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At Interfaith Caregivers of Polk County, we are constantly inspired by the courage and the generosity of the people we serve. When Ashley and her mom, Nan, agreed to



Nan and Ashley

share their story, we were deeply moved – not just by their journey, but by their willingness to open their hearts to others. This is a more detailed look at Ashley and Nan’s inspiring story from my own perspective.

When we met, Ashley described Nan as someone who was a giver and a doer her entire life. Ashley painted the picture of someone resourceful, who was always thinking of others. We smiled when we learned that during Nan’s career as an

elementary school counselor and fourth-grade teacher, she once raised a pig named Oreo Ann in her school, using the food waste from lunch tray leftovers to feed Oreo Ann. When the time came to say goodbye, she donated the meat to the local food shelf.

Nan was independent, having lived alone for 20 years. But three years ago, everything changed. She was diagnosed with dementia. She and her family had planned for the time when Nan would need more care, believing they had time to prepare. But that time ran out faster than they expected – and soon, Ashley found herself transitioning from daughter to caregiver.

It was a role she hadn’t anticipated stepping into so soon, and like many in her position, she found herself searching for help. In her efforts to find a support group for children of parents with dementia, she stumbled upon Interfaith Caregivers.

Soon, our staff had Nan lined up for regular rides to the fitness center and speech therapy. But it didn’t stop there – what started as simple transportation quickly grew into something more. Friendly visits followed, bringing companionship for Nan and a respite for Ashley. After several months, Ashley made a special request: could an Interfaith volunteer drive her mom to Color Crossing?

For the past 15 years, Color Crossing had been an important part of Nan's life. The art coop provided studio space for artists working with a variety of mediums- weaving, sculpture, jewelry, and even block printing. But for Nan, it was more than just a creative space; it was a community. This incredibly tight-knit group of artists, which included her sister Barb, had become a source of strength and support for Nan throughout her journey with dementia.

Hearing all of this, we wanted to meet Nan and the people at Color Crossing to truly understand her journey. With Ashley's help, Sarah, an Interfaith staff member, and I arranged a visit. We would first meet Nan at her home, then bring her to the art co-op where so much of her life and creativity had unfolded.

When we pulled into the driveway, we were greeted by Rye, Nan's black lab, who was playing in the yard. As we stepped out of the car, Nan came outside to welcome us. She led us inside, with Rye coming up behind, happily carrying her very large stick 😊



Rye



Nan and her painting *The Prairie*

The moment we stepped inside, the first thing I noticed was the space. The large windows were a perfect frame for the woods surrounding her home, and they filled the room with natural light. The house had a tranquil atmosphere – peaceful and filled with Nan's personality.

Ashley had let us know that Nan was preparing to move to a memory care facility. I could see that the family was beginning to pack things away, but we did get the opportunity to see Nan's painting *The Prairie* - a landscape inspired by an area not far from Nan's home. - a moving reflection of the beautiful rural area we live in.

(Nan was nice enough to let us photograph her with the painting. -Thank you, Nan!)

Nan showed us around, pointing out the artwork that was still on display - paintings, metalwork, sculptures, wall art, and textiles, each piece left me in more and more in awe of her (and her family's) artistic talents and creativity.

But scattered throughout all of this, there were quiet reminders of Nan's struggle with dementia...notes and other tools to help her remember tasks and information she needed to get through each day. Because Nan's dementia has affected her speech, communication was sometimes a challenge. She would say what words she could, and when Sarah or I filled in the blanks correctly, she'd smile, nod, and give us an emphatic "yes!"

At the end of our tour, Nan led us into her art studio. It's impossible to fully capture the space in writing, but it was nothing short of inspiring. Much like Nan herself. Nan's work is a testament to the artist she is, despite the challenges she now faces.

Here are some of the pictures from her studio....





Left: Nan showing us her corn husk wreath and above: a painting she's working on now

We wrapped up our visit and prepared to head out. Sarah and I jumped in the car with Nan in the passenger seat, ready to direct us. She wanted to take the back roads. It was a beautiful, sunny day, and as we drove, we asked Nan about her life. She did her best to share stories - about her home and family, her art, her move back to Wisconsin from Colorado. Some details came easily; others were more difficult, but through laughter and a few wrong turns, we made our way to Color Crossing.

When we arrived, we were welcomed by Barb, Nan's sister, and Patty, the co-op's founder. As soon as we stepped inside, it felt like walking into a gathering of old friends. The space was overflowing with creativity. Each artist has their own space with tables and materials. There were works of art everywhere. We wandered through, taking it all in. There was so much to see - there were large looms, life-sized sculptures, textiles, and clothing, all created by the artists who called this place home. But beyond the art, there is something powerful: a sense of family. I saw the warm smiles and friendship that greeted Nan at Color Crossing. It wasn't just a studio; it was a place where she was understood, supported, and embraced. A place where Nan isn't just someone living with dementia. She's an artist. A sister. A friend.



Nan, Barb, and I talking about Barb's repurposed materials



Barb and Nan

These connections are more than just meaningful; they are essential. They provide a sense of belonging, dignity, and purpose. Even as life changes in unexpected ways.

That's why I'm proud to be part of an organization that brings people together, matching those in need with caring volunteers who can help.

This month, as Nan transitions to a memory care facility, I'm reminded that her journey isn't just one of loss but of resilience, love, and the enduring power of community. She's left an undeniable mark on the lives of those around her. And thanks to the support of Interfaith, Color Crossing, and her family, she has been

surrounded by care and compassion every step of the way.