

A Daughters Journey to Care for Her Mother in Canada  
The Melman Story  
By Judy Siblin-Librach

When a loved one becomes seriously ill, we often don't know where to turn. The health care system can be complicated for people who aren't used to navigating their way around it, and particularly when there is a medical crisis, it can be very daunting and overwhelming for family members who are trying to sort it all out and make the right choices and decisions. At moments like this, we often wish we had a fairy godmother who could just appear, wave a magic wand and grant us our wishes-or at least make it all less scary and stressful and give us some hope, relief and comfort all at the same time.

This is how Mandy Basman must have felt when her mother became seriously ill in Canada. And until she met her fairy godmother, health care advocate Andrea Nathanson, she felt frightened, alone and very frustrated that she couldn't help her mother.

Mandy is the kind of daughter everyone would like to have. Kind, devoted, loving, caring, and compassionate, she would have done anything in the world to take care of her mother the way her mother wanted to be taken care of.

When Mandy was growing up in South Africa with her parents, a sister and her grandparents, she probably would have never imagined that her mother, Myra Melman, who would have turned eighty this past June, would suffer from a debilitating, painful, degenerative brain disease that would ultimately change the course of their lives forever.

The hardest part for Mandy was that her late mother, who passed away in April of this year, was once a beautiful, vibrant, intelligent, and formidable woman who was so ahead of her time, that after becoming married, she went back to school to become a very well known and highly regarded divorce lawyer and women's rights activist. Being the very strong and determined woman Myra

was, she once made Mandy promise that she would never be put in a nursing home or any kind of institution if she ever became ill. She wanted to maintain her dignity and her own independence at all costs.

So Mandy was faced with a very difficult decision, and she didn't know what to do. Her mother was in a wheelchair, in terrible pain and determined not to see a doctor, go to a hospital or nursing home of any kind. Mandy, being the devoted daughter she was, didn't want to let her mother down, but at the same time, she didn't know where to turn.

“My mom was not well at all. Every time she got ill and I had to take her to the doctor, it was so difficult for her. She was in pain when you moved her. So she didn't want to go to the doctors. And I couldn't find a doctor to come and see her. I'd say, Ma, you need to see the doctor. And then she'd say, 'in a month's time I'll go.' So she used to do these games and then she wouldn't go. And eventually she would say, 'leave me alone.' I was exhausted and I didn't know what to do for her anymore. And that's when I called Qualicare in,” says Mandy.

Enter Andrea Nathanson, a registered nurse whose company Qualicare is a savior for many families. Andrea has been referred to as an angel, a lifesaver, a “light in the darkness” and a health care advocate extraordinaire. She is there to help navigate, orchestrate, and pull everything together for a family with one-stop-shopping, personalized, hands-on holistic approach that puts the patient at the centre of it all. She advocates on their behalf with all the doctors and necessary services and then acts as the intermediary between the doctors and the family. This of course creates a stress free environment for everyone so they can enjoy the relationship with their loved one. It's almost like having a bridal consultant who frees up the bride and her family to be guests at their own wedding without all the stresses and strains that go along with orchestrating the whole event. Only in this case, Qualicare is orchestrating the entire health care of a person and the peace of mind of that person and their family. Standing right

alongside of Andrea is her husband of 16 years, Wayne Nathanson who is the founder and creator of Qualicare and is responsible for creating and developing relationships with other companies that complement Qualicare's effort to provide the best possible care for their clients.

All kinds of patients will come to Qualicare. As Andrea explains, "Post ops, rehab cases, new mothers coming home who are having nursing difficulties. We do palliative care, patients with cancer or other serious illnesses."

She has over 75 people who work for her. As she puts it: "We have doctors, all levels of caregivers, physiotherapists, massage therapists, hairdressers, home adaptations specialists, drivers...whatever they need, we provide for them. All the patients receive holistic attention. This is extremely important to people who are not well. You don't have to be dying to need holistic attention. You could be having surgery. You could have a serious illness or just need a companion. It doesn't matter what it is. You need to know that there is so much more than the pills. It's also the time we spend talking, assessing and looking at the whole person."

