

LYNN

“... You know she comes first.

**It has to be that way, but it is
very, very, hard.”**

Lynn, 61 years old, caring for her elderly mother suffering from Alzheimer's in New Orleans, interviewed February 1, 2006

“Something was going to have to give, we just didn't know what.” Lynn is a 61 year-old white woman who lived in Metairie with her husband and was caring for her bed-bound, 81 year-old mother prior to the storm. Lynn was already facing very difficult times before the storm. Not only was she struggling with her own health problems, including severe diabetes, but she also was dealing with her mother's multiple conditions, including Alzheimer's, heart and lung problems, and diabetes.

Lynn lived in a house that she and her husband had owned for over 30 years. Her mother lived nearby in her own house. Lynn's mother had a primary care doctor that oversaw and coordinated her care. The family also had a private sitter that came five days a week, and Lynn and her brother rotated nights and weekends providing care. Although Lynn's mother is covered by Medicare and private supplemental insurance, neither the sitter services nor her prescription drugs were covered, and they were a significant expense. The sitter services cost about \$600 per week, and her mother's ten prescription drugs cost \$700 or more per month. These costs were being paid with her mother's savings and with income from a rental property owned by her mother, but they were becoming unaffordable.

Lynn was under significant stress caring for her mother, and it was taking a toll on her health. Prior to the storm, Lynn's doctor told her that she needed to slow down because of the impact on her diabetes. She went on sick leave from her job working with the school system, but she intended to return.

“We couldn't get her in and out of the car to stop and even to go to the bathroom.” Lynn and her husband evacuated prior to the storm in a car with her mother. To prepare for the evacuation, Lynn had all of her mother's prescriptions filled and packed all of her supplies, including her wheelchair, potty, walker, clothes, bed pans, and diapers. The evacuation was very challenging, since her mother cannot walk. Lynn noted, “Getting her in and out of the car alone was a horrible experience,” and “I had to take my mom and put her in my car lying down because she can't sit up. We were on the road for 12 hours.”

They initially evacuated to a hotel in Mississippi. However, the hotel suffered damage and they then traveled another 12 hours to a hotel in Alexandria, Louisiana. Throughout these difficult circumstances, Lynn was able to maintain her mother's medications, aided by assistance from drug stores. She said, “The drug stores were wonderful. I just brought the bottles to different places. In fact one druggist I went to ... gave it to me for cost.”

“She ended up in the hospital from all the stress.”

Lynn returned to the New Orleans area in late September with her husband and her mother. Her mother’s house suffered significant damage and needed to be gutted. Lynn’s house was damaged but livable, but she did not think it was safe for her mother because it needed to be cleaned out. Thus, initially, her mother stayed with her brother. However, he could not handle caring for her, and she moved over to Lynn’s after several days.

Lynn’s mother began experiencing heart problems from the stress of the situation, and she was taken to the hospital. She stayed in the hospital for two weeks and left with new orders for home health care and oxygen. Lynn noted, “That’s when they put her on oxygen. Now she’s going to have to stay on it.” Her mother returned home for two weeks and then returned to the hospital for another few weeks due to complications with her blood sugar. In addition to her physical problems since the storm, Lynn’s mother has had difficulty understanding what happened. Lynn noted, “Every day I’ve got to go over the same thing over and over and over again. She can’t comprehend even if we tell her, we show her pictures.”

Lynn said the care her mother received in the hospital was what could be expected given the circumstances and the shortage of staff. She described several instances when her mother sat needing changing or other assistance for hours. Her mother’s original primary care doctor oversaw the hospital visits, but, since then, Lynn has had difficulties with this doctor. It took him weeks to call back with results, and he generally was not responsive to Lynn. The home health service nurses caring for her mother eventually helped Lynn find a new doctor, who has helped

stabilize her mother’s medications and been much more responsive.

The new doctor also told Lynn about the new Medicare drug benefit. However, Lynn said, “I haven’t had time to do anything about it or find anything about it.” A friend offered to let Lynn use her computer and to help her figure out the best program for her mother. Lynn noted, “That’s the only way I can do it, because the drug stores ... are so busy ... they don’t have time to help you.” She does not want to ask her doctor for help because she does not want to burden him.

“I’m going to miss my house.” The combination of the stress from the storm and caring for her mother has taken a major toll on Lynn’s own physical and emotional health. Prior to the storm, Lynn was suffering from depression and anxiety, and these problems have gotten worse. One of the main issues Lynn is struggling with is that she and her husband have decided to give up their house and move into her mother’s home since it is better suited for caring for her. Lynn is very sad and emotional about leaving her home, but says “I mean we have to do what we have to do ... We feel like it’s our responsibility.” Lynn’s physical condition has deteriorated so badly that her doctor advised her to go on disability. She said, “I can’t go back to work and my blood sugars are crazy.”

Even in the face of these challenges, Lynn has received very little in terms of assistance. She received food stamps and unemployment for a short period of time following the storm but did not seek further assistance. She said, “I just think there are more people that need it than us and I’d rather them get it. We can survive and we’ll make it.”