

Cribbage, Cowboy Hats, and Connection

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“Fifteen for two, fifteen for four . . . say no more.”

I watched him think through all the combinations, his forehead wrinkling with concentration as he moved the little golden peg four places forward. Even though one of his arms struggled to work after the stroke he had many years ago, he was adamant about shuffling the cards and moving his pegs up the cribbage board himself. To preserve his autonomy and independence, I sat patiently while he took longer than most people might. I made small talk to pass the time when appropriate, but was comfortable in silence when he needed to focus on the task at hand.

On my first day as a volunteer, I walked into his room where he was lying in bed, his cowboy hat resting on the bedside table. He was looking for someone to play cribbage with weekly, and I made it my goal to learn. During our first game, I felt my palms getting sweaty, struggling to remember all the steps. Patiently, he reminded me of the rules and taught me how to strategize which cards to put in my crib. By the third week, I could finally count the points as fast as he could. As I pushed his wheelchair back to his room, we passed a nurse; his face lit up, and he turned to her and said, “She’s a real quick learner, but she had a great teacher!”

Each week, I knocked on the door and walked in. I asked him whether he was ready to go, and he said he just needed to grab one thing—his cowboy hat. Shoes weren’t always a necessity, but the hat was. He said it was good luck. I often thought to myself, maybe if I got myself a cowgirl hat of my own, I wouldn’t have lost so many games. Returning indoors after an hour, we passed other residents on the floor. They’d ask, “Who won today?” and more times than not, he could confidently say he had beaten me again.

Before leaving him, I would say, “Rematch next week, this time I’m going to win,” and we’d exchange a fist bump. I shrugged off the losses; being able to get him out of bed and out for some fresh air felt like a victory in itself.

Unfortunately, the rematch I promised him at my most recent visit just two days prior would never come. After enjoying our visits together for five months, I received a phone call from the nursing home informing me of his passing. A lump welled in my throat, and tears filled my eyes. I didn’t know how to respond on the phone, but I managed to mutter a “Thanks for letting me know” before losing the ability to focus on anything else she said during that call.

Hours later, I kept thinking about the past half a year. I thought about the time he got sick, and we missed our cribbage game that week. The visit after that, he told me, “Your visits save my life; it gets so lonely in here.” I gave him a soft smile, laid out the cribbage board, and started to shuffle the cards for our next match. In truth, my visits were just as much for me as they were for him.

Many times, when I arrived for our cribbage matches, the nursing home halls were still, with only the soft hum of fluorescent lights and the squeak of my shoes on the floor breaking the silence. As I sat across from my cribbage partner, time seemed to move differently, more slowly. As we counted points together, I could feel my typically tense shoulders loosen. Though I lost most of our cribbage games and will likely lose more, I gained a skill I can continue to share with others and opportunities to slow down.

Months later, I reached into my closet and pulled out my cribbage board, which had been sitting largely untouched after I lost my cribbage partner. After an invitation to “drop-in cribbage” at the local senior center, I finally had a reason to take it out again. Maybe this time I’d even wear a cowgirl hat. I look forward to these games, which keep me

grounded and keep his memory alive every time I shuffle my cards and move my peg up the board.