

Can't Buy Me Love

How a mother endangered her own welfare rather than risk challenging her daughter's abusive behaviours

BY ELLEN BARAGON
PHOTO JERALD WALLISER

'I liked doing things because she made me feel wanted.'

Marijatta sits in her rocking chair facing the tiny window of her basement suite. Her television is a few feet away, and family pictures and pretty bric-a-brac form a small shrine in her bookcase. One hand on a Bible, she gestures with the other as she speaks. She appears upbeat and welcomes her visitor with a smile, asking kindly, "Are you warm enough?" 🐾

Her demeanor is a contrast from how she must have appeared during the disturbing period of her life in which she was a victim of so-called 'elder abuse'. Marjatta now recognizes the irony of her own victimhood by harkening back to her past, at a time when she was caring for the elderly herself as a young woman. Many were alone and a bit adrift after losing the lifelong companionship of a spouse, having a debilitating illness, and dealing with an increasing loss of independence.

"I remember back then thinking to myself: 'What am I going to be like when I am old?' It's funny how I can recall those people,"

that's when things spiraled downward in her personal life.

She moved to a condo on her own because she found it emotionally difficult living in the home she had shared with her husband. "That's when things really went down. You see, I didn't have enough experience on my own before I got married," she explains. "And I didn't have a clue how to control money. I was lost."

Her oldest son lived with her on and off, but his substance abuse caused a lot of disruption, so much so that Marjatta nearly got evicted from her apartment several times due to his partying. At one point Marjatta's ailing health and emotional stress was such that her physician contacted Fraser Health Home Care services, which arranged for her to attend adult day care. She was also offered the services of Lifeline, a personal emergency response service, as well as a grocery delivery program.

After a few years of struggling on her own as a widow, Marjatta's daughter asked her to move in with her. Marjatta was delighted and very happy for the company. For a long time the arrangement seemed to work for both. Marjatta helped by paying half the mortgage on her daughter's home and by splitting the costs of food and utilities. She cooked and cleaned, prepared meals, and ran the household just as she did when her daughter was a child. But by this time, her health was compromised with diabetes and arthritis, and for most of the last few years she has required a walker for mobility.

Yet in those early days as roommates, Marjatta was more or less content. Mother and daughter would go on outings once a week – for walks, for lunch, and sometimes to shop. Her pension was modest, but she was contributing, and she was able to help out someone she loved.

"I had everything nice and clean all the time and I know she appreciated that," says Marjatta, who used a sitting walker to do the household chores. She preferred to be active, though it wasn't always easy. "It would take me an hour for what it would take someone else a few minutes," Marjatta recounts, almost cheerfully. "You see, I liked doing things because she made me feel wanted.

"I have always wanted to hang on to my independence."

She realizes now that her desire to be needed and loved by her daughter caused her to accept their arrangement on her daughter's terms and to avoid confronting matters that concerned her own welfare.

When asked if there was ever a discussion about her having partial title on the home, in return for paying half the mortgage, Marjatta appears surprised by the question. "No, no, no, I never registered about having ownership to the house."

When Marjatta would get her modest GST rebate cheques, her daughter would drive her into town to shop for clothes at the local secondhand store. "I had very little left over, but I always had enough to make sure I had warm clothes in winter."

Due to Marjatta's difficulty getting out on her own, she and

A HIDDEN CRIME

Elder abuse is defined as the deliberate mistreatment of an adult that causes physical, mental or emotional harm, or damage to, or loss of assets. It's estimated that four per cent of elderly Canadians suffer from one or more serious forms of abuse by a spouse, son, daughter, relative, or other close contact. Probably even more cases go unreported.

Every employee of Fraser Health has a responsibility to report abuse/neglect of a vulnerable adult.

WHAT ABUSE LOOKS LIKE

- Intimidation
- Physical assault
- Sexual assault
- Over- or under-medication
- Withholding needed medication
- Censoring mail
- Invasion or denial of privacy
- Denial of access to visitors
- Theft

RED FLAGS

- Threats and intimidation to those trying to help the elder
- Signs of abuse/neglect do not match the explanation by victim or abuser
- Adult reports being abused
- Abuser and/or victim deny or minimize the signs of abuse

VICTIMS' RISK FACTORS

- About 2/3 of the abuse cases that come to the attention of community agencies are women
- Elders who live with someone are more likely to be abused than those who live alone
- Elders who live with grown offspring or other caregivers are more likely to be abused than those who live with a spouse
- Victims are often dependent on the individuals who are abusive to them, and so there may be a host of other barriers that prevent them from reporting the abuse (fear, threats from the abuser, confusion)
- Economic and functional dependency, increased age, impaired judgment/lack of insight, poor health/impairment, substance abuse, mental illness

Leanne Lange, is the Fraser Health Clinical Specialist for Adult Abuse and Neglect. To report abuse, or to find out more about elder abuse, contact her at 604-777-7393.

Staff can learn how to recognize, report and respond to situations of abuse (and neglect, and self-neglect) of vulnerable adults with a new one-hour online education module on the FH Intranet.

she says. "And now I think, here I am myself in the same position."

