

## **Author's approach to elder care nonmedical, holistic**

Ojai writer suggests poetry, music, conversation to inspire bored adults

By Amy Bentley

Joan Englander is bothered by the thought of older people being bored and lonely, sleeping for hours, watching television all day long and waiting “for life’s sun to go down.”

“Aging does not have to be this way,” said the 71-year-old Ojai resident. “Elders can have joy, meaning, intellectual and spiritual challenge in the evening of their lives.”

Englander should know. As the founder of Healing Companions services, she helps older people find peace, comfort, joy and mental challenges. Englander offers a nonmedical, holistic approach to elder care.

For 28 years, she has taught elders and nursing staffs, serving as a consultant, elder care coach and trainer for geriatric care facilities.

Englander is a recipient of Today’s Caregiver Magazine’s 2008 Caregiver Friendly Award, and she is a Living Treasure nominee in Ojai.

This fall, Englander self-published a book about her work and philosophy called “Joy in the Evening of Our Lives: Nurturing the Elderly Soul.”

The book aims at changing what she calls the “warehousing” of older people in nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

Englander said families want to feel at ease caring for their elders. “Joy in the Evening” aims to challenge and inspire the way people think about elder care so caregivers can learn to communicate through the arts, song, prayer and meditation, all things Englander does in her work with seniors.

Readers can learn to “reawaken” the will to live in older people who feel useless and bring them hope and a sense of wellness, she said.

“The way this book is different than other books on aging is it brings a journey of hope, inspiration and creativity,” she said. The book does not describe diseases, symptoms of illnesses or medications. “That’s so depressing. This book is a reverse of that. This book is hopeful. It talks about bringing elders new things to express. Then you waken them up to something that engages their mind.

“With older people in our care systems, the thing that I found that was lacking was connecting to the inner person,” she said. Poetry, music or conversation can bring intimacy and a sense of inner peace to older people who have lost spouses as well as many family members and friends.

As a Healing Companion, Englander sings by a patient’s bedside and offers poetry, storytelling, movement, inner reflection and chair dance. She also practices Qigong, an ancient Chinese art of becoming aware of the body’s energy and learning how to control its flow through movement, controlled breathing and meditation.

Much of Englander’s knowledge comes from her nearly two years of travel in the mid-1970s throughout Egypt, India and Israel, where she studied spiritual healing traditions. She also trained in Los Angeles several years ago as a movement therapist. In addition, she sings and plays the tamboura, a four-string instrument from India.

Englander began working with seniors after a meeting and prayer session with the late Mother Teresa in Rome 25 years ago. The meeting made Englander want to reach out to others in need.

She also was influenced by a young deformed and expressionless boy she was asked to feed at one of Mother Teresa’s homes for the sick and dying. “While I was doing this, I heard music and I started to sing. He suddenly smiled and his eyes lit up. For a few seconds, he was alive.”

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