

## DIGNITY, RESPECT, AND KNIGHTS IN SHINING ARMOR

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His warrior features are molded by time. Her blue eyes are faded and soft. But watching them together, you'd never know that they've only recently met. The tender care he bestows on her melts my heart during these painful days of medical testing. She relies on him now perhaps more than she ever did on the two husbands she's buried. In those years, she was strong and resilient, able to face whatever life dealt her. Now he pushes her chair, skillfully guiding the footrests lest they hit the doorframe and jolt her broken hip. Wrapping her coat against a cold wind, he straps her in for the ride home. One more day means one more doctor as they shuffle her from one specialist to the next. Home isn't even home anymore-it's a hospital bed in a care center more than two thousand miles away from the quiet orange groves of central Florida. A moment without her cane, a fall in her neighbor's driveway, and my mother had to say goodbye to her gentle climate and hello to Colorado, a move I made almost thirty years ago.

Her journey has introduced me to neighbors just down the road, strangers in my own small town. Carbondale has only one nursing home, euphemistically named a care center; I'm grateful beyond words that it more than lives up to its lofty title. With his compassion and capability, Dave is one of the heroes that brighten the lives of the residents. Their knight in shining armor transports them to appointments in a manner befitting royalty- with dignity and respect, regardless of their infirmities. His shield and sword are years of experience and a true devotion to a higher calling. Doctors respect him as a vital element in the care network, knowing that Dave records and follows up on every detail of their patients' treatment. Nurses treat him like family because he has earned the privilege. It is my honor to tag along and watch a warrior fortify the flagging defenses in the inevitable war against time.

We have a few moments during an MRI, and though I coax him to answer some questions about himself, he'd rather talk about the residents. Besides his wife and family, they are dearest to his heart. Now and then, they slip away; this is, after all, a retirement home. Still, he grieves. He took the time to know them as people; not only as they were in old age, but also in the prime of their lives. If you want stories about the residents, you'll get an earful. Ask them, he says. Take the time and ask them who they were and what they did. Colorado history, replete with cowboys and homesteaders, lies just beyond the front door of Heritage Park Care Center.

The MRI is finally over, so Dave bundles Dori up against the cold for the ride home. Since she missed lunch, her knight in shining armor will probably drive through McDonalds and get her a burger for the road. Only as he pushes her through the doors do I notice the limp. While his shield and sword are his experience and devotion, the compassion that wells from his heart flows from the spot where his leg used to be. Dave Martin, Carbondale's mighty warrior and Vietnam veteran, loads his precious cargo into the van and away they go. My mother couldn't be in better hands.