

Parent Care: A daughter finds closure as advocate

by *Marsha_Kay_Seff*

It's been a year since Jan Takehara learned of her parents' tragic demise. And she's able now to talk about it relatively dispassionately.

It took a three-week search of the city to find her parents, Sumio and Betty Takehara, who had disappeared from the San Diego home they shared with their daughter. The octogenarian couple, who were married 60 years, were found last September in their wrecked 1989 Toyota, below a 230-foot embankment in eastern San Diego County. They both died of their injuries. The family's bichon frise, Butchy, apparent was with them, although he's never been found.

Jan says the California Highway Patrol listed the incident as an accident.

And that's what she prefers to believe. She points out the cliff they went over wasn't very high and her parents were wearing seat belts.

"Could it have been an honorable suicide?" Jan muses. "She (Mom) didn't want to be a burden to me. She was driving.

"I look at it as Romeo and Juliet: They wanted to be together, so they left together. A lot of love stories are sad."

Jan says the elderly couple were depressed because her dad, a World War II Army vet, had been accepted at the Chula Vista, Calif., veterans home and her mother wasn't eligible. Sumio had a stroke and suffered from some dementia. Betty, concerned about the separation, had not been sleeping.

The difficult situation was compounded because Jan wasn't having luck finding help for her mom. Although her parents' money was limited, Jan says, they didn't qualify for caregiving help from the county's In-Home Supportive Services. And the respite care Jan hired was unreliable. Meanwhile, the daughter hadn't found an ideal retirement home her mother could afford.

Jan had been living with her parents for about seven years. Not until she moved in did she discover they were bankrupt. She says her dad had gotten caught up in several sweepstakes and other scams and wasn't paying his bills.

Jan sold their dream house in Alpine, Calif., and bought a smaller, less-expensive one for the three of them.

The daughter, a middle school science teacher, says she's more sad than angry about their deaths. "There are so many questions that will never be answered."

To make it through this year, Jan went to a support group and sought counseling. She also says she found closure by writing a letter to her parents.

She doesn't waste much time with guilt and should-haves. But she believes the biggest mistake she made was planning to separate her parents.

Soon after they were found, she decided she'd make some sense out of the tragedy by becoming a senior advocate. Now she's working with the county's Aging & Independence Services to find an organization to underwrite a tracking device for people with dementia. She's also researching affordable-housing options for older people who need care.

"Unless you have money, everything is too expensive."

I tell her that one option is board-and-care homes that accept Supplemental Security Income as payment in full. But she's determined to convince the government to offer more choices.

"I think I'm doing OK," she tells me at lunch. "My spiritual side says everything is OK, they're together and they're happy. My human side says I have a hole in my heart. But to sit here and not cry is pretty good."

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