

“I miss my son. He never comes and visits, but he’s young and single and is a painter,” Leonna solemnly told me.

“Did he happen to do this?” I looked at the painting on her wall, her personal touch to what was a seemingly sterile room.

“Yes, in fact he did! My son painted that. I miss my son. He really doesn’t come to visit, but he’s single...”

I knew her son painted it. She had told me five times in 15 minutes. She had told me the first time I met her. She’d be telling me again.

I’ve come to learn the simplest conversations are often the ones that mean the most, the ones that have the most impact on our lives and the lives of others. I’ll never be able to unhear the words “Corynne I feel like a prisoner in my own home.” Those were the words of my Grandpa, the man who once was the epitome of a provider. By that point, he was no longer able to pour his own drinks without his coffee spilling all over the counter. My Grandpa passed away after suffering from dementia brought on by Parkinson's disease. All I wanted to do was see him live out his final days happy and feeling fulfilled, but unfortunately that wasn’t the case.

I also remember conversations sitting in my neighbor Jenny’s kitchen. She went from being the sharp Jenny that was always cracking jokes and watching me, from her bedroom window, get on the bus every morning, to the Jenny showing up at our front door under-dressed and confused late at night. I saw her become very paranoid that her beloved husband was cheating on her. Jenny was the the first time I ever truly was affected by the effects of the awful disease of Alzheimer's. I had no clue that when Jenny moved into the memory care unit at Richfield Senior Living, that in 2 years I’d be spending my days sitting where sweet Jenny spent her final year.

The summer before my junior year I was really searching for something to fill my life with passion. I came to the realization that waking up, going through my daily responsibilities, and then going to bed and waking up and doing it again wasn’t making me happy -- and definitely wasn’t impacting others. I had been introduced to a local retirement community through my elementary school Student Council Association. I kept having the feeling that was the place that could be the change in my life I was looking for. So I made a call and my new journey began.

The Joseph C. Thomas Center has my heart. I volunteer at an Assisted Living building, which is designed so that half the building is for memory care patients. Those patients are my favorite, because even though their minds can’t always keep up with their bodies, their hearts still do. There is so much love coming from these people and sitting and talking to them always puts me

in a good mood. One lady always tells me “today is a good day, because I woke up this morning.” Some are farther along in their battles with different forms of dementia including Alzheimer's, or even mental illnesses like Schizophrenia, but my mission is to make them feel as human as I can. They aren't just a shell, they are the people who came before us. They are the people in the pictures in their rooms loving on their grandkids. They are the people that fought in WWII. They are sometimes the people with no family and need me to be their adopted grandchild. They are “my people.”

The worst part about getting to know the residents is leaving them. The weight of their gazes follows and haunts me as I leave. The memory care patients will follow you to the pad locked door, trying to escape. All you can do is look them in the eyes and say, “I'll be back soon,” quickly shutting the door between their world and mine. I've learned “soon” isn't always soon enough.

MJ was one of those people you wish you could've known in her prime, because let me tell you - this woman had sass. She'd always tell me “I want my nails painted something wild.” So, I brought MJ a Ziplock bag full of crazy colored nail polish, so her hands could match her personality. The next time I went back to Richfield, I was stopped in my tracks. The state of her room, down the hall on the left, mirrored what I immediately felt -- empty. MJ was dying they told me. She wasn't coming back.

I knew this would happen when I started volunteering. All week I kept googling her name, looking for an obituary. I found nothing. Fast forward to Sunday -- sitting in church at the end of the service, my pastor said something I'll never forget, “I'd like ya'll to pray for the family of MJ Knight. She passed away last night.” I didn't even know her family went to my church. When MJ's family later told me they kept her nails painted until the day she died, I knew I was doing what I was meant to do. That day was the first and only time I've ever cried happy tears.

The summer before my senior year, I was thinking about what I wanted my final year to look like. I'd become very involved in my church, was maintaining multiple yearbook positions and was wanting to continue to visit my Richfield friends. I didn't want to have to come back to an empty room again and regret not being there more often. I wasn't sure how I was going to do it all. That's when I had an idea put on my heart.

As I met with my principal, in August, I was nervous about doing something different than what I had envisioned for my senior year. I explained to him that I wanted to work with the Activities Director at Richfield for two periods of the school day. The schedules had already been made, but at 4% odds, the two classes I wanted to cut were consecutively first and second period.

Now, along with my visits outside of school, I get to go every school day and learn about the profession I've fallen in love with. I'll never forget when Leonna recognized me before I had to reintroduce myself. Moments like that make me so full. Over the year, I've become so close with the residents and they have changed me. My friends hear stories about my people all the time and have come with me to meet the residents. My youth group has come and it filled me with so much happiness to see them with my "80 grandparents." I've worked with the Keyettes, the service club I'm the president of, to make cards and little gifts for the residents. Through my Pathway Project I've worked with my English teacher to set up some students as penpals with residents. I'm also going to interview many of the residents to preserve their stories. I've been able to research the diseases that affect the people I work with so I can understand what is happening on the inside so I can better deal with their behavior. I've learned how to handle hallucinations and delusions and have been able to apply that knowledge. It's hard to watch people progress through the stages before my eyes, but that doesn't scare me away -- it motivates me to love harder. My mission is to not let brain atrophy and loss of connection between neurons force the aging community to just wither away in their beds. I want to help those affected by diseases like Alzheimer's stay connected to others as long as possible and live a life worth living. Energy and passion is what I'm ready to bring into the Geriatrics field. I'm going to learn more about aging in college so that I can better serve these people and raise awareness amongst families affected, coworkers, and beyond.

Becoming an Activities Director won't make me rich, but I want a job where I can make meaningful, relentless relationships. I've come to realize how many people are in need of a little love and that they sometimes can just be living in a building down the street -- a building that holds my heart now. I will always remember people like MJ, as I paint my future residents' nails, and I hope I can make an impact on others, even if I only get to know them at the end of their lives.

I don't want to be remembered as a society elite, a millionaire, or even a movie star. I just want to be remembered by people, by Leonna. Even if they don't always remember my face, I want to make sure everyday is their best memory for the time that they have it. That's what serving is. That is what love is. That's what being rich is.