Although the position Marjatta is in today is much improved of late, it has been difficult trying to heal from the pain of learning that she was taken advantage of by those closest to her.

Now in her mid-80s, Marjatta has chronic health problems that make it difficult for her to get around easily. She is a mother and grandmother who has been through hard times that began when she lost the love of her life. Married at an early age, her husband Leo managed the household expenses as they both worked and raised a family. When he passed away, it hit Marjatta hard. And

her daughter arranged with the bank for her daughter to cash the pension cheques on her mother's behalf. "I didn't know what I had in the bank from one month to the next," she recalls. That lack of financial savvy soon began to cost her, and gradually Marjatta became aware that her funds in the bank were being used for more than she had agreed to pay for. So although she continued to have the minimum of food and shelter, her daughter did not provide for her much-needed medications and incontinence supplies.

Reluctant to voice her concerns, the arrangement continued until the day Marjatta discovered that her daughter was also using her credit cards without telling her. That's when the bottom fell out of their relationship. Her daughter became so distressed and angry that her mother had discovered the deception that she ordered Marjatta to leave the house and sent her to live with a niece. It was the start of an estrangement that would last a long time, with neither women speaking to the other.

But there were more dark clouds forming over Marjatta's life. Her name was put on to her niece's utilities bills, and she was told that in return for a place to live she was expected to pay half the household expenses. That meant that she was basically helping to support her niece's entire family. But soon, other complications arose in the living situation, and, when Marjatta once again dared to express her concerns, she was told to leave.

Realizing the peril she was facing, and about to become homeless, Marjatta was once again in a state of great emotional distress. "I was scared stiff," she says. "I just thought, 'God what am I going to do, what am I going to do?'"

But her will to survive was still intact. She found the number of a crisis line in a services directory, and was put in contact with Lindy, a caring and experienced social worker from Fraser Health's Home Health services, who has since retired. Lindy knocked on the door that same afternoon when Marjatta was downstairs in the basement by herself with no one else in the house. Physically unable to walk upstairs, she managed to crawl up to the first floor on her hands and knees, where she opened the front door. Standing before her were two people from Fraser Health.

"[Lindy] and another lady came in and wanted to find out what was wrong," recalls Marjatta.

"I was so mixed up, I didn't know whether I was coming or going," she says. "But after I explained things to them, they helped me pack my clothes into bags. And away I went."

Fortunately for Marjatta, the Fraser Health social worker and case manager worked together with the Salvation Army to get her moved, and a peer support program helped Marjatta consider her options before they arranged for a quick transition to safe housing on very short notice.

Lindy then drove Marjatta to her bank to help her sort out her financial situation and connect her with organizations that assist victims with the administration of their finances, including St. James Community Service and Credit Counselors.

A few years have passed since that awful day and the upheaval that sent Marjatta into a tailspin of fear and uncertainty.

Today she lives in her own suite in a house, where her meals are prepared, and a cleaner comes to vacuum regularly. She still prefers to clean her own suite and bathroom as much as possible by steady-ing herself with her walker and a cane.

Through an arrangement with her bank, her rent and food bill are paid automatically, so that her small income and expenses are controlled. But Marjatta now keeps a diary of all her income, and her expenses. "Oh, yes, I learned the hard way," she says with a wry smile.

But despite the improvement in her living situation, Marjatta and her daughter's estrangement continued.

"Hurt? You talk about hurt?" asks Marjatta. "Oh, yes." Marjatta said she knew that the loss of her husband still weighed on her as well. "I really missed him a lot." And the treatment by her relatives had left deep wounds.

"I was very bitter, very bitter for the first few months. Then I started to read the Bible and started to ask for guidance." She also accepted counseling sessions that were arranged by Lindy at Fraser Health.

Then, one day her daughter came to visit her.

"She said, 'Mom, I want to talk to you. Can I come in?'" recalls Marjatta. "She sat down on the bed, and by this time I was crying my head off.

"She said, 'I am sorry, I am sorry. Can you forgive me?'" She

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wanted our relationship back as mother and daughter. I said: 'Oh yes, it's all over and done with.'"

"Sometimes I wonder, How? Why? But if I don't forgive, I won't be forgiven for things I have done.

"I think I was trying to buy her love; I believe that now more than ever."

Their misuse of her credit cards left Marjatta burdened with several thousand dollars of debt she will not be able to repay, and that still sits on her own credit record. But Marjatta's spirit and determination have helped ease her into a more comfortable situation. Fraser Health has been actively involved to assist her to manage her life so that she is comfortable, safe and healthy as she can be.

Marjatta has also formed some deep friendships with several other residents with whom she shares a home, some of whom have traveled similar paths before they arrived where they are today.

Marjatta says now that she only cares about mending the wounds between her and her relatives. "I was given a chance to straighten things out, and I don't want to do anything that would spoil that," she says. Repairing her relationships is an ongoing process.

"I have a way to go yet. But if my family come and visit once in a while and let me know they care, that's all that matters."