PETER ROJAS

Community Partners in Caring, Santa Maria, CA

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Peter started his professional career working as a junior and high school math teacher in several districts of the Los Angeles metropolitan area. After 8 ½ years, he returned to graduate school as a full-time student, earned a master’s degree in mathematics, and immediately landed a job at Santa Barbara City College (SBCC). In 2022, Peter retired from SBCC after serving 30 years as a tenured professor. In retirement, he is a community volunteer and pursuing his love of the theater and the arts. “I have always stayed connected with the theater and the arts even while I was teaching.” Besides training as an actor, he has trained with flamenco dance groups in the United States and Spain and is currently rehearsing with a Middle Eastern ensemble on a folklore ballet that will be performed this spring in Santa Barbara’s largest theater venue, the Arlington Theatre.

In 2017, Peter started making inquiries into the organization Meals on Wheels when his 85-year-old mom became challenged preparing meals for his 90-year-old father, who was diagnosed with diabetes and receiving kidney dialysis. It was during that inquiry that Peter became aware of the need for more drivers to deliver meals in his parent’s town of Santa Maria. During the summer of 2017, he became a volunteer driver for Meals on Wheels, which ironically led him to deliver on a route that included his parents’ home.

“As I became more aware of my parents’ fragility, I grew compassionate to the plight of seniors living on their own and instinctually developed caregiving habits to support assisting my parents and other elderly friends. After my dad passed in 2018, I looked into other nonprofit organizations that served the elderly.”

In 2020, Peter joined Community Partners in Caring (CPC) in Santa Barbara as a volunteer caregiver. This role allows him to serve seniors, or those with limited mobility who are housebound. Some of his volunteer services include driving or accompanying clients to their medical appointments, grocery stores, banks, post offices, etc. “If convenient, I’ll allow my role to lend itself to responding to unscheduled requests after hours or during weekends. These types of requests are usually minimal in scope and can range from raking leaves on a driveway to picking up a carton of milk, or simply walking a dog.”

One of the features Peter appreciates as a volunteer with CPC is the ease of ability to self-select client requests, which are available on the website’s dashboard. With a couple of clicks, he can access a client’s request to view details and choose one that best fits his schedule. On average, Peter fulfills three client requests per week throughout the general Santa Barbara area, with each request lasting from 1 ½ to 3 hours.

In May 2023, Peter took a few months break from volunteering with CPC due to the passing of his mom and two other relatives. “I had to stop volunteering for a few months due to the deaths of my mom, a nephew, and a younger cousin within the same week. I couldn’t give to anyone in any capacity as I realized I needed to give myself time to process the grief of losing my family members. It was also during this tough time that I approached CPC and asked if they could take unused health supplies and equipment that were purchased for my mom. I was grateful when they said yes, and that it could easily be given to some of our clients. I also appreciated their attitude of condolence shared with me.” In late 2023, Peter resumed volunteering with CPC, where he had a couple of interactions with clients who unknowingly offered him more grief support that he hadn’t realized he still needed.

Delia is a regular client of Peter, who is recovering from surgery to remove colorectal cancer. When she learned her 84-year-old mom was admitted to hospice, Delia was conflicted about whether to fly the out-of-state distance to see her due to finances, estranged family dynamics, and her own health’s fragility. Because Peter shared his own experience being personally present and tending to his mom during her hospitalization and eventual passing, he encouraged Delia to take the chance to travel and be at her mom’s bedside. After Delia agreed, Peter drove her the 90 minutes to the airport. When Delia reached her destination city, she encountered miscommunication with some family members and had difficulty navigating the city’s transportation system on her own. However, she eventually was able to be at her mom’s bedside before her passing. Not only did it gratify Peter to know he was instrumental in enabling mother and daughter to reunite one last time, but this one act helped him to cope with the grief he was still experiencing.

Another client of Peter's is a psychologist/life coach named Candace. In April 2023, while driving Candace to her medical procedure, Peter shared that his mom was admitted to the hospital, and he was hoping she would recover from a serious UTI setback. Being familiar with the complications of a UTI, Candace gently encouraged Peter to be open to the possibility of releasing his mom in making the transition to the afterlife when that time arrived. Eventually, Peter accepted and practiced her advice at his mom’s passing just one month later, which proved a great source of comfort. After Peter took a break and resumed volunteering in November 2023, he volunteered to drive Candace to her storage unit so she could transfer some items. While waiting for her, Peter walked around the storage unit grounds and came across a rock sitting on a stone wall. It was the size of a baseball, yet in the shape of a heart, with the painted-on words “Love You”. Those are the same words Peter remembered his mom would write in correspondence or say when taking leave. Those are the same words she requested to be etched on her gravestone. When Peter showed the rock to Candace, she said that it was a message from his mom that he should keep and cherish. It now sits in his living room.

These are just two accounts that typify the quality of interaction Peter experiences while volunteering which leads him to believe that volunteer caregiving intended for his clients is a two-way dynamic. “After recently retiring from a long career as a math professor, I am fortunate that my health and resources allow me the freedom and capability to not only perform duties for clients but to simply be a presence and comfort to them that manifest in ways I couldn’t have imagined. Through it all, it’s the quality of interaction and companionship that matters most. I only hope to receive the same attention and care when my time of restricted living arrives.”