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Caring for the Elderly When They Need It Most

"As I delved deeper into the reality of aging (some of which I gleaned through caring for my own family) certain unmet needs became more apparent to me." An attorney shares how and why she founded a homecare agency for the elderly.

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Mary Roque is a Boston-based attorney and co-founder of Entrust Care, a home health company dedicated to caring and assisting people who are transitioning from independence to assisted living, either at home or in a facility. As they say in their mission statement, "While dependent in some ways, older people have a wisdom and perspective that is vital to the young, and younger people help to perfect themselves by the loving care they give to the old. This final leg of the journey, while difficult at times, is full of meaning and value."

Given her experience caring for the elderly, we thought this was a good moment to connect with Mary and ask a few questions.

What is it like in Boston and the surrounding area these days?

In Boston, we currently have a “stay at home” order so most of us are working from home. It is not explicitly a lockdown order, but as close as you can get. Students have been sent home, and universities and schools are closed. So it is quiet and very few people are on the streets. Nursing homes and assisted living facilities have a "no visitor" policy. Meanwhile, families home together are learning to manage school, work, chores and fun. Another phenomenon is that families and clients are meeting online. Meanwhile, there are a lot fewer runners along the Charles River these days, and those who venture out keep their distance.

Tell us about Entrust Care. Why is it especially relevant today?

Entrust provides high-quality, compassionate, home-based elder care with deep respect for the humanity of our clients and employees. We aim to promote a culture in which the elderly and their caregivers are valued, assisted and loved until the natural end of their lives. Our motto is “care for the whole person.” Although we offer companionship and aid to people in need, we wanted to provide spiritual care as well, to those who want it. This sets us apart from other agencies. For example, this service could include praying with people or taking them to Mass. One of our clients goes to the Stations of the Cross during Lent with her caregiver. Another is brought to Mass in her nursing home, and her caregiver prays the Rosary or listens to a podcast with her.

Obviously with the new lockdown measures, for the moment you and

your team may not be able to do a lot of the things you just mentioned. Could you comment on these challenges?

The challenges with the quarantine are not easily overcome with elderly. We have had to cancel many of our caregivers due to mandates and common sense precautions. Since elders tend not to be tech savvy and able to use apps and video conferencing easily, more frequent phone calls and old fashioned cards and letters are working for now. But there is an opportunity to teach the older some of these applications and we hope to do some coaching for those who can. Of course, there is no substitute for an encounter with a human face.

You are an attorney. What led you to co-found Entrust?

As a lawyer, my work includes not only drafting documents but also

advising clients on how to best plan for their future financially and otherwise. Some of the trusts and wills I draft make provisions for this kind of accompaniment and specifics about end of life prayer, Sacraments and funeral Mass arrangements.

As I began to encounter legal clients requesting these things, and as I was witnessing the burgeoning population of elderly in need of dignified care, a light went on in my head: there is a real need for this kind of service. Not just home care for the elderly, but a kind of home care that distinctively recognizes their dignity and their spiritual needs as well. As I delved deeper into the reality of aging – some of which I gleaned through caring for my own family – certain unmet needs became more apparent to me.

A crucial part of healthy aging is the social interaction with caring people.

Most hope to stay at home or out of a nursing home, but no one wants to be alone. Even those in a fully staffed, skilled nursing home setting need extra help to live an "accompanied" life. Entrust Care provides companions in all of these settings. They can do so many services for a person, e.g. shop, clean, organize, read, pray, or they can just talk and be "substitute family", eventually becoming true friends with their clients. Although I cannot play this role as their attorney or trustee in a comprehensive way, I was able to create a company that connected kind and competent individuals with elderly clients.

I don't know of any other agencies that will provide this kind of service. Hospice is now an insurance driven, limited service for end of life, and the care is not equivalent to the attention we offer.

What are some of the challenges you find for the elderly in today's culture?

Even without the lockdown situation brought about by the coronavirus, I have always felt that loneliness stands out as the biggest challenge and hardship for the elderly population. Some find themselves alone because of busy schedules and distances of family and friends.

Others are isolated due to illness and physical limitations. Many are financially well off but have lost touch with their former communities because of relocation, death of friends and family or perhaps have fallen away from their faith tradition. We want to eliminate loneliness!

At the same time, the caregivers themselves feel so blessed through their work and our mission. One of my clients, Lillian, has some

dementia and has had many caregivers over the years. Each of the different caregivers has felt enriched and filled with joy through their connection to Lillian. At the same time, she claims she has been the “spoiled one” in the nursing home with lovely young people visiting her and bringing her to Mass, taking her on rides, going out for ice cream, painting watercolors and making visits to the Blessed Sacrament. There is a wonderful reciprocity to it all.

How can we help the broader public be more aware of these issues assailing our elderly today?

Obviously right now, what we are experiencing is exceptional, but once life gets back to normal, I like the idea of encouraging anyone who can to volunteer at senior living facilities or at a senior center in some way. Everyone has something to share,

e.g., a skill, an hour of company, the charm of their endearing toddler. It is a win-win. Older people have so much wisdom to impart and they have the benefit of a full life.

Is there anything you would like to add?

I have been so fortunate to find wonderful caregivers for my clients. The clients too have been sources of strength and inspiration for the caregivers. They pray together and accompany each other. The end of life can be the best part of your life with the right set up and people around you.

I have also witnessed some wonderful conversions and “reversions” back to the faith. It works both ways: sometimes it is the clients who are brought closer to their faith through the example and suggestions of the caregivers, and

others times it is the caregivers who are brought back to their faith.

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