.org. ♦