



HOW LAUGHTER AND PRECIOUS MOMENTS EASE MY CAREGIVER STRESS



CHARLENE SITTING ON HER MOM ARLEEN'S LAP, WITH SISTER SHARON (LEFT) AND BROTHER DAVID (RIGHT), 1970

Balancing the role of her mom's primary caretaker with a busy family life and law practice left **Charlene Bazarian-Fruehauf** feeling overwhelmed and guilt-ridden. But learning to find glimmers of humor in the hardship helps her see the small joys all around her

AS TOLD TO GINA ROBERTS-GREY

Charlene Bazarian-Fruehauf let out a deep sigh. *I wish I could clone myself*, the 58-year-old attorney thought as she tried, yet again, to figure out how to be in two places at once. Torn between attending her son's band concert and staying home with her mom, Arleen—whose health prevents her from going on family outings—often leaves Charlene destined to disappoint someone.

"Being my mom's primary caregiver for the past 20 years has impacted almost every

aspect of my life," Charlene shares. "At first, I was simply a helping hand, there to make sure she wasn't lonely or that she didn't trip on a rug. But a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease a few years ago dramatically increased my caregiving responsibilities.

"As her disease progresses, Mom isn't able to comprehend her physical limitations and thinks she's able to walk farther than she can. She also doesn't understand that her memory issues mean she can't stay home alone. Mom prefers that I'm the one on hand at all times—rather than other family members or paid in-home aids—so it's challenging for me to meet *my* other responsibilities at work and as a mom.

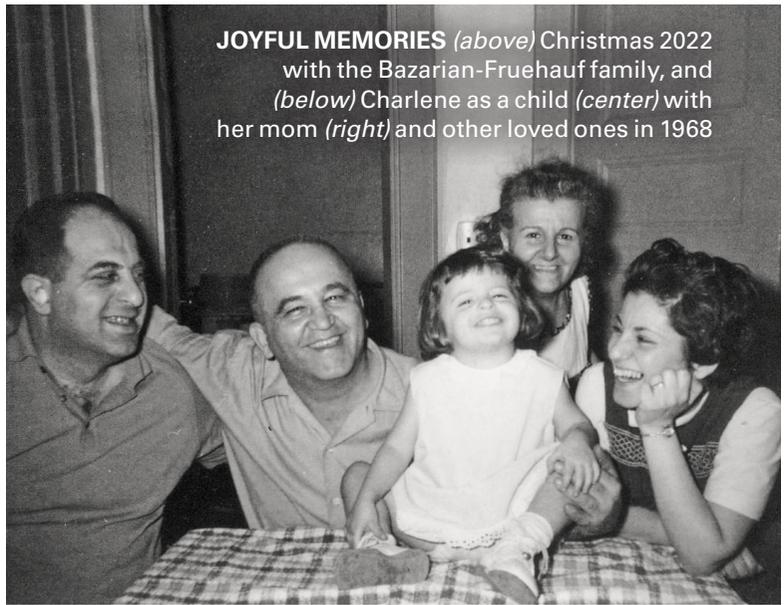
"My boys are teenagers now and are involved in lots of activities. I love attending their school plays and band concerts. And it really tugs at my heart when instead



SPECIAL BOND
Charlene (left)
with her mom,
Arleen, in a joyful
moment, 2024



JOYFUL MEMORIES (above) Christmas 2022
with the Bazarian-Fruheauf family, and
(below) Charlene as a child (center)
with her mom (right) and other loved ones in 1968



of saying ‘Have a good time,’ my mom says, ‘Why can’t I go too?’ or ‘Why do you have to go?’ I do my best to explain the situation to her, assure her she will be fine, but I’m guilt-ridden for leaving her, then feel more guilty that I’m not looking forward to the event.

“As my boys grow older, regret creeps in as well. I had always wanted to take the boys to Disney World, but I couldn’t leave Mom for that long and she couldn’t handle the crowds or noise. On a good day, if I try taking her with us out to dinner, she will be vocal about her displeasure if the restaurant is too loud or too cold, which, for her, it always is.

“But when I find myself teetering on frustration or throwing a pity party for one, I remind myself that it won’t always be this way. Instead of wishing away daylight so I can finally relax and crawl into bed at night, I try to reflect on how I wish I could freeze

time. My sons are rapidly growing up and my mom just celebrated her 90th birthday; we won’t all be under one big roof forever, and no matter how many balls I’m juggling today, I’m sure to miss them when they’re no longer up in the air.

TRULY THE BEST MEDICINE

“To give myself a bit of grace, I have adopted the motto ‘Do what you can, when you can,’” Charlene says. “I prep as much as I can the night before—set the coffee maker, prep my mom’s pills, set the table—to make the next day less stressful. Accepting help is also invaluable. Since I can no longer leave my mom alone if I have appointments or want to take a break for a manicure or coffee with a friend, I rely on my aunt when she offers help and utilize elder companion care services a few hours a week.

