



# **Pieces of the Puzzle**

**Story by: Jennifer Johnson, R.N.  
Mayo Clinic Health System**

*To me, the last nine months have been learning to support my team of nurses while I develop into a new position as a nursing supervisor. When asked to discuss what this time has meant to me there is a song that I listen to almost every day. It relates to the nurses I work with and how we all got through and will continue to get through COVID-19. The song is "Rise Up" by Andra Day. The meaning behind the words is we will all rise up like the day and be not afraid. Even when feelings of being down and tired we all had to "rise up."*

*Working in Oncology, it has been a time for the nurses that did not slow down the practice. With all their COVID fears they stayed strong for these patients that truly had fears of their own. Nurses during COVID have had to do more than just be a "nurse." They were the patient's family and biggest support person. They were the patient's rock and sound board when fears set in. During this time, to me personally, the patients have also been each nurse's support person. The strength that has come from COVID-19 is remarkable.*

*Though Oncology and nurses deal with death or sick patients and—at times—are unsure if they can do it or get through it, they can't imagine not doing the job they were meant to do. During difficult times, it was nurses that found strength they never thought they had.*

*Family became more important than ever. COVID was a time that a person sat back and looked at what is truly important. What was lifelike not to go, go, go? Now we are told to stay home with immediate family. This was the good that came from COVID. To realize how rewarding it is to work a thousand-piece puzzle with my 21-year-old or to play the fifth game of Battleship with my 15-year-old. It is the time that we took for granted before, as our kids grow so fast. Having "forced" quality time was unforgettable!*

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**Story by: Marvin Whitman  
Menomonie, WI**

*Let me begin by telling you who Beverly and Robert Whitman were.*

*They were mom and dad to three boys and one girl. They were grandma and grandpa to three boys and four girls. They were great-grandma and great-grandpa to four boys and two girls.*

*They were tireless public servants. Robert was in the U.S. Navy during WWII. Robert served 38 years with the Waupaca County board. He was the youngest member and the most senior-serving member. He was a life-member of the Waupaca Fire Department.*

*Beverly, in addition to raising four children in an era when "a housewife" was a career, worked for the Chaney Manufacturing Company in the 1940s and the City of Waupaca, drove a school bus, managed the financial aspects of Robert's businesses, and worked at Riverside Memorial Hospital. After retiring in her late 60s, she volunteered at the Wisconsin Veterans Home for another 20 years.*

*As you see, both Robert and Beverly built their lives around service to others. This value—along with their exemplary work ethic—molded my life in many positive ways. I, in turn, passed these values along to my sons.*

*Both Robert and Beverly loved to travel and see the world. Even so, their trips were limited by their desire to keep working and taking care of their family. It wasn't until their later years that—with help—they got to travel and see places that held deep meaning to them. This included a long-awaited trip to Lake Geneva for Beverly to re-live her first job after high school at Chaney Manufacturing. During this visit she was taken into the factory and given a lifetime retiree honor and benefits offered to today's retirees. For Robert, it was when we traveled to the Midwest Great Lakes Naval Training Station for a memorial service for his brother Marvin, who was killed in action on May 25, 1945 off the coast of Okinawa. Both Marvin and Robert took their boot camp at this same training center more than 70 years earlier.*

*Despite the exemplary lives they lived, time passed and Robert and Beverly became older. Robert began to lose his balance. He eventually broke both hips and a rib or two in his later years. Beverly began the long, frustrating slip into Alzheimer's and dementia. Nothing can be worse than this horrible disease, as it takes your life away from you. Nothing can be worse than people who do not understand this disease and what it does to a loved one.*

*Yes, they got old, but who doesn't? But they really got old when the COVID-19 pandemic came to Waupaca WI.*

*I was not their healthcare POA. Because of that, I had very little pull at the Bethany Nursing Home of Waupaca. When my wife and I knew the pandemic was real, we immediately contacted the POA at Bethany to take all cautions with our parents. This included moving them to a safer location. Their reply was "What makes you think they will have COVID at Bethany?" This was very frustrating, because we knew in our hearts that Robert and Beverly were highly vulnerable living in a county that, up to that point, had taken the pandemic very lightly.*

