

Virginia Bell returned to college after 40 years for a second career that helped change dementia care worldwide.



A BEST FRIEND TO ALL

By Christina Noll

Photo: Tim Webb

Growing up on a farm outside Cynthiana, Virginia Marsh Bell '82 SW learned early the importance of community. “Our farm actually was almost a self-contained little community because everybody had to work together,” says Bell. It is this background of community that she credits for helping her career later in life.

Bell went on to become a pioneer in the dementia care field, opening one of the first dementia-specific day centers in the country, now known as the Best Friends Day Center. This model center has just celebrated 33 years of a new way of being with persons with Alzheimer’s disease and other dementia — a relational, Best Friends approach. This approach has expanded nationally and internationally for the joy of families, volunteers, staff and most of all, persons living with dementia.

A LIFE OF LEARNING

When Bell’s parents were older and she was cleaning out the family home, she found calendars that her mother had saved over the years. On one calendar, on June 30, 1922, her mother had written, “22 hen eggs, 5 turkey eggs, baby girl born.” Bell laughs, “Well, I made the calendar!”

From her mother, Bell learned she could do anything she put her mind to, with effort. Bell’s mother graduated from Eastern Kentucky University in 1908, when it was not common for a woman to have a college degree. She taught school for a few years before pursuing a nursing degree. “My mother was sort of a suffragette,” she says.

Bell’s father taught her the value of hard work and having a plan of action. As the second of seven children on a working farm, Bell

often worked alongside her father. “My father would say, ‘We’re going to get this job done. Now don’t give up. We can do this,’” relates Bell. This sentiment would guide Bell throughout her life.

Bell’s parents ensured that all of their children went to college. In 1944 Bell graduated with a degree in math and biology from Transylvania University, where she later received an honorary doctorate. It would be 40 more years before she enrolled in college courses again, this time at the University of Kentucky.

Bell was married to the late Wayne Bell, a minister, and made a career of being a minister’s wife and raising their five children. They lived in Nashville, Tennessee, and later returned to Lexington when Wayne Bell became president of the Lexington Theological Seminary.

This move coincided with Bell’s own parents increasing age and

was also inducted into the UK Social Work Hall of Fame. In 2010, Bell was inducted into the UK Alumni Association Hall of Distinguished Alumni.

SHEDDING LIGHT ON THE WINTER OF ALZHEIMER’S

Growing up, Bell recalls, older adults suffering from dementia were often sent away to live in a psychiatric hospital. “I can remember my father saying, ‘I can’t believe they put him away.’ As a child, I didn’t know what that meant, but the tone says it was bad news,” explains Bell. At that time, it was thought by many that there was nothing that could be done about dementia. The goal



Surrounded by her grandchildren on a special day, Virginia Bell received her master’s degree from the UK College of Social Work in 1982.



Virginia Bell received the UK Alumni Association Hall of Distinguished Alumni Award in 2010 from Scott E. Davis, left, then president of the association, and Lee T. Todd Jr., then UK president.

her concern for them as they continued to live on the farm. Bell, who had always had a desire to work with people, thought she could learn something about caring for aging adults.

So in 1979, she went to the Multidisciplinary Center on Aging, (now the Sanders-Brown Center on Aging) and met Dr. William Markesbery, director. She then enrolled part time at the UK College of Social Work. She finished her master’s degree in 1982 at the age of 60. “I was at UK to get my masters at the same time our youngest son was in medical school at UK,” she says.

“The community of professors, administrators and students with whom I spent many hours while a student and the many contacts, honors and friendships throughout these last 35 plus years have added support and joy to my life,” she says. “My experience during my three years at the UK College of Social Work set me on a wonderful fulfilling life for the next over 35 years. I owe a lot to the professors, administrative staff and students who helped me along the way.”

In 2004, she returned to UK to receive the Sullivan Award, a humanitarian award meant to recognize those who have selflessly given to others or served others in some way. That same year, she

was to keep the person with the disease safe and contained. According to Bell, it was “the winter of Alzheimer’s.”

