In Her Shoes

By Julia Nack, MG

This is the story of a woman who was abandoned in an "asylum" in the '50s. Her blindness was caused by early doses of psychotropic medication. This is Joanie's story, as rediscovered by her guardian, Sonya Evans. Sonya volunteers with the Volunteer Guardian Program operated by the Central Ohio Area Agency on Aging in Columbus, OH.

"I told the care plan team that there is no way we can make up to Joanie for what she's lost," Sonya said. "We need to find ways to make her life better." Even though she is not paid for her services, Sonya's guardianship work is as professional as that defined in the National Guardianship Association's Ethics and Standards.

The story begins with Sonya's curiosity and concern for Joanie. Sonya stated that the nursing staff and the facility record described Joanie as "delusional" and a "poor historian." Joanie was admitted from a group home without any accompanying personal records. Sonya was told not to believe Joanie, as she was delusional. Sonya had questions about Joanie's last name, which Joanie said was different from the one on her chart. She questioned why staff said that Joanie was blind from birth, because Joanie could describe colors and write her name. She wondered why Joanie had no teeth and why there was no record of preventive health care. She resolved to find answers.

Sonya initially focused on burial planning, because Joanie is indigent and had no arrangements. The director of a local funeral home said that her burial would be cremation and scattering of ashes in a pauper's site. Sonya vowed to change it. She searched for family history, hoping that investigation would lead to a family burial plot with a dignified space for Joanie.

Sonya only knew that Joanie, diagnosed with schizophrenia, had spent years in a state institution. Her records had either been lost or destroyed. Joanie told Sonya about the hospital where she was born, the street on which she once lived, and the elementary and high schools she attended. Joanie told Sonya her parents' names and the name of a music store where her father

worked. She told Sonya her last name and spelled it for her. She spoke of brothers and sisters. She articulately described singing at the Eagles' Club.

Now able to use both names, Sonya set out on a search for state agencies having similar information. No birth certificate was on file at the State Health Department. However, a thorough search at the Bureau of Vital Statistics yielded a document containing the names of Joanie's parents and sibling.

Sonya searched area cemeteries for Joanie's parents. After several attempts, she found a site near Joanie's childhood home. Sonya and her husband drove to the cemetery and found graves of two males with the name in question. Serendipity brought the discovery that a woman with Joanie's last name had recently come to the cemetery and had her husband's body moved to another location. Sonya believed that person was somehow connected to Joanie, but the cemetery could not reveal any information other than the woman's name.

Undeterred, Sonya drove to a pay phone near the cemetery and found "Anna," the same name Joanie had given as her sister's name. Sonya called the number, confirmed a relationship and received an invitation to visit Anna. Anna, a 65-year-old woman suffering from a stroke, was nonetheless very open to Sonya's visit. She was, in fact, Joanie's sister-in-law. It had been approximately 40 years since Anna had last seen Joanie. Anna was excited to learn Joanie was alive. Moreover, she was eager to relate the history.

Joanie had been married to a man whose last name was the name used in the nursing home record. The second name Joanie used, quite similar in both sound and spelling, was Joanie's maiden name. Anna said that Joanie's husband committed her to a psychiatric hospital in 1950, and that Joanie had a son who was then three years old. The son was told that Joanie had died. The stigma then, as now, was very great. Some of Joanie's confusion about names and dates might be traceable to the use of strong, early psychotropic medications, or even to the use of electric shock therapy.

Anna visited Joanie. She informed Sonya about their cousin in Florida who was disbursing Joanie's grandfather's estate. Joanie would receive a small inheritance. With this money, Sonya was now able to arrange for Joanie's burial near her parents. Sonya went to the Ohio Historical Society and located the obituaries of Joanie's father and husband. Joanie's father had actually

been the manager of a music store. Joanie's husband died in 1967, without a divorce. Anna also informed Sonya that Joanie's son suffered an accident in the early 1970's and was living in a nursing home only a few miles from Joanie's.

Sonya pondered whether Joanie and her son should be told. Sonya consulted with psychiatric and social work staff at both nursing homes. The decision was made to gradually let the son know that his mother was alive, and then to ask him if he would like to meet her. The process took several months. Understandable, Joanie's son needed some time to adjust to the idea that his father had lied to him, that his mother was alive and that, in fact, she was living a few miles away. The son resisted meeting her for several months. One day, he changed his mind.

Sonya made sure Joanie's hair was done, her nails polished and her best clothes prepared. Sonya gave Anna a ride to the nursing home for the family reunion. The meeting was a genuine success. The poignancy of the moment affected everyone present. Whether they will meet again is up to Joanie and her son. Sadly, just a few weeks after this meeting, Joanie's sister-in-law, Anna, died of a heart attack. Her generous spirit had helped Sonya bring Joanie's identity back.

Sonya's curiosity and dedication to Joanie were her best gifts. Sonya and her husband, Bill, have been volunteer guardians since 1997. Bill has particularly focused on persons having serious medical conditions. This amazing couple recently stated that the Volunteer Guardian Program is the best part of retirement.

Sonya's work continues. She ensures that Joanie's hair is done weekly. Because Joanie likes to sing, Sonya brought Joanie a radio and set it to a station that plays music from the '40s and '50s. Sonya had advocated for pap smears, mammograms and other medical care for Joanie. Sonya now knows that the name Joanie uses is her maiden name and that Joanie had four brothers and one sister. She knows that Joanie's father managed a music store and was well respected in the community. She has reconnected Joanie with her long-lost son. She made possible a few final visits with her loving sister-in-law, now deceased. She has arranged for a dignified burial plan. She has proven that Joanie is neither a poor historian nor delusional about her life.

Indeed, Sonya cannot compensate Joanie for what has been lost, but she has improved Joanie's current life. She has replaced relationships.

This is the essence of good guardianship practice. Practical work, diligently and compassionately performed, yields intangible, often-impractical results. A person with a disability is helped, and their whole community is better.