And there is no person more qualified than Andrea Nathanson for this position. Not only is she is a loving, kind and very spiritual person; but she has an extensive nursing background in both medical and social healthcare. For the past seven years, she has been specializing in palliative hospice care, advocating for the needs of patients and family members that are faced with terminal illness, death and bereavement.

Mandy remembers what happened when she found an article about Qualicare in the Canadian Jewish News, and said to her husband Michael,

"That's it. I'm calling them, and Andrea came and it was wonderful. My mother told her exactly what she could do for her, making it very clear, because at that time she knew exactly what was going on."

So what did Andrea do exactly?

Mandy's face lights up with animation as she replies:

“Andrea was my angel! She was just wonderful. She organized caregivers, the doctors to come, the medications and she was a lifesaver for me. I have to tell you I could not have done it without her. I was at my wit’s end before I met Andrea. And when she came in, I felt that I could breathe again.”

Mandy and Andrea are seeing each other for the first time since Myra’s funeral. So there is intensity in the conversation, lots of tears and emotion and yet throughout there is also lots of laughter and joy at all the memories. From the moment they met, Andrea bonded to both Mandy and Myra immediately, and this was partly due to the fact that as Mandy says,

“Well, my mom just basically said to Andrea, ‘this is how it’s going to be and Andrea accepted this”.

Andrea recalls, “Myra had lost a lot of weight. She had ulcers at the time, from bed problems, bedsores. She was carrying a urinary tract infection at the time and she was in severe, severe pain. Her doctor had told her that she couldn’t help her. And we needed too many people to help lift her so I said how about I get a Hoyer lift in here.” Absolutely not,” she says repeating what Myra said to her. That was the first thing she ever told me, that I was not swinging her EVER.”

Everyone laughs at the memory.

A Hoyer lift is a mechanical device like a sling that Andrea wanted to put under Myra to lift her and help get her up. But since Myra would have nothing to do with it, Andrea had to honour that, and she did.

“So you know what we ended up having to do,” Andrea remembers. “We had to have two people in that apartment at all times, because Mandy believed in the utmost dignity for her mother. If her mother needed to use the washroom, she needed to use the washroom now, not when it was shift change when two people were there. Every month I would revisit this arrangement with Mandy to ensure she wanted to continue with it”.

Mandy was so intent on maintaining her mother's dignity and this is why this heartbreakingly beautiful story of the love and respect this daughter has for her mother, had to be told.

Andrea says, "It's unbelievable. Mandy would not deviate from that plan, not once".

When asked if her mother ever thanked her for her incredible concern for her and the outstanding care she was receiving from Andrea's company, Mandy says,

"She kept on telling me and my husband Michael, 'I feel so guilty, and I'm such a burden on all of you. And I kept on saying, Ma, it's my pleasure. You know, she lived here for five years, and three and half of those years she was well. And she had such a wonderful sense of humor. You know it was never a case of 'you didn't come and see me this morning.' She never complained."

Now in all fairness that was partly because Mandy went to see her every day. But it went even further. Myra's bedroom was set up like a hospital, only in the most dignified way.

Andrea describes, "She had a hospital bed, a hospital table and a commode chair. They re-did her entire bathroom so she could have a regular shower up until the time she could no longer have one. It was all-familiar to her. She had her own furniture. She had her own blankets. It looked as though she was in her regular bed, always her beautiful sheets and her beautiful blankets. We never put her in a hospital gown. Mandy had certain gowns made that were pretty, that we could tie or button at the back. One of the caregivers made them for her."

Mandy remembers that she maintained her dignity at all times.

"That was the most important thing. I mean, I stopped people from coming to see her at one point. I didn't think it was necessary for anybody to see her like that."

Andrea lights up and adds, "She did have her dignity. She always looked beautiful. She always smelled beautiful."

Mandy continues, "For a year and a half we looked after her without ever leaving the house. She never went to a hospital,

never. I used to go to the library for her every week. And I'd ask, "Tell me what you'd like to read. Bring whatever you like, so I would take 24 books out at time, and two weeks later I was back. The librarian said to me the other day, I haven't seen you for so long. Where have you been?"