Later, when Bell was asked to develop a day center for persons with dementia, she recalled her childhood and the lack of engagement provided for persons with dementia. “It’s interesting how sometimes your past surfaces, and I thought, you know there has to be a new day,” she says.

How she came to create the Best Friends Adult Day Center (formerly the Helping Hands Adult Day Center) was luck. “I just happened to be there,” she says. “UK had just received a big Alzheimer’s disease research grant, and part of UK’s outreach efforts included a support group for families living with dementia.”

Bell, who was finishing her practicum as a student, was asked to sit with a group of persons with dementia while their family members met with Dr. Markesbery. Bell, however, had been hoping to be in the meeting. “I often say that sometimes the things we are asked to do that we don’t want to do are the best learning experiences,” she relates. It was during this time that she learned so much about the individuals who needed the dementia care programs. “The more I got to know them — their life stories, what



Gelena Meade, right, who participates in the Best Friends program (part of Christian Care Communities) near Brannon Crossing, chats with her friend, Virginia Bell, while looking at a book together.

Photo: Tim Webb

they enjoyed, their joys and their sorrows — life was better for all of us,” she says.

She determined right then and there that she wanted to develop a way to help individuals with dementia enjoy a more dignified life. Soon after, Bell finished her master’s degree and took a position as a family counselor at the center, where she helped create support groups across the state and served as director of the Helping Hands Adult Day Center. The center was renamed the Best Friends Adult Day Center on its 20th anniversary.

Linda Kuder ’94 GS, then head of the Council on Aging and associate director at Sanders-Brown at the time, was her partner in making the program a reality. “There was nothing printed on the subject, and there were only four places in the United States that we could find that had dementia specific programs,” explains Bell. Together, Bell and Kuder visited these programs to gather information. They found that although the facilities were keeping people safe and secure, the engagement level was lacking, and the staff turnover was high.

Bell and Kuder set out to create a program that acknowledged the medical facts of dementia, while also shedding light on the person as a whole. “If you would just lift the dementia, and look underneath, you’d find an amazing person,” says Bell. “Individuals with lots of strengths and abilities, still.”

THE BEST FRIENDS APPROACH

A British researcher popularized the idea of “person-centered care” to build on a person’s remaining strengths and individualize care approaches to support happiness and reduce behaviors that are challenging to families.

“Person-centered care was an important first step, but most people

don’t want the emphasis only on them,” she says. “They want a friend and a relationship.”

Bell drew on the importance of community she had learned from her earliest years. “You can do everything just right for a person, but if they sense you’re not connected, it won’t work,” she says. “So we say relationship-centered care.”

This was the birth of the Best Friends approach to dementia care, one rooted in the belief that friendship is therapeutic. “Our Best Friends Center has been a model

program all over the world because it shows what is possible,” says Bell.

Through the program, volunteers and staff are encouraged to get to know persons with dementia as a best friend, not a patient. Being called by name and treated as a person, one who still has something to offer, makes all the difference. The key is activity and engagement. It works for the person experiencing dementia, it works for families who love them and it has also reduced turnover of staff working with the individuals because it enables them to have successes on a daily basis.

CHANGING DEMENTIA CARE WORLDWIDE

The Best Friends approach is now recognized as a model of care for persons with dementia in all types of worldwide settings. Bell has attended and spoken at 27 international conferences on the Best Friends philosophy, as well as trained many long-term care workers in other countries.

Together with co-author David Troxel, who worked at Sanders-Brown from 1986-1989, Bell has written six books detailing the approach to dementia care. Troxel, who is a recognized expert on best practices in Alzheimer’s care, has spent much of his career with the Alzheimer’s Association and today works as a speaker and consultant to organizations and companies serving people with dementia.

Troxel remembered meeting Bell and forming an instant bond. “We



Virginia Bell stands with her co-author David Troxel at a conference regarding dementia. In 2016, Bell and Troxel also presented the Best Friends approach at the Alzheimer’s Disease International conference in Budapest, Hungary.

