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'I've lived for her': 88-year-old Eleanor woman has dedicated her life to caring for disabled daughter

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Geraldine Bayless, 88, has dedicated much of her life to caring for her daughter Valerie, who has suffered from | damage-induced cerebral palsy since birth. Valerie has defied t longer physically care for her as she did for the first 44 years of feeds her dinner.

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ELEANOR -- When she was 18 years old, doctors told Geraldine Bayless her newborn daughter wouldn't survive the night.

With every sunrise since, the 88-year-old Putnam County woman has lifted herself from bed and gone about a daily routine that, these days, includes a trip to the Teays Valley nursing home where her 70-year-old daughter now resides.

"I prayed that God would let Valerie live for me," Bayless said in a sweet and pronounced West Virginia drawl. "So she has lived for me and I've lived for her."

Since birth, Valerie has suffered from brain damage-induced cerebral palsy that rendered her unable to speak or walk. In light of those limitations, Geraldine dedicated her life to her daughter's happiness, having spent the majority of her daughter's first 44 years providing direct care at home.

That care came in a constant rotation of lifting, feeding, teaching, cleaning, minding, caring, laughing and loving that eliminated the possibility of most hobbies, vacations or a career.

"She made me strong," Geraldine said. "Taking care of Valerie and my two other children made me strong, because I was willing to do it."



When her new life began in 1953, Geraldine was a young, red-headed Eleanor native born to a couple of the town's original homesteaders.

She'd grown up in abject poverty, moving with her family from place to place on the heels of the Great Depression. Geraldine remembers living off a garden and having to walk a half-mile to get water for cooking before her mom got home from doing housework for "prominent people" in St. Albans.

"Our life wasn't good growing up, but I was one of them that wanted to do better. I wanted out of that," she said. "That was life for me, but I loved my Mom and Dad. My Mom worked hard."

With Valerie's birth, Geraldine built a family of her own without finishing her senior year of high school.

"I was so young I just really didn't know what I was going to be going through. I didn't know, and maybe it's a good thing I didn't," she said. "But I know we loved our baby. Of course, she was from God."

Geraldine's husband, Robert, was a Marine Corps and Korean War veteran who worked jobs at a textile mill and later at Union Carbide. He enriched Valerie's life and aided in her care as often as he could until his passing in 1996. Geraldine calls him "the most gentlemanly man that ever walked the face of the earth."

Both stayed busy.

"We just didn't know," their son, Chip Bayless, remembered. "You heard other kids talking about vacations and where they went and what they done. It didn't affect us. We didn't care. We had Mom and Dad."

On most occasions, the responsibility of caring for Valerie, Chip and their sister, Jeannie, fell to Geraldine.

"We've had a lot of joy. Our life wasn't like everybody else's, but that didn't matter," she said. "That was us, and we were OK with it."

Geraldine smiles when reminiscing on a life spent by her daughter's side. Valerie would spend hours throwing blocks into a bucket one-by-one, while her mother cleaned nearby, before resetting the game.

Together, Geraldine and Robert tried to keep Valerie's life as vibrant as possible. Robert often insisted on taking their daughter on evening strolls while they carried on with neighbors in rare moments of unwinding, or on trips to the nearby creek where she could relax in her specially modified chair in the cool water, Geraldine said.

While her father was certainly a key element in the family, Valerie was her mother's

daughter.

Geraldine remembers one occasion when she settled Valerie in with her father as he napped on the couch after work. Having watched her mother clean all day for much of her life, Valerie crawled up on him and, finding the newspaper out of place in a freshly straightened room, slapped him to let him know he'd erred.

"If something was out of place on the floor, if it didn't belong, she knew it and she'd let you know about it," remembered Chip with a laugh.

Caring for her daughter required a lot of work, but Valerie often helped keep things light.

"She'd take a bite of food out of her mouth and put it up here and I'd say, 'Are you mommy's little silly goose?' and we'd go laughing," Geraldine said, finding another laugh at the memory.

Through their constant companionship, the pair managed to transcend Valerie's limitations in their own ways.

"Valerie knows a lot, she just can't speak and I think that probably aggravates her, does something to her, that she can't explain herself," Geraldine said. "I put myself in her shoes. That would be terrible, wouldn't it? To not be able to say what you'd like to say."



Valerie was able to pick up one word.

"Mom knows her inside and out," Chip said. "[Valerie's] never been able to walk or talk, but she's been able to say one word and she says it to this day.

"It's mommy."

Now that Geraldine is physically unable to carry out the tasks required for her daughter's care, she tries to make her life as comfortable as she can. She still stops by the nursing home for two to three hours every day to visit and feed Valerie dinner.

"I try to tell the girls over there the noises she will make and what they mean. She'll reach her arm out if she wants to get up and I tell them that. She's got a habit of biting her cup or her glass and I'll say, 'Valerie don't do that or I'm going home.' She'll go, 'Ugh!' That means, 'No you're not!'" Geraldine said with a laugh.

"She will bite her hand if she's upset about anything and I told them that over there. Or, she will bite her hand if she's happy about something and take it out and laugh. But I know the difference, see."

The decision to entrust the bulk of Valerie's care to others was a difficult one.

"Of course, I knew things wouldn't be like home. They couldn't be, but I made sure I went

over there and supervised her care the best I could," Geraldine said. "Even the doctors would say, 'Geraldine, you've got to take care of yourself.' I just let that go in one ear and out the other."

Though the pair are settled into a comfortable routine now, there were plenty of hard times as Valerie was growing up.

There was a flu-induced coma, numerous seizures and surgeries, physical therapy and a short-lived and deeply regretted trial run at a care facility during a difficult time for the family.

"I cried a lot. I'd walk outside, sit in my swing and I'd cry. That relieved me some," Geraldine said. "Because there was no way I was going to give my little Valerie up."

Though Chip doesn't have memories of family vacations to look back on due to the family's schedule, he has something more. He has all the lessons his mother imparted, from the first time she showed him how to ball a fist and stand up to a bully, to watching her selflessly keep to a routine of love.

"Strength. Discipline. Compassion. Loyalty," Chip said, wiping tears from his eyes. "If anybody had a reason to throw in the towel, it could have been Mom. I like to think that there's not a lot that bothers me to where I can't function. Knowing what she's gone through, I don't think anything could have been any tougher."

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VIDEO: Celebrating a mother's love

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Reporter