

At first glance, 75 year old Anna seemed like many other women her age. She lived alone in a rundown older home, keeping mostly to herself. Her neighbors knew little about her, and she never had visitors. On most days she could be found traveling the city via the public bus system, dressed in clean but slightly eccentric outfits, with her snowy hair pulled neatly into a bun. Her most frequent destination was the public library where she liked to do “research”. The librarians knew Anna well enough to realize that she was different. She was generally pleasant, but her conversations rambled from topic to topic and were often sprinkled with references to government spies and FBI plots. They accepted Anna as she was---someone whose mental illness posed no threat to others and didn’t interfere with her ability to enjoy life.

One night the police, investigating a report of an elderly woman wandering the street in her nightgown, found Anna, disoriented and in severe pain, and took her immediately to the hospital where she was found to be suffering from a ruptured gall bladder. Due to Anna’s mental incapacity, the hospital obtained temporary guardianship to authorize the surgery she needed. Then, to plan for Anna’s post-discharge care, a hospital volunteer visited Anna’s home to assess her living environment. To her horror, she discovered that Anna had been living as a hoarder and had neglected essential home repairs. Every room was filled with trash, papers, and notebooks scribbled with Anna’s “research”. Dirty clothing carpeted the floors. The kitchen was completely inaccessible and the bathroom barely usable. There were odd collections of items, such as large piles of faux fur fabric in a rainbow of colors, and a bathtub full of unopened bottles of perfume. The dining room was littered with ceiling plaster from a badly leaking roof. The home was in such deplorable condition that the Public Health Department had condemned it. As there were no known family members to care for Anna, the only option was to transfer her to a nursing home following discharge from the hospital. But the question remained: Who would be responsible for Anna, since she was clearly unable to make decisions for herself?

When Families First was asked to consider becoming Anna’s permanent guardian, Sarah rose to the challenge. An alumna of the Hartford Partnership Program for Aging Education through Boston College Graduate School of Social Work, Sarah is a talented young social worker whose gentle yet unflappable demeanor seemed the perfect match for an angry, delusional client. While she had been forewarned that Anna was extremely unhappy about being in a nursing home, nothing could have prepared Sarah for the raw fury that greeted her at their first meeting. “GET ME OUT OF HERE!” Anna bellowed. “I want to go home NOW!”

“I’m so sorry, Anna,” Sarah explained gently, “but I’m afraid you can’t go back to the house you lived in before. We’ll need to figure out a different plan.”

“You’re stupid!” Anna thundered back. “I went to medical school! You’re not a doctor---what do you know about anything?!”

Anna was inconsolable, with such intense anger that the nursing facility had to call in extra help to keep an eye on her. Anna’s extreme rage would make it impossible for the facility to keep her long-term. Even worse, her behavior had proven so challenging that no other facilities would accept her. “Let me go home!” Anna insisted. “I want to go home!”

With no clear solution to Anna's dilemma, Sarah brought the case before the Protective Care Committee, an advisory group of Families First board and community volunteers that provides consultation regarding clients for whom the organization has legal or financial responsibility. After lengthy discussion, all agreed that the most ethical course of action would be to return Anna to the community. Admittedly it was a risky idea. Would she try to return to her condemned home? What if she got lost or wandered away? Wasn't she an easy target for someone who could do her harm? What if she started hoarding again? Would she voluntarily accept our help?

By a stroke of luck, Sarah discovered that an apartment was available in a building immediately across the street from our office. "I think we've found an answer for you, Anna", Sarah announced hopefully. "You'll have your own place, but you'll be close enough that you can visit us anytime, and our homemakers can help you with cleaning, laundry, and grocery shopping." (AND de-hoarding, Sarah thought to herself.)

"You're acting just like my mother!" Anna retorted angrily. "And I know you're all working with the Secret Service." But finally, after some grumbling and complaining, Anna relented.

When the long-awaited day of her discharge arrived, Anna climbed into Sarah's car and announced that she was ready to go home. "We're going to your new home" Sarah reminded her. Anna offered no protest as Sarah led her to her new apartment, helped her get settled, and provided essential phone contact instructions. But when it was time for Sarah to leave, a wide-eyed Anna turned and asked, "What?! You're leaving me?!"

"I'll see you first thing tomorrow" Sarah reassured her. "You can do this, Anna. We'll help you." But as Sarah drove away, she wondered to herself "Can Anna really do this?"

After a night of tossing and turning with worry, Sarah telephoned Anna early the next morning to check on her; to her dismay, there was no answer. She hurried to the apartment, fearing the worst, and knocked on the door. In a moment there stood Anna, looking rested, well groomed and almost surprised to see her. "Oh, hello" she said matter-of-factly. "Will you take me to the fabric store?" Clearly this move was much harder on me than on Anna, Sarah smiled to herself.

It didn't take long for Anna to settle comfortably into a new routine, stopping by the office every week to pick up her spending money and check in with "Mother Sarah", as she is fond of calling her. Free to move about the community as she wishes and enjoy familiar activities, Anna has also come to understand that she is no longer alone in the world. While she continues to fiercely guard her autonomy and occasionally complains about being "supervised", she also genuinely appreciates Sarah.

Sarah has learned that each visit with Anna will be like a journey, and she never knows where the road will lead or what unexpected twists and turns she might encounter. Like getting Anna to cooperate with basic health care. "Anna, I think it's time for us to take you to a dentist for a check-up." Sarah suggested one day.

"No", Anna retorted, "the FBI doesn't want me to go."

“Well, I’m going to make an appointment for you anyway”, Sarah insisted, “and I will go with you in case the FBI gives us any trouble”.

Anna fired back, “You’re too young to be my mother!”

Weeks later, Anna had forgotten her objections and willingly climbed into Sarah’s car to go meet her new dentist. Although she would never admit it, Anna seemed to be enjoying the attention and novelty of the visit. She had selected her favorite outfit for the occasion: a pair of slacks she sewed herself, in a football-patterned fleece fabric on a bright green background, accompanied by a not-quite-matching lime green sweater. Upon arrival, she greeted her new dentist pleasantly and announced “I don’t really know why I’m here, because these are not my teeth.”

“That’s fine,” Sarah replied evenly, “but since those teeth are in your mouth we will need to go ahead and take care of them.” Somehow this seemed to make sense to Anna, and she settled into the examining chair without further grumbling.

Sarah breathed a sigh of relief-- Anna seemed to be cooperating. Then the dentist announced that Anna’s teeth had suffered such long-term neglect that two extractions were immediately necessary. The prospect of dentures was also raised, but Anna quickly shot down this idea, declaring “I used to make fun of people with wooden teeth.”

Having no recourse, Sarah directed the dentist to proceed with the extractions, and to her surprise Anna didn’t resist. Instead, keeping her mouth open wide for the dentist gave Anna the perfect opportunity to express her displeasure by howling at the top of her voice throughout the procedure, rattling the nerves of Sarah and the dentist, and striking terror into everyone in the waiting room.

When the ordeal was finally over and a shaken and exhausted Sarah led Anna back to the car, Anna turned to her and mumbled, “Thanks, Mother Sarah, you’re doing a good job.”