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SUPPORT GROUP FOR CAREGIVERS NOURISHES FACULTY & STAFF

By Jessica Moes, St. Olaf Class of 2014

NORTHFIELD, MINN. — Kari Berit '86 cannot expect the unexpected, but she can deal with it.

Three months ago, in conjunction with the St. Olaf Human Resources Department and through a grant from the Mardag Foundation, Berit, an expert on aging and caregiving, launched a weekly support group on campus for what she calls “unexpected caregivers.” The intent of this support group model is to be run peer-to-peer. Berit is now finally letting go of the reigns, calling upon current members to lead the program in the final developmental step of the peer-to-peer support group.

The Caregivers Support Group, which meets Thursdays at noon in the faculty lounge of Buntrock Commons, was created to provide a safe environment for those who feel like they are doing this caregiving alone and those who oftentimes find themselves frustrated and overwhelmed while providing care, typically for aging parents. Other types of caregivers may support adult children, developmentally delayed siblings or sick spouses. Berit recognizes that oftentimes these family caregivers need to care for themselves. “Family caregiving disrupts our lives,” she said. “It changes how we think, how attentive we are at work, how we make financial decision and how we feel about ourselves.”

Berit has been an active participant in the group since the beginning – with emphasis on the word “participant.” “I thought it fruitful for me to part of the group and to see how the script and the flow worked,” she said. “I started making notes all over the script and changing it. I also saw and witnessed the dynamics of the group and I could take notes and develop the model with instructions for the facilitator.” These notes have enabled Berit to create a working script for the meetings that encompasses all of the varying dynamics the support group encounters.

A group moderator – who may be any member of the group (members tend to rotate) – begins the meeting by welcoming the participants and reiterating the goals of the group. Members are each given a turn to check-in and express how they're feeling right now in relation to their caregiving without interruption or feedback until everyone has had an opportunity to share. They can also pass. Only then are members allowed to ask for feedback (if they so desire). The meetings always include discussion topics such as caregiving solutions during the holiday season or when taxes are due. The group concludes with well-wishes and short, light-hearted wrap-up. All information that is shared stays within the group, creating what Berit likes to call, "a sacred space." "Group members feel more connected with each other on a daily basis," Berit said. "They can see each other in the workplace and check-in. The nature of these meetings is not embarrassing; we're not secretive about the fact that we attend these meetings, just confidential in what we share with one another."

Scientific research conducted at the University of California – San Francisco shows that mothers caring for chronically ill children can actually damage their DNA chromosomes due to prolonged stress, affecting health and lifespans of certain cells in the body. The study found mothers who manage their stress do less damage to their chromosomes. Support groups are one of the best-documented stress-relievers. "All scientific research, including my own, indicates that human beings need support in their struggles," Berit said. "Unfortunately, there are not enough professionals in the field to care for all of the people in need, so we're looking to give people the tools to help each other."

Berit recognized the need for peer-to-peer stress-relief services, specifically in the caregiving context. A graduate of St. Olaf College in Psychology and Norwegian, Berit had spent significant time in her career post-college working in senior housing both inside and outside of Northfield. Berit was plagued with suffering caregivers who didn't realize that their small moments of stress – a mother refusing to eat meals, a father calling too often – were both common and unhealthy in excess. Through the support of the Northfield Retirement Community, Berit orchestrated a \$15,000 grant from the Mardag Foundation, a group that focuses on empowering seniors to live independently. The Northfield Retirement Community

and Berit worked together to create five self-sustaining support groups in the Northfield and Twin-Cities areas.

Immediately, Berit was in contact with Roger Loftus, St. Olaf director of human resources. Loftus had read Berit's book, "The Unexpected Caregiver," and recognized the advantages of a support group on campus. Many faculty members, including Loftus, are beginning to care for parents of the aging "baby boomer" generation. "My dad is widowed and lives by himself," Loftus said. "The group is a great way to share my concerns and fears as I encounter different issues in caring for him."

Jill Ewald, director of the Flaten Art Museum on campus, echoes the same sentiments. Her parents live in an assisted living home and her father has Parkinson's disease and dementia. She sees them a few times a week to clip their nails and take them to doctor appointments. "I feel it is a privilege to be able to do things for them, even though it takes a lot of time and emotion," she said. "The group helps me realize I am not alone."

Still a passionate participant group discussion, Berit now is speaking up less and less, allowing group members like Loftus and Ewald to care for each other. "I try to act like any other participant," Berit said. "I am a group member and caregiver, and I too am benefitting from these meetings. Eventually, however, I will not be here, and they know that. Unfortunately, there are just not enough professionals to help everyone in need, so we have to help each other. I'm hoping to give people those tools."

"Other caregivers have valuable insights," Ewald said. "They share practical information about a variety of subjects, including transportation, health care and taking care of myself. These people help me to maintain equilibrium at all times. We all share many issues and feelings. We can empathize with each other. It's a safe place to express one's self, even to cry."

The group encourages new participants to join them.