



MY DAD'S DEMENTIA

ART KRIES AND JENNIE HERRMANN

Caring for my father
shows the true
importance of love

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“I know you don’t remember who I am. But do you remember that I’m important to you?”

As told to Lisa Fields

Joliet resident Jennie Herrmann, 45, shares her experience taking care of her father, who had dementia. Here are her words, as told to Caregiving writer Lisa Fields. Herrmann’s father, Art Kries, passed away in April 2022, shortly after this interview, at the age of 79. Herrmann’s words have been edited for space and clarity.

Whenever I wanted to buy a car or had questions about a 401(k), I’d go to my dad. He was a teacher for more than 30 years and had a master’s degree — a very educated man.

When my dad was diagnosed in 2016 with Lewy body dementia, a form of progressive dementia, he functioned just like himself for a year. Then, he began to decline. And now, he needs 24-hour care. He can’t dress himself or eat without prompting.

So, our family adjusted. My mom retired two years ago. I live a block away from my parents, with my husband and three kids. I work full time from home as a senior administrative assistant for Target, with the flexibility to work from my parents’ house too.

Every morning, I do two school drop-offs — elementary and junior high — then I’ll often go to my parents’ house to give my mom a break. I set up my computer, and my dad sits with me while I work.

Usually, he’s had his medicine by the time I get there, but if not, I help

with the whole routine: crushing pills and putting them in pudding because he has a hard time swallowing them. Around 12:30 p.m., I prepare lunch and encourage my dad to eat. I need to cut his food into little pieces. He can’t use utensils anymore, so he picks everything up with his fingers.

My sister Kim moved back home to help out. She and my mom do all of this and so much more — all day and all night.

My dad sleeps a lot, so there’s time for my mom and me to talk. I leave around 2:30 p.m. to pick up my kids. Then I make sure they do their homework, and we have dinner. It’s a lot. I’m fortunate that I have good friends to talk to, so I can be a better person for my dad and my family.

It’s extremely hard to witness someone you love lose their ability to do everything. When my oldest child was little, my dad, who had retired from teaching, watched him. He taught my son his ABCs. Now when Dad sees my kids, he’s loving, but I don’t think he realizes they’re his grandkids.

Still, we do get glimpses of Dad. He’ll remember something from when we were younger and talk about it. Other times, he’ll say, “I can’t explain what I’m trying to say,” like it gets lost in his mind before it comes out of his mouth.

I try my best to meet him where he is. The other day, for example, when he couldn’t remember my name, I said, “I know you don’t remember who I am. But do you remember that I’m important to you?” His eyes welled up with tears, and he said, “Yes.”

I know he’s still in there. I feel blessed to be so involved with him because he’s important to me, too. 

