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Guest Columnist

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Bergeron: Imagining a dementia-friendly MetroWest

Imagine feeling trapped. Trapped inside a mind that no longer remembers well or thinks clearly. Trapped inside your home, because you fear going outside and getting lost, fear the embarrassment of acting inappropriately at a store, a restaurant, a movie. Trapped and alone because your friends, even family members, avoid you, thinking they no longer have anything to say to you, or you to them. Knowing that someday, after your mind and body have become more frail, you may be condemned to loneliness and boredom, when most days, at most times, there is nothing to do but sit, watch TV, and wish you were dead. Or imagine you are the wife or child of that trapped person you have always loved, afraid to leave them alone, helpless when they are angry or embarrassed or depressed about their fate.

I watched my mother and father live this drama (sometimes a comedy, but most days a tragedy) over the few years before my mother, after four months in a nursing home, died there. I see one of my older sisters living this drama at home with her husband, a business leader, model husband and father and pillar of the community for years before the dementia came. One of my older siblings now has an early-stage Alzheimer's diagnosis. Most of the clients in my practice as an elder law attorney are either living this life or fear they may in the future. Do you fear it yourself? Trust me, you are not alone.

Now imagine a community where you can continue to live a happy and dignified life, even if your memory is not so great and your thinking is not so clear. Imagine a neighborhood where you can feel safe going for a walk because, if you get confused, one of your neighbors will help you out ("Mr. Bergeron, let me walk you back home"). Imagine a place with restaurants where the waitress will not overwhelm you with a 50-item menu ("Mr. Bergeron, would you like the chicken or the fish today?"), where the people at the store will help you with your shopping list and help you make change at the cash register. Imagine a place where you can live happily in the present, every day, for the rest of your life. What you are imagining is a dementia-friendly community.

BayPath Elder Services, the Aging Services Access Point (ASAP) charged by the commonwealth with improving the lives of seniors in most of the MetroWest communities, recently began an initiative that they hope will ultimately make every one of them dementia-friendly. In September, they invited three Council on Aging (COA) directors, Kelley Burke from Northborough, Trish Pope from Marlborough, and Janice Long from Hudson, to travel to Minnesota and learn first-hand from the people there who started and developed America's first dementia-friendly communities initiative over the last five years. My law firm, Mirick O'Connell, sponsored the trip, and I went along. We learned first-hand about the 34+ communities there that have developed and are now implementing plans to make their own neighborhoods or towns dementia-friendly, each in a unique way. We all came back inspired. Now, with support from the MetroWest Health Foundation, BayPath will be staffing the efforts of these three pioneering COA Directors and the volunteers they recruit to make their communities dementia-friendly. Ultimately, BayPath Executive Director, Christine Alessandro, hopes all 14 communities in BayPath's service area will want to become dementia friendly.

Mirick O'Connell will continue to support this work. So should you. Help make your community a place where living with dementia can still mean living a meaningful life, not dying a slow death. Do it for yourself. Do it for someone you love. I'm doing it for my mother. To learn more about the Minnesota model, visit <http://www.actonalz.org/>. To follow the progress in Northborough, Marlborough and Hudson, go to BayPath's websites, www.baypath.org or www.caregivingmetrowest.org or follow my blog at <http://mirickoconnelltrustsandestateslawblog.wordpress.com/>.

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