Mandy even surprised her mother with a dog, because they'd always grown up with dogs in South Africa.

"I walked in with little Muffy, and she was so excited. It gave her an interest in life again. She would ask, Has Muffy eaten, Has Muffy gone outside. Has Muffy done this?"

Everyone laughs at the story.

Then Mandy remembers what happened when her mother was so sick.

"It was so sad. Muffy went from being a playful little dog and she really was, and then she became so sad. When I would go to the apartment, she'd come and sit with me, but if the caregivers would come and move my mom, or my mom cried or something, she would start running around the bed and panicking that they were hurting her. And if my mother went to the washroom, Muffy went with her".

Andrea also helped the family members cope with the changing status of Myra. She talks about all the joy and all the gifts they shared, but admits that the end was difficult and it's okay to be sad about that.

"I think it's important for people to realize that it's a temporary time; you can't make all of it joyful. I wanted to make sure that Mandy had the opportunity to express how hard it was for her, and not to put on a brave face all the time. I wanted her to know that it was wonderful that she was looking after her mother and that her life was committed to it, but in the end, I would say, 'It will one day be over. There will be a time when life will pick up and be 'normal' again". When it was Mandy's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and she didn't want to celebrate; Andrea supported her feelings that it was normal to not feel in a celebratory mood.

Whatever was required to make Myra comfortable, whether it was a hairdresser once a week, to this little dog that gave Myra a new lease on life, Mandy orchestrated it all with the help of her angel Andrea.

The first seed was planted for the company Qualicare in the early 1980's when Andrea was working as an acute care nurse in the hospital and was frustrated by the lack of holistic care for patients.

"I could never understand why everybody was sitting around doing nothing. They were all at the desk talking. And I would be looking around and wondering why people weren't talking to the patients.

From there Andrea went to work in a psychiatric ward. She was one of the only people who was an acute care nurse in the department so was often involved in the cases in which patients were physically sick as well as emotionally sick.

"So I was able to keep the two skills going which was good. This is where the holistic part comes through. I realized that so many physical problems are manifestations of emotional problems. If you just get to the bottom and to the inside, a lot of things would be solved. I loved that. Holistic to me is absolutely anything that is important to somebody, physically, emotionally, spiritually, the whole picture. I am a very spiritual person and I'm quite forward about that. There are not a lot of companies that bring spirituality to the job, but we have experienced that it is a very important component when people are faced with a health problem."

Andrea and her team really do believe in the philosophy of the words, 'we care' and it shows up in the way her face lights up when she talks about Myra and the total regard and respect she has for Mandy. "My purpose in life is to help people. Every single person that I get to know, they are gifts, you know. They teach me. That's how I become a better person. I watched Myra, Mandy, Michael, the grandkids...they taught me lessons each day, and have made me a better person. I'll treasure this forever. ."

If Andrea is the fairy godmother in this story, Mandy is the character of the selfless, kind princess who would stop at nothing to grant her mother all of her wishes.

“It was never a choice for me,” Mandy says. “That was how it was going to be. My mother and dad had the most wonderful marriage. My Dad put my mother on a pedestal and that’s how I grew up. It never was a choice for me. I’m sorry she had to suffer and that she had to go on so long that way, but I wanted my mother to have whatever she needed.”

And Mandy was lucky to find Qualicare whose one stop shop health care haven supported her in ways she could have only dreamed would be possible at such a difficult and stressful time in her life. “It’s an amazing job to have. I believe in looking after people properly and I’ll go to the ends of the earth to do it. That is my mission in life. Wayne and I live and breathe this company. We really do. We care so much and are grateful that we can spend our time looking after people and making their situations more manageable. We only live so long and we want to fill it up properly.”

So this fairytale doesn’t have a completely happy ending, because sadly Myra passed on, but it had a much happier ending for Mandy knowing that her mother was receiving such excellent care and for Myra because of the incredible love, dignity, respect and attention that was showered on her by this special fairy godmother and her team of angels.

One thing is for sure. Andrea Nathanson is a beacon of light in our health care system and sometimes, she will even grant some special wishes for you along the way.