



GRACE BEAHM/STAFF

Mary Peters, president of Care for Life, visits with Jack Segars, a resident at the Ashley River Plantation assisted-living facility. Peters, whose interest in the elderly began with her great-grandmother, often visits elderly friends and associates in assisted-living homes in the area.



PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED

Mary Peters with her husband, author and Civil War expert, Jack Thomson.

Mary Peters: Agency founder helps aged stay at home

BY DOTTIE ASHLEY The Post and Courier January 24, 2009

‘Some people have a soul that smiles,’ says Valerie White, referring to staffers at Care for Life, a local company that provides home care for the elderly. White’s life had become a nightmare after her father, diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, became physically and verbally abusive. An educator and single mother, White moved last summer from New York to Charleston to care for her father.

She contacted several local Alzheimer’ scare agencies, but they were of little help. Then one day in an alterations shop, she spilled her story to a kind woman who suggested she call Care for Life. “When I walked, sobbing, into Care for Life’s office, (staffer) Sheryl O’Neal gently listened to me and then said, ‘You need to meet Mary Peters,’ ” recalls White. “And somehow, relief just washed over me, as Mary then calmly said, ‘We can help you.’ ” Peters, who founded Care for Life in 1995, a for-profit business that assists with keeping the elderly at home under medical management, got in touch with a geriatric specialist that White had been trying to see for months. “I was amazed,” says White. “Mary got us an appointment for the very next day.” After being hospitalized for a time and given the proper medication, her father, 73, has calmed down to the point that White is free enough to start looking for a full-time job.

Lazy days spent on the maple-shaded porches in Columbia talking with her great-grandmother and grandmother made Peters aware that elderly people were interesting and fun, and not at all like the stodgy images often projected on television. “I still remember my grandmother’s lively, colorful friends who would come over to her house to play bridge once a week,” says Peters. “And my entire family went to church to hear my grandmother sing in the choir.”

But one afternoon on Edisto Avenue, her great-grandmother, Lula B. Crowder, who was around

90, had a serious talk with Mary, then a child. "I'm probably not going to be here that much longer," she said, "and I want to prepare you for what could happen." Luckily, her great-grandmother lived to 95. In fact, two weeks before she died, she was busy vacuuming in her home. "That taught me a lesson," says Peters, 56. The lesson learned was that the longer a person is able to stay in his own home, the longer he lives and the happier he seems to be.

She became a nationally certified geriatric care manager and opened Care for Life, employing 85 carefully selected caregivers. "Some people will hire just about anyone who is willing to stay with an elderly relative," says Peters. "But our caregivers are screened through FBI checks and references and must have at least two years' experience in home health care before we hire them for Care for Life." Peters' 10-member office staff includes a certified nurse who regularly visits in the homes of patients to make certain the quality of their care meets certain standards.

When one of Peters' clients does have to be moved to a nursing home, Peters' staff keeps constant contact with him to make certain he is satisfied. Recently, she had a patient moved from one assisted-living home to another because the patient was unhappy there.

Peters began her career as an occupational therapist and then worked as a lobbyist in Washington, D.C., for the American Occupational Therapy Association and later for the National Association of Private Psychiatric Hospitals. Part of that time, she lobbied the Congressional Health-Writing Committees on behalf of issues such as Medicare, Medicaid and reimbursement for providers and hospitals. As a lobbyist, Peters explains, "My job was to get Congress to allow occupational therapy to be paid for by Medicare. Rep. Lindy Boggs of Louisiana sponsored the bill, along with others, but it took several years to get it through Congress."

Framed on the wall at Care for Life is the reminder: "Abuse and neglect of the elderly is a crime, whether physical, psychological or financial exploitation." Peters says, "Many elderly are not aware that if they don't deed their home to their children or relatives before a certain time before becoming disabled that often they can't qualify for a Medicaid bed."

"I believe Mary's in home caregivers are the best, and I've been very impressed when I go into a patient's home and see how professional these caregivers are," Dr. Leslie Pelzer of Charleston Housecalls says.

Although she runs a for-profit business, Peters also does pro bono work making referrals to the Alzheimer's Association and the Trident Area Agency on Aging so clients can apply for grants for home care.

"When somebody calls here, even if they can't pay, I always try to put them in touch with an agency or a person that can help them," says Peters. "Remember, we all may be in this situation one day, and planning is the only answer, no matter how much money you may or may not have."

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