

# How My Childhood Years Were Lost: *A Young Caregiver's Tale*

By Fran Cericola

I clearly remember the night the police knocked on the front door of our Long Island home. What made it memorable was not that the authorities wanted to revoke my mother's driver's license. After all, her sight had been failing for years because of untreated diabetes. For me, just 11 years old at the time, the moment marked the beginning of a new world of adult responsibilities.

Suddenly I was thrust into a new role. I was expected to handle the duties of my mother, Helen. In our family, cooking, cleaning and



1991, Westbury New York, Frances Mage Cericola and Joseph Mage at her brother's wedding.

caregiving tasks were "women's work," and I was the only other female in the house.

Even more difficult was becoming a near full-time nurse. The loss of Mom's sight left her essentially confined. Later, she required several amputations, making it difficult for her to move. And because she couldn't visit the bathroom without assistance and awoke often in pain, I slept in her room.

For three years, I frantically balanced school, caring for my mother and keeping the house in order. My brother helped sometimes, but my father, Joseph, was rarely available. He worked the night shift in Brooklyn,

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leaving at 1 p.m. and returning 12 hours later.

One day, when I was 14, I asked my father if I could attend a friend's birthday party.

"No," he said. "You need to stay home with your mother."

That was the breaking point. Infuriated, I packed a bag and left the house. I got about two blocks away before my father found me.

As escape attempts went, it wasn't a success. But Dad finally realized he needed to bring on more help. Eventually, we found a woman to care for my mother. She was not a trained nurse – indeed, she barely spoke English – but she relieved some of the burden.

Mom passed away three years later, just before my senior year in high school.

Incredibly, in 1998, I was called on again to become a caretaker, this time for my dying father, who had cancer. I moved to Florida, where Dad had retired, and struggled through as best I could.

My brother remained in New York with his wife and three young children. My uncle offered to help – but only in return for financial compensation.

That's one of the lessons a caregiver learns quickly. Unfortunately, when sickness strikes, there are not a lot of people who stick around. And often, those who do remain are not ideally qualified to provide care.

I wonder now how my mother's life might have improved if a skilled nurse had looked after her, not an adolescent girl. A nurse, for example, is trained to recognize circulatory issues. Might a nurse have been able to prevent, or at least postpone, the amputations?

As an adult, I pursued a career in health care and today I am the administrator/executive vice president of operations for Concierge Home Health Care in Naples.

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At the time my mother fell ill, my father and brother did not know that such opportunities were available. A professional health care agency can help navigate the medical system, helping families receive the best possible care and services.

Anyone who is confronting a caregiving situation should be proactive. Don't stay silent and try to pull together a patchwork of care, as we once did.

For more information, please contact us at Concierge Home Health Care, a private duty agency providing trusted nurses and caregivers for in-home care. Serving Collier, Lee and Charlotte Counties, Concierge has a full range of personalized care from skilled nursing to 24-hour companion care. Call us at (239) 939-6100 or visit [www.conciergehomedhealthcare.com](http://www.conciergehomedhealthcare.com)