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LIFE & WORKJOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

To Give Dementia Patients a Voice, She Asks Them to Speak With Legos

Loretta Veney used the building blocks in her job in security. Then her mother was diagnosed with dementia.



Loretta Veney, an author and speaker, is focused on improving care for those with dementia.

PHOTO: DANIEL MCGARRITY

By Julie Halpert

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Loretta Veney, who is 63, spent most of her career in security management and training, where she helped teach and give shape to security procedures and rules in the public and private sectors.

But the seeds of her next career began in 2006 when her mother was diagnosed with dementia. That was when Ms. Veney started learning everything she could to become the best caregiver possible for her mother.

Eight years later, Ms. Veney published a book about her experience, “Being My Mom’s Mom,” the proceeds of which helped pay for her mother’s care and “educate others about this horrible disease,” she says.

Since 2021, her main focus has been as an author and speaker, with the goal of improving care for sufferers of dementia. In particular, she is a leading advocate of playing with Legos as a means of doing that.

“When you put the Lego bricks out, it’s like they come alive again,” she says of her experiences with people who have dementia.

Like millions of children, Ms. Veney grew up playing with Legos. During her security career, she used the building blocks for emergency planning and tabletop evacuation exercises. For years, a bag of Legos went everywhere with her in her car. Playing with the blocks became a form of communication between her and her mother as well.

Ms. Veney recalls a pivotal moment just after the doctor’s appointment when her mother was first officially diagnosed with dementia. She was riding in Ms. Veney’s car, Legos in her hands. “Build how you feel,” Ms. Veney recalls saying to her mother. Doris Woodward took the head off the Lego person in her hands and said to her daughter, “I’m afraid that years from now, I’m going to lose my head.”

“That was the most profound way to describe what was coming,” Ms. Veney says.

Later, in the middle stages of the disease, when she couldn’t do much, her mother could still build with Legos and create a story, Ms. Veney says.

“Clicking Lego bricks together gave her a voice,” Ms. Veney says.

In 2014, Ms. Veney took a training course on the use of Legos for communication, business and organizational purposes. The course was designed by a former employee of Lego A/S, which had earlier offered such training itself but discontinued it in 2010.

Ms. Veney, who lives in Clinton, Md., says she started to use her training in 2018 to work with other dementia sufferers and their caregivers. She has also run sessions for employees of the Maryland and Baltimore County departments of aging.

“One of the greatest lessons my mom taught me was when you find something that works, share it with other people,” she says.

Last year, while giving a presentation at a senior-living center, she asked a resident with dementia to build her favorite vacation using Legos. The woman built a cruise ship that she went on with her niece 15 years ago. “All of a sudden,” Ms. Veney says, “the woman started

talking about the midnight buffet and line dancing on the cruise, and the niece burst out crying because the woman hadn't talked in a long time."

Ms. Veney's mother died in January at the age of 92, with Lego bricks in her hand. Ms. Veney was flooded with messages from people in more than 18 countries expressing their condolences and sharing their stories about how Legos had helped their loved ones who had dementia.

She hopes to continue using Legos to help those with dementia for many years. "When I see other people are happy with the Lego bricks," she says, "it just brings me a joy I can't even really describe."

Second Acts looks at the varied paths people are taking in their 50s and beyond. You can reach Ms. Halpert, a writer in Michigan, and let us know how you're starting over, at reports@wsj.com.