Virginia Bell, standing at center, was in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1999 to lead a workshop about best practices with the Best Friends program.



were both so taken with the people we were meeting — the families, caregivers and people with dementia — and trying to understand how we could give support and dignity to this very challenging disease,” he says.

Bell and Troxel decided to write their first book, “The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer’s Care,” published in 1996, to share what they had learned. They also have a website at www.bestfriendsapproach.com.

Bell credited Troxel with the creativity to fashion the Best Friends approach to a worldwide audience. He, in

turn, gave the credit to her. “Virginia is a bold thinker,” he says. “She was always the one pushing to say, ‘Let’s recreate a voice and message.’” The book is now available in seven languages and used around the world as a benchmark for Alzheimer’s care.

More recently, Troxel and Bell have written “The Best Friends Approach to Dementia Care,” a new edition for professionals and “A Dignified Life,” written especially for families.

In addition, two books focus on how to engage people in unstructured times, as well as planned activities.

Two other co-authors helped with the recent books on engagement: Robin Hamon ’89 ’91 SW, caregiver support coordinator, UK Alzheimer’s Disease Center at the Sanders-Brown Center on Aging, and Tonya T. Cox ’98 SW, administrator of Homeplace at Midway in Midway.

The Best Friends program has won numerous awards and grants, including being funded as one of the first 17 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Respite Care and Dementia Services sites.

Bell’s impact on dementia care has been widely noted. “Virginia Bell is a great inspiration to caregivers of persons with dementia,” says Hamon. “Her enthusiastic spirit and powerful example has raised the bar on dementia care internationally.”

Dr. Nori Graham of London, England, geriatric psychiatrist and past president of Alzheimer’s Disease International, recalls, “When I visited Lexington in 2014 ... I was particularly struck by the enormous number of volunteers who had been inspired by Virginia to give the very best of themselves over many, many years.” She went on to say, “Virginia is the most extraordinary woman in so many different ways — her energy, her enthusiasm, her vision and imagination, her compassion and, above all, her capacity to make things happen, to make dreams come true.”

Bell received the prestigious Ruth Von Behren Award from the National Council on the Aging for the person who had done the most for adult day care in 1994. She received the Senior Award from the American Society on Aging in 1999. In addition to membership in many professional organizations, including the American Society on Aging, Bell has served twice as a member of the

Governor’s Task Force on Alzheimer’s disease for the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

“She’s become a worldwide figure and a thought leader,” says Troxel. “She was one of the first people to really say there’s a person beneath this cloak of dementia — a person of value and dignity. And she’s taken her mission all over the world.”

LOOKING FORWARD

In these last 35 years, Bell has had an entirely new career, something she never envisioned when she first married. “Wayne and our family have been very supportive with a wife and mother who has had a late life career,” she says.

Despite her official retirement in 1993, Bell is still helping others and volunteers at the Best Friends Center near Brannon Crossing (part of Christian Care Communities) as program consultant, training volunteers and as a best friend for persons with dementia.

“Virginia has been, and continues to be, a mentor and Best Friend for our Adult Day Health and Residential Memory Care Centers across the Commonwealth,” says Mary Lynn Spalding, president and chief executive officer of Christian Care Communities. “We are so grateful to be able to call her our friend.”

When she’s not working toward continuing to improve dementia care, Bell stays busy with her growing family, which now includes grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Each morning, she attends classes at the YMCA in Lexington, rotating between high impact aerobics, Pilates and yoga.

When it comes to care for aging adults, “I don’t feel as negative about the future as a lot of people do,” she says. She notes that many large assisted living and nursing home chains are changing to a more engaging approach because families are looking for this aspect when choosing where to place a loved one. Indeed, thanks in a large part to Bell, the future in dementia care looks brighter. “Now we’re not where we need to be, but we really have a new day for memory care, and I don’t think we’ll ever go back to the old ways of thinking,” she says. ■

If you are interested in learning about the UK Alzheimer’s Disease Center at the Sanders-Brown Center on Aging, visit www.uky.edu/coa/adc

