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Stepping into their world with care

By *CHRISTY SWIFT*
Special to Highlands Today



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Dementia expert Lisa Rodriguez with client Pauline Conrad. Rodriguez is a certified dementia practitioner, certified state trainer for dementia and Purple Angel ambassador. She has worked in the field of dementia and Alzheimer's for over 22 years.

SEBRING — When dementia strikes, it can be a frightening and overwhelming experience for both the patient and the family. That's why dementia expert Lisa Rodriguez collaborated with Gary Joseph LeBlanc on a new book called *Managing Alzheimer's and Dementia Behaviors (Health care Edition)* which published in April.

"It's a really good educational book on how to deal with the behaviors of dementia and Alzheimer's," explained Rodriguez, who owns her own business as a geriatric care provider and also contracts with a home health company.

LeBlanc had previously authored another version of the book, but asked Rodriguez to help him develop the health care edition. A certified state trainer for dementia and a certified dementia practitioner, Rodriguez has focused her entire career on this disease. She was the face of the Gulf Coast chapter of the Alzheimer's Association for 11 years as well as a chapter in her home state of Ohio for seven years before that.

Altogether she has over 22 years of professional experience in the field.

"I have a passion (for this work)," 49-year-old Rodriguez said, "because I've been touched by it."

Rodriguez watched her grandmother struggle with dementia for 13 years. She was a young teen at the time of

the diagnosis.

“I was the oldest grandchild, so I got to see a lot. I had to put my part in,” Rodriguez recalled.

That meant coming home from school many days and helping her grandfather with her grandmother’s care. “I would read to her. I would help with bathing, feeding her.”

For the grandchildren, it was “tough,” Rodriguez shared. Her grandmother often wouldn’t recognize them. She would mistake Rodriguez for her mother. “We didn’t understand why this was happening,” she went on. “Memories are erased in reverse order. She didn’t recognize her kids as adults. In her mind, her kids were little.”

Rodriguez hopes the book, printed in a large easy-to-read font and published by Outskirts Press, will help patients and their families deal with the physical and psychological effects of dementia. There are many different types of dementia, the three most common being Alzheimer’s, lewy body and vascular. Each person’s experience will be different, she said.

Rodriguez is also an ambassador for the global Purple Angel Campaign, started by dementia patient Norman McNamara in England. The campaign seeks to de-stigmatize dementia and educate the public on the disease. Rodriguez is working to make Highlands County the first dementia-friendly county in the U.S. That includes rolling out programs like a new grant-funded GPS-tracking bracelet program run by the sheriff’s department to help wandering dementia patients get back home safely. Public information officer Nell Hays stated that they don’t have a start date for the program yet, but it is in the works.

Rodriguez is also encouraging dementia-friendly measures in Highlands County hospitals, and she’s launched the Memory Cafe, a monthly event sponsored by Vitas Healthcare hospice, where patients and their families can enjoy a night out in different local venues, with door prizes, pampering, and a sense of normalcy and acceptance.

Depression is a common side effect of this terminal disease, Rodriguez explained, but “life doesn’t end after diagnosis.”

For caregivers, the toll of dementia can be even more trying. “70 percent of caregivers die before their loved one,” she said soberly. With her own grandfather, Rodriguez remembered that he began to have minor heart attacks and TIAs. In the end the family chose to “share the care” as Rodriguez described it, moving her grandmother to a facility.

While she said the goal is to help patients stay in their homes, that’s not the best choice for all families all of the time.

Another important thing to remember, Rodriguez said, is that dementia patients don’t do or say things purposely to hurt their loved ones. “You have to understand what’s chemically going on in the brain. It affects their ability to make a rational decision,” she stated. Many loved ones get offended when the person with dementia accuses them of something, such as stealing from them.

“They say, ‘how could you say that? I would never steal from you,’” she elaborated. “It’s the disease, not the

person.”

Rodriguez is also proud to be on the board of Nu-Hope Elder Care Services and is part of the Heartland Regional Transportation Planning Organization. Lack of public transportation in the county affects dementia patients profoundly, because they often lose the ability to drive.

“What do they do? Do they stay home and get depressed? That’s what a lot of them are doing,” she remarked.

Rodriguez also gave caregivers permission to tell what she called “therapeutic fiblets.” These are little white lies that help the person stay calm, as they often get agitated when people argue with them. She cited an example of a client who insisted someone else was supposed to take her to a doctor’s appointment when Rodriguez showed up to do the job.

Instead of insisting that she had indeed been scheduled, Rodriguez made up a little story about how the person her client was expecting had had an emergency and had asked Rodriguez to fill in.

“Don’t ever argue. It’s a no win battle,” she advised. “It makes it easier if the caregiver kind of goes into their world.”

“We can never bring them back into ours,” she added.

The next Memory Cafe will be held at the Manor at Lake Jackson from 2 to 5 p.m. on June 24 with book signing by Rodriguez and LeBlanc. “Managing Alzheimer’s and Dementia Behaviors (Health Care Edition)” can be purchased on Amazon.com or www.common sensecaregiving.com for \$15.95. To RSVP, call 863-449-0264