*Consequently, they were not tested for the virus until the last week of May 2020. By then, it was too late. They had both had contracted COVID-19. Because of Mom's dementia, she probably never really understood how bad it could be. We talked to her on the phone the last week of May. When mom commented on all the fuss going on there, Rhonda reminded her that she tested positive for COVID-19. She said, "I did? Well, there goes my birthday!" She was eager for a birthday party like one we had planned many times in years past for her, and something she was able to both remember and look forward to. Her birthday was June 21. She would have been 93.*

*I called her on Thursday, June 11. She said she felt fine. She had a little cough and some congestion. She never would admit that she did not feel well in my memory. Instead, what I heard was deep-chest congestion and even a little more confusion than usual.*

*On June 12, we got a call from my sister-in-law that Mom was slipping downhill and not responsive. It was such a shock! Everything seemed to progress so quickly from the night before when she was essentially herself and sounding no worse than having a bad cold, to becoming unresponsive and slipping away. We were 185 miles away, and Bethany Nursing Home only allowed one family member to visit, so we stayed home while my brother with power of attorney went to see her. This was frustrating, because we would have liked to know what Mom's last day was like for her. Subsequently, we haven't heard details of her final day to paint a picture for ourselves of her final hours.*

*At 10 a.m. on Saturday, June 13, mom slipped away to be with her brothers, sisters, and parents, to a place where she had no problem remembering anything.*

*During this time, Dad had been in and out of consciousness for three days, suffering the same agony as Mom. Again, my brother again was in the room with him.*

*At 10 a.m. on Tuesday, June 16, Dad went to be with Mom. This was in the morning hour—nearly to the minute—three days after the love of his life had passed.*

*Through this whole ordeal we could not be with them, talk, touch, hug, hold their hands, help, or do anything for them. It was like being outside looking in through one-way glass at your parents dying without being able to lift a finger.*

*I believe that had the nursing home taken the pandemic for what it really was, my parents may not have contracted the virus. I believe that—had we been able to be with them—I would have the comfort of knowing they died in peace.*

*To have spent their entire lives in the service of others, only to die because people didn't take the pandemic seriously is a great tragedy.*

*We know that when Dad's body was taken by the funeral home, the staff at Bethany lined the hallways as his flag-draped gurney went by. It is said there were many tears shed that day. Tears are still being shed, as I write this.*

*Their funeral service was September 29, on their seventieth anniversary.*

*I find comfort in remembering how they were loved by the people of their community. Dad's pickup trucks in the old days of his Standard station ownership said, "Here Comes Bob!" on the front of the hood, in reverse font that was legible through a rearview mirror. On the tailgate it read "There Goes Bob!" Everyone in their town of 3,500 knew Bob. Mom's love of family was always a comfort to us. Until the end, she welcomed us all into her living space with joy! In their later years, neighborhood kids often spent hours at their house because they felt so welcome there. They made everyone feel welcome!*

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**Artist Emma Ozark  
Menomonie, WI**

Emma Ozark is a mixed media comics artist and animator. As someone with chronic health issues herself, remembering those who have helped those suffering and those who have passed away due to COVID-19 is something very important to her.

*In a way, we are all like the large puzzle described in Jennifer Johnson's COVID reflection; we all connect to other's lives in ways we may not realize. Nurses, Doctors, Janitors, and other essential medial staff come from all different kinds of backgrounds but still all connect under the common goal of helping others, and thus are important "pieces" to the "puzzle" of the lives of coworkers and patients. In the top portion of my piece, I wanted to remember not just the nurses, but their families as well, and how the special moments they share helps contribute to supporting them, and their "puzzle." The bottom half of the piece is more from the patient perspective, specifically in memory of Beverly and Robert Whitman; although their piece is "gone" from the puzzle, the memories remain in the hearts of their family and caretakers and continue to affect those around them.*

**View all the pieces in the *Healing Reflections* [online gallery](#).**