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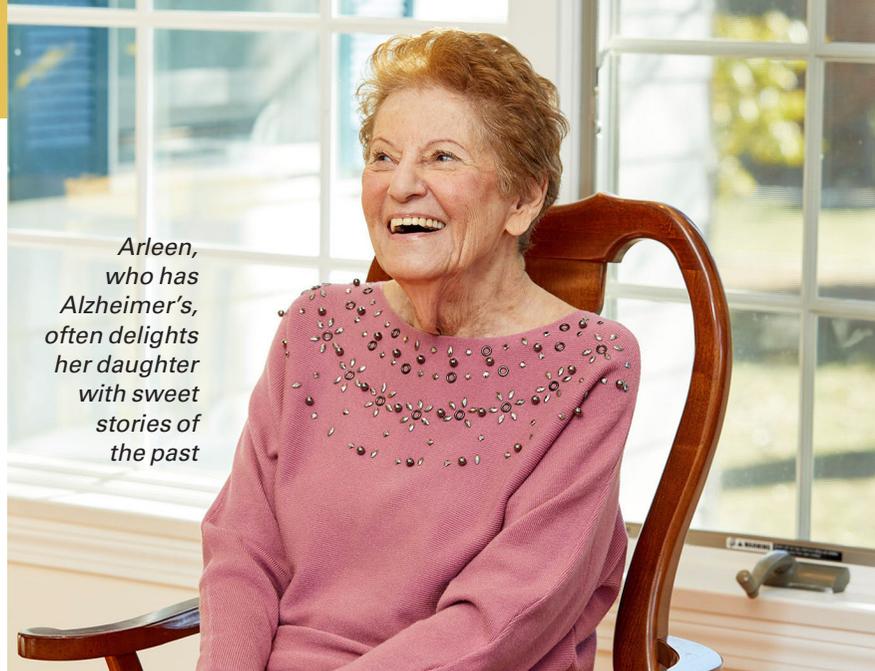
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“But I have found that the best medicine to prevent a case of ‘Why me?’ or that feeling of caretaker guilt when I reluctantly admit that no one can do it all...is laughter,” Charlene says. “To keep my cool and keep from being overwhelmed by sadness witnessing my mom’s decline, I rely on humor. I make jokes when I wash, dye and blow-dry her hair that I should have gone to beauty school. She’ll often respond that I missed my calling, which, depending on what I am doing, could have been a nurse, hairdresser or even stand-up comedian.

“I often joke to her that I think I’m starring in my own reality sitcom, but I’m the only one that doesn’t know it. Even my kids have joined in the fun of getting her to smile with impressions, funny stories and jokes.

“On days when Mom doesn’t want to get out of bed, I distract her by making funny faces or talking in a silly voice to take her mind off her aches and pain. When the weather cooperates, I’ll take her with me on my walk, pushing her wheelchair, chatting about nothing and everything as we take in the fresh air and enjoy a few moments of genuine joy together.

“Caring for her is not fast or easy, but the effort is worth it because no matter how much work or sacrifice is involved, I know



Arleen, who has Alzheimer’s, often delights her daughter with sweet stories of the past

“LITTLE BONDING MOMENTS OF LAUGHTER AND JOY PROVIDE THE VITAL EMOTIONAL ENERGY TO SUSTAIN ME.”

my heart will be broken when she is gone. When I find myself missing the mom I once had, I reflect on all the laughs we’ve shared together. I turn my focus to the good times, like all the precious moments her face lights up when she sees me and when she tells me how grateful she is that I am her daughter.

“Sometimes Mom will share a story from her childhood that I haven’t heard before, or reminisce about when she was dating my dad. Those little glimmers remind me that no matter what, we love each other. Those little bonding moments of laughter and joy provide vital emotional energy to sustain me...and will always live on in my heart.”

PROOF: HUMOR HELPS CAREGIVERS COPE

When we’re overwhelmed, having a good laugh isn’t exactly top of mind. But research shows that finding glimmers of levity, even at the toughest times, can boost resilience, decrease anxiety and bring us closer to those we’re caring for.

“Unlike other stress-relieving strategies, like hitting the gym, humor doesn’t take energy or effort, which is why it’s a beautiful coping mechanism,” says Allison J. Applebaum, Ph.D.,

Founding Director of the Caregivers Clinic at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.

While it may sound counter-intuitive, one of the best ways to reap the benefits of “funny bone medicine” is through dark humor. “Caregivers have told me it tends to soften the ‘ick’ feeling when they’re doing unpleasant tasks,” says Applebaum. “For example, my dad and I found ourselves laughing when I had to change his diaper—we laughed

at the absurdity of doing something that felt out of the natural order of life.”

To invite healing humor into *your* life, she suggests being very intentional: “Make it a point to ask friends to send you funny memes or videos regularly as your responsibilities mount. Humor doesn’t negate suffering, but it can help us connect with others, find meaning and see each precious moment.”

—By KRISTINA MASTROCOLA