



Kimberly Bleach

It started 23 years ago when I met a man named Mr. Baird. I was a college student, working part-time serving dinner at the assisted living facility in Deland, FL, where Mr. Baird lived. He was about 88. He sat alone. He had no teeth. He never smiled. He was angry and unhappy and nothing seemed to please him. The food, the service, the staff, his fellow residents – nothing.

The other residents couldn't tolerate his poor attitude and didn't want him at their dinner table. The administrators tried everything and eventually had to give Mr. Baird his own table in the corner. As the new kid, I was assigned to serve him his dinner and I was determined to help him. My strategy: knock him over with kindness. It became my personal mission.

I actually looked forward to our time together and, after a while, Mr. Baird began to warm up. He told me about the love of his life, his wife of 63 years, who he had lost. And about his son who had also predeceased him. He had no one and, as a result, he was giving up on life.

Mr. Baird and I became friends. He would bring a joke to dinner to share with me. It was the same few jokes week after week, but I didn't care. We laughed just the same. I recall laughing pretty hard, louder than the jokes warranted, for sure. It drew the attention and piqued the curiosity of the other resident diners. Others wanted to be in on the jokes, to know what was going on at that table in the corner.

Slowly Mr. Baird rejoined life. He put his teeth back in. He began to smile. Eventually, he was introduced to a table of veteran gentlemen and began to dine with them every night and I continued to serve them all.

Now, don't get me wrong, I am not claiming that Mr. Baird's warming up was based on my friendship alone. But I like to believe I played a small part. We all know it takes a village, and all the staff wanted to see him succeed. Mr. Baird was treated with care and love in every part of the facility.

Which brings me to the Pines and why I cherish this organization. Anyone who has stepped foot on the Pines campus knows it is a big family. The mission of the Pines is to offer individuals a fulfilling life that satisfies their health and lifestyle needs, all with the confidence of knowing they will always be secure, well cared for and welcomed. It is so much more than that.

We know that the residents of the Pines cannot go back to work. Many have no other options of where to live. No family. It is up to us (the staff, the Board, the donors, our community) to be that family. To give them hope. To make them feel loved and welcomed.

All the residents of the Pines have a story. They deserve dignity, compassion and love in their later years. If we all do our small part, we can make a big difference in their lives. Love lives at the Pines.