

Driving Miss Jean

by Joe Volz and Kate Bird

The prevailing wisdom among experts on aging is that there will come a time when you will have to step in and act as mom and dad for your elderly relatives. By the way, "elderly" in our lexicon means someone who is over 80. Just a few years ago, we thought of 70 as elderly; however, not anymore since we have approached that age ourselves.

Anyhow, a few weeks ago when we were making our semiannual trip across the country to see Aunt Jean in Tucson, Ariz., we were determined that the time had come to read the riot act to our 91-year-old aunt, who lives alone in a first-floor garden apartment.

She walks with a cane, has a hearing problem and still drives. And she is a vigorous drinker. Well, we were going to fix all that, even if it meant a bit of tough love. Aunt Jean didn't know what was good for her.

Our resolve was only intensified on the plane trip west. We were seated next to a determined 50-year-old woman who had been the caregiver for her father and two aunts for five years.

"I didn't ask them what they wanted," she told us. "In fact, I even turned down bad suggestions. My father wanted to move in with me. But I had my own life. I put them all in an assisted living facility near my house so I could visit them every day. You have to put your foot down with the elderly."

There was a dissenting voice from a woman sitting nearby, however. An 87-year-old who had brought along her oxygen tank to ease her breathing, she was flying across the country alone. After listening to the 50-year-old, she turned to us and said, "You know, you folks scare me when you talk like that." Apparently, we had raised fears that her own daughter might consider hauling her off to a nursing home.

Well, we had that admonition in mind when we landed in Tucson, but not very firmly. Aunt Jean still needed

to listen to reason - at least, our version of it.

She must have had some clues about what we might be suggesting, though. The first thing she said when she opened the door was: "I am just fine. Everything is beautiful. Aren't those mountains beautiful?"

At dinner - if you can call it that because Aunt Jean subsisted mainly on two glasses of scotch, a glass of wine and an Irish coffee - we tackled what we thought was the easiest problem first, her hearing. Joe said he was going to get a hearing aid while frequently telling Aunt Jean he could not hear her very well. But Aunt Jean caught on to that ploy.

"I am not getting a hearing aid," she bellowed, so Joe could hear her. "My hearing is perfectly fine."

At that point, we doubted that the rest of our plan would succeed - such as suggesting she go to a nice nearby retirement place we had found. Money was no problem for Aunt Jean. She had a good inheritance and had lived frugally.

But Aunt Jean kept telling us how much she liked the apartment and how nice the neighbors were. And, besides, she had two wonderful cats that might be barred at the retirement home.

So, we didn't get around to pushing the retirement home this time. But the drinking and driving issue concerned us; she could kill herself or someone else.

The Arizona motor vehicle people keep renewing her license. Aunt Jean doesn't have Alzheimer's or dementia and can see just fine. She only drives in the morning when she is stone sober.

"I only drive it once a week to the beauty parlor," she said, "and I always take the back roads and only drive on sunny days (not hard to do in Tucson)."

Jean has a perfect driving record, which cannot be said about her teenage neighbors.

Jean wasn't quite ready for us to run her life.

"I hate it when people try to tell me what to do," she said.

So we headed home.

She had taught us that age and being alone should not be used as an excuse for intervening where we aren't wanted. However, it is also important to note that many older Americans, suffering from various diseases and impaired judgment, do need help.

The important thing is to know when to intervene.

We'll wait a bit.

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