

Deborah's Many Good-Byes

The human resources director at her company initially requested my professional assistance in Deborah's case. She was a professional in her late forties who had early-onset Alzheimer's-type dementia and could no longer function in her important capacity at her firm.

Because Deborah had no living relatives but many friends, I suggested to the human resources director that we help Deborah create a care-share team. She agreed and hired me to set up and mentor the team of friends and co-workers, who worked together for what ended up being a five-year journey.

Deborah's close friend and colleague stepped up to serve as team coordinator. This heroic friend, along with other team members, bravely walked with Deborah as Alzheimer's gradually erased her knowledge, memories, and many skills and abilities.

For Deborah, there were many good-byes: First, her job. Her colleagues donated sick days and vacation time as a gift to Deborah. They invited her to lunch during those weeks when she no longer "worked" but still "dropped by." They hosted a big party to mark her "early retirement" (as they chose to call it).

In the next three months, she said good-bye to her car and her driver's license. She reluctantly gave up paying her bills and managing her health-care appointments, and eventually moved out of her home. Each of these

good-byes was accompanied by another ritual to help her grieve what she must leave behind and hand off to her team the tasks that would lighten her load.

Next came the need for twenty-four-hour supervision and a move into an assisted living home. That's where her care team hosted a final party in her honor. When Deborah lost her ability to recognize most of the members of her team, most felt it was more than they could bear and withdrew from the team.

Deborah's last move was into a nursing home, where a structured and protective environment and caring, specialized staff safeguarded her. Only a couple of team members, the nursing home staff, and I supported the remainder of Deborah's journey.