

Free Caregiver Training Series Starts Again in January **By Carol Harrison**

Betty Camp and Susan LeRoy were unprepared to become caregivers, but that is what life required after a stroke incapacitated Camp's husband on his dominant left side, and vascular dementia limited LeRoy's sister.

"I was overwhelmed and unprepared," Camp said. "Here I was a home economist and there he was with a feeding tube, a lot of medications that needed crushing, and an incapacitated left arm and leg. I needed knowledge."

"I needed help, any kind of help," recalled Susan LeRoy, a 63-year-old Fortuna grandmother. She has been caring for her 62-year-old sister for the past 18 months, two-thirds of it from long distance.

Both were desperate for information and support when they saw a story in the newspaper about a Caregiver Training Series offered for free to family and informal care providers. The eight-hour series meets for two hours on four successive Thursdays and features four separate sessions – 32 hours total – in the course of a year.

"I called the same day I saw the announcement," LeRoy said. "I knew it was for me. I'm taking all of them. I'd have taken it even if I had to pay for it."

Sunnybrae's Camp and Fortuna's LeRoy finished part one in September. Part two begins Jan. 23 from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at the A1AA office at 434 Seventh Street in Eureka.

"The class taught me how to chart out Don's medications and give them to him correctly," Camp said. "And the thing that was most helpful was how to talk to a stroke victim, how to be kind and communicate in a way that he responded to. I didn't know how to talk to him. We'd taken so many trips together, traveled to Ashland every year, had so much in common – including the books we read – and all of a sudden, I couldn't talk to him."

Camp said she talked less and gave up many of the activities she did before because she was too busy trying to figure out what to do and how to do it.

"There was a lot of work involved and so many medications," she said. "Then there would be an accident or irritation. I had to get up in the middle of the night. I lost a lot of weight. I was deteriorating. I sort of felt bogged down, tired and inadequate."

LeRoy said the class helped her handle situations more effectively and find help.

"You hit a point where you get frustrated and angry," she said. "You don't mean to take it out on the person you are caregiving for, but you get sharp. I didn't get nasty, but I got exasperated and it showed."

Their stories have a familiar ring to anyone thrust into the role of caregiver for a friend or loved one.

"The constant responsibility, the lack of knowledge regarding community resources and the lack of adequate training all contribute to frustration and stress among family caregivers, many of whom are often unprepared for what is being asked of them," said Jeanie Ren, Manager of Information and Assistance and Caregiver Services at A1AA.

"Stress threatens the health of the caregiver and, when mixed with other family dynamics, can also lead to unintended abuse or neglect of the person who needs the care."

"You have to take care of yourself before you can take care of someone else," LeRoy said.

Area 1 Agency on Aging offers the series to improve the quality of care and family caregiver competency while at the same time reducing the level of caregiver stress. The series includes hands-on activities, professional presentations, educational videos and discussion.

"I liked the format and I liked the videos," Camp said. "It was the right amount of time and it was offered at a good time. I loved it."

Classes are free, but space is limited. Pre-registration at 442-3763 is required and respite assistance is available to enable participants to attend classes.

Attendance in one four-week session is not a prerequisite for future segments, but participants are encouraged to attend all four classes in any period they choose to attend.

"We'd like the group to get to know each other," Ren said. "A big benefit of taking a class is finding out there are others out there who are doing what you are doing."

"It will be easy to slip right in," LeRoy said.

Ren said caregiver support and stress management is a part of every series, but each series also has different focus areas.

Part one concluded Sept. 19 after covering the family caregiver support and stress management; communication skills and community resources; basic safety issues; and special challenges in family and informal caregiving.

Part 2 begins on January 23rd, and will focus on how to observe and take vital signs, caring for chronic illnesses, infection control, helping someone safely with walking and transferring in or out of a bed or wheelchair, and fall prevention.

Part two will not include Camp. Her husband passed away on Oct. 22.

"I should have gone to a caregiver class much earlier. Much earlier," Camp said. "I encourage people to attend classes for caregivers, and the earlier the better."

For many years, A1AA offered a 42-hour course for paid and family, usually unpaid, caregivers. That course is being revamped because of budget cuts. A1AA embraced the shorter Caregiver Series to better fill the unmet needs of family caregivers, Ren said.

"Most family members can't commit to the length, the homework, and the tests (in the 42-hour class), and so miss out on really valuable information that will make their lives easier," said Victoria Onstine, a registered nurse who had been teaching the short-term course for years.

Maggie Kraft, executive director of A1AA, said many families never hire anyone to help them. "They can't afford it, and even if they could, there aren't enough caregivers out there for everyone to hire," she said. "They need a short class they can take in bite-size pieces."

Part three starts March 13 and part four on May 1.

Area 1 Agency on Aging paid Carol Harrison to write this article.