

Storyteller illustrates the arc of people's lives who are no longer able to speak

By Jonathan Devin

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Elaine Blanchard helps tell the life stories of those who are no longer able to do it themselves.

Blanchard, 57, creates what she calls "I Am Stories" for the elderly who have lost their ability to speak and express themselves.

"My mom can't talk anymore," said Blanchard, who lives in Midtown. "And if you walk in her room, it looks pitiful. But when I look at her, I see so much more, so many periods we've been through, and so many things she's done."

About four years ago, Blanchard wrote out a simple, one-page story about her mother, Lois Eades, who lives at St. Peter Villa, and taped it to the wall in her mom's room. She hoped that people coming in to care for her mother would read it and learn something they hadn't known before.

"It says 'I'm a thinker, a teacher, a poet and a person of faith,'" Blanchard read. "If she could talk, that's how she would like you to know her."

The story did the trick. Blanchard noticed visitors stopping to read it and then using details of it when talking with Eades. Her mother became a person again and ceased to be just one more patient.

"It's really amazing the river of people that flow through her room," said Blanchard. "The real value of the story is when nursing home attendants, agency people, podiatrists,

mobile dentists, the x-ray technician -- they can look and see something about this person. They can have a real connection."

Blanchard eventually typed up her mother's story, framed and matted it, along with a photograph, and hung it in her mother's room. Now she offers the same service to others for \$150.

Julia Hicks, whose mother Virginia Anne Withers Hicks lives across the hall from Eades, is one of a handful who has taken Blanchard up on the idea.

Hicks and her four sisters contributed information along with their mom, who has Alzheimer's but can still speak. Blanchard spent about a day and a half writing out the story, editing it and getting feedback before having it framed.

"What was surprising to me is I didn't think my mother would understand what it was,"

said Hicks. "When I finished reading the story and looked over at her she said, 'That's beautiful.'"

Hicks said the story gives people a chance to know her mother as a complete person.

"She's a woman who is really a mixture of intelligence, patience, steady work," said Hicks. "She had a faithful church life, good friends and an overriding sense of grace."

Blanchard's interest in storytelling is no accident. Her own story has plenty of twists.

Once a United Methodist minister in Lauderdale County along with her husband, Blanchard left the ministry and got divorced when she came to the realization she is a lesbian.

She moved to Memphis and worked as a registered nurse at St. Francis Hospital. While attending First Congregational Church, she made a name for herself telling stories of her childhood as children's sermons.

In 2005, she published a book of those stories titled "Help Me Remember" through Pilgrim Press.

Blanchard returned to full-time ministry in 2000, this time in the United Church of Christ, and pastored at churches in Denver and Birmingham before leaving ministry again in frustration.

Last year, with the help of writer/actor David Prete of Voices of the South, Blanchard wrote and developed a one-woman show titled "For Goodness Sake," about a racial incident that occurred when she was 5 years old and its aftermath.

"I think (Blanchard) has an inherent understanding of what people like to pay attention to," said Prete, who met her in an acting workshop. "There's a part of storytelling that you can't teach, which is knowing when something's going to be worthy of somebody's time, and she has that."

Blanchard will take her show to Vermont in late April, Wisconsin in November and is awaiting word on publication of a second children's book. She now works as a family mediator and a consultant for the United Church of Christ.

On March 8, Blanchard began leading a four-month volunteer workshop at the Shelby County Women's Correctional Facility in which inmates are learning to tell their own stories before an audience.

"A lot of times people can tell part of their story, but they can't tell their whole story," said Dr. Sharon Thompson, a psychologist in private practice. "Sometimes we get stuck in shallow ideas about who we are and what our lives mean and we forget all of the complexity of what's going on."

And sometimes, said Blanchard, even professional storytellers need to remember that, too.

"I believe, looking back, I started telling stories and it came from a place where I needed to feel connected to people, like I had something to contribute," said Blanchard.

"And the response I got was 'thank you.' Storytelling paved my way to a new life."

More Stories

Contact Elaine Blanchard at 725-9310 or elaineblanchard.com.

At 8 p.m. Friday, Blanchard will perform her show "For Goodness Sake" at Prescott Memorial Baptist Church, 961 Getwell, at a conference by the Tennessee Equality Project called "Creativity, Equality, and Possibility."

Blanchard leads a workshop on solo performance and storytelling from 9 a.m. to noon Saturday at Prescott Memorial Baptist Church.



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