

A Message from the Forgotten Middle

Ed and Nancy are a married couple we met in Michigan while I was a grad student at the University of Michigan. We connected because Nancy and my wife had started work on the same day as physical therapists at the University Hospital. Ed was a high school teacher and golf coach. Ed was a gentle giant at six foot eight who was the ringleader of intense games of charades, and Nancy was always a sweet and witty presence.

After I finished school we returned to New England and they settled in western Michigan. We stayed in touch, visited each other, and eventually began joining them for vacations. They were wonderful companions. Like ourselves, they were laid-back vacationers who didn't have to visit every tourist site or be going full-tilt at every moment. They also helped us "watch our pennies" as we vacationed. They introduced us to places they had been before---the Canadian Rockies, Hawaii, and western Michigan. We showed them the New England Coast and northern Washington. We were both first-timers at the Grand Canyon and Yosemite.

At a relatively early age Ed was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. With good therapy and medications he was able to remain active for a number of years. Despite a tremor he still golfed and hiked, just more slowly and carefully. Growing muscle rigidity made him struggle to get up from a chair, even with help. Yosemite was our last vacation together. Then, in a heartbreaking twist, Mary was also diagnosed with Parkinson's, added to a bad back that's an occupational hazard of being a physical therapist.

With their worsening conditions Ed and Mary relocated, first to the Grand Rapids area in far western Michigan, near family and friends. That was followed by a condo in Dallas Texas where their daughter lived and she was able to help with caregiving. We visited them there. By that point Ed's cognitive decline had become serious, affecting his speech and mood. They eventually moved to an assisted living residence back in Michigan. As Ed's and her conditions progressed, Nancy's e-mails became more and more heartbreaking.

We are heading out to Michigan soon to visit them. Nancy's most recent e-mail said, "We will have moved somewhere, but we still don't know where. We have given our 30 day notice, and are now scrambling to find a good place. We fall between the cracks; our reward for working hard all our lives is that we don't qualify for any assistance, yet certainly can't afford the rent anyplace decent. Add to that

the fact that Ed probably belongs in a memory unit or nursing home, and I am still independent, and it comes to no place (yet), but we will get this figured out.”

I am waiting for any of the numerous candidates for President, including the incumbent, to even acknowledge our nation’s growing crisis of long-term senior care, much less offer any solutions. Our “forgotten middle” of millions of seniors like Ed and Nancy, who are neither wealthy enough to pay full cost for decent care nor poor enough for care to be covered by Medicaid, deserve better.