

Mary E. Peters —

Eldercare Visionary

BY PEG EASTMAN, CHARLESTON MERCURY

Born: Columbia, South Carolina

Hobbies: Working, reading, golfing, traveling that includes biking in foreign lands

Favorite Book: *The Alexandria Quartet* by Lawrence Durrell

Best Lowcountry Memory: Rollicking good times at the Garden City, South Carolina, beach with the extended Peters family

With youthful energy, Mary Peters attended the 1980 Democratic National Convention as part of the South Carolina Delegation. A recent graduate of the University of South Carolina, just for fun she wrote “Occupational Therapists Work for You” on the back of her placard. The newscasters picked up the image of an attractive young woman waving the unusual advertisement and televised it across the nation. At the time, Occupational Therapy was a fairly new vocation, and this opened doors that have led to a long and full career.

Because of the national publicity, Mary was quite literally tracked down and hired as a lobbyist for the American Occupational Therapy Association in Washington, DC. Later she worked for the National Association of Private Psychiatric Hospitals. In both associations her job was to persuade high-profile members of Congress to reimburse costs through Medicare and Medicaid. But Mary missed her wonderful family and the Lowcountry. She moved back to SC and became an administrator at St. Francis Hospital. Before starting her own business, she also taught health policy at the Medical University of South Carolina.

Growing up in Columbia, Mary had enjoyed a warm, supportive relationship with her family. Her great-grandmother and grandmother clearly demonstrated that the elderly were fun to be around and had a real zest for living. Remaining active and involved in life seemed to be the secret to their productive longevity. Mary’s great-grandmother did her own vacuuming almost up to the time of her death at age 95. Her grandmother had loads of friends throughout her life. She sang in the church choir and enjoyed the social stimulation of a good bridge game. (Current statistics suggest that the longer a person stays in her familiar home environment and remains socially and physically active, the longer she lives.)

The strong matriarchal influences combined with observing her entrepreneurial father and her own work in diverse healthcare settings raised Mary’s consciousness about aging. It became apparent that entire families can be ensnared in a complicated trap. Mentally sharp elders often display a reluctance to ask for help and are often resistant to accepting assistance of any kind.

The journey through eldercare can be emotionally draining and financially devastating when physical or mental impairments surface. The responsibility of ensuring elderly loved ones are properly cared for often falls on adult children who must continue to meet their own situational needs. The frustration of having to juggle careers, childrearing responsibilities and the challenges of aging parents simultaneously can be overwhelming to everyone involved.

Mary opened Care for Life in 1995. It is a for-profit business that assists many families in planning for keeping their loved ones at home for as long as possible. A sound plan and trained caregivers help dispel the greatest fear that persists in the elderly — placement in a nursing home. Whether rationally or not, they fear that their well-intentioned children will forget about them.

Looking forward, Mary became a nationally certified geriatric care manager. Her geriatric care management goes to great lengths to empower families. With a mission to ensure the greatest possible degree of safe and independent living for seniors at home, Care for Life staff monitor the five major aging areas of concern: poor nutrition, medication errors, diminishing personal hygiene and home upkeep, failure to address medical problems and prevention of debilitating accidents such as falls. Nurses assess needs and collaborate with the family to plan a care giving regimen. When appropriate, referrals are made for additional professional services.

Following the adage “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” Mary publishes Caring Times, a newsletter that provides practical suggestions for healthy living. The newsletter encourages activities that prevent loneliness and promote independence while maintaining motor skills, social skills and cognitive ability. Preventing isolation ensures an improved mental attitude and tempers the decline associated with depression in the elderly.

The costs of eldercare can be staggering when pre-planning has not occurred. One of the first needs is to assess the financial situation and determine what is appropriate, including lifestyles other than nursing homes. Monitoring assisted living and other housing for seniors is part of care management. Care managers keep current on community resources and help families when they select a residential facility for their loved one.

Mary has long worked to foster positive outcomes for the elderly in South Carolina, and more specifically in the tri-county area. Her role as an advocate has been to educate persons in government as to the state of eldercare and how it can be made more accessible and practical. She quietly supports a number of organizations. She refers families to the local Alzheimer’s Association and the Trident Area Agency on Aging for grants that enable them to have their loved ones remain at home. She holds care manager certification, and she is a certified guardian qualified for appointment by the probate court.

When there is a need, she refers persons for legal advice for updating important documents such as wills and powers of attorney. Many families have requested referrals

to certified financial planners who assist in protecting real assets and future income for long term care.

Mary serves as secretary for the Hospice of Charleston Foundation Board, a non-profit tasked with raising charitable dollars to assist low income persons with hospice services. She supports Hospice of Charleston's inpatient care center in Mount Pleasant and praises the medical staff, including foundation board member Dr. Angus Baker and the volunteers who give their time, talent and finances.

On a personal note, Mary's mother is a homemaker who provided stability in her life. Mary attributes much of her professional success to her father, Ben Peters, lovingly known as the "brickman of Charleston." He set a standard of excellence that has guided both Mary's career and that of her brother Tommy, also an entrepreneur. His maxim was "do something for someone and your business will grow." And grow his did. He helped start the Executive Association of Charleston, an organization of one-of-a-kind businesses that have networked with one another for several decades.

Ben Peters supplied the bricks for MUSC's construction projects. And he was generous. He once raised money to purchase rocking chairs for every child's room in the MUSC Children's Hospital. He and Dr. James B. Edwards, former governor of SC and past president of the Medical University, offloaded the rockers personally.

Ben's wardrobe was legendary. Mary proudly displays a picture of her father jauntily wearing pants embroidered with multi-colored lollipops. A world traveler, he had a lavish wardrobe of custom-made Thai silk jackets. At the memorial reception in his honor at the Hibernian Hall, friends and family donned Ben's jackets in celebration of his playful, dynamic impact on their lives.

Mary is married to a historian of the War Between the States, Jack Thomson, who authored Charleston at War. She and Jack met at coffee hour at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church. Jack caught her attention because he was wearing a jacket trimmed with very conspicuous rick-rack. The outfit reminded her of her father's colorful combinations. As he approached, Mary thought, "There's got to be a story here." Apparently there was, because they hit it off immediately and have been married for 15 event-filled years.

Peg Eastman recently published "Hidden History of Old Charleston" with Edward F. Good and has written several other books about the Charleston scene. She can be reached at pegknowledgetech@msn.com.