



Former GMA host, advocate Joan Lunden talks end of life conversations

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PORTLAND — Former Good Morning America host and health care advocate Joan Lunden was the keynote speaker at the Hospice of Southern Maine Thresholds Conference last week where she spoke about her experience caring for her disabled brother and elderly mother and the importance of advanced healthcare directives.

Lunden's father, a cancer surgeon in California, died suddenly in a plane crash when she was 14 years old. Years later she found herself responsible for the long distance care of her disabled brother and her aging mother.

"I had to provide decades of care for both of them, and I was not at all prepared. Too many of us are unprepared for caregiving. This is about how we can be better prepared, and how having a plan in place can make all the difference in the world," Lunden said.

The theme of the 7th annual Thresholds Conference held at the University of Southern Maine in Portland was "Prepare to Care: Completing an Advance Directive."

Hospice of Southern Maine Chief Executive Officer Daryl Cady related her own recent experience with her mother who passed away from an acute respiratory infection in March, with no advanced directive in place. Cady said she had the conversations with her mother years earlier, but she never returned the forms to her doctor.

“We had to make a life or death decision for her,” Cady said.

She said if her mother had completed the forms, she would have had the chance to be a daughter during the last few days of her mother’s life, rather than having to make difficult decisions in a time of crisis.

An advanced healthcare directive is used to tell doctors and others what medical care an individual wants to receive if they become too sick in the future to communicate what they want.

The senior demographic in the United States is changing quickly, and planning for caregiving is changing with it. As life expectancy stretches, many people will find themselves caring for their parents for more years than they spent raising children.

“There are more adults over 65 than ever in the history of our country,” Lunden said. “10,000 people a day turn 65 in America, and they are not signing up for old age.”

The fastest growing demographic group in the country are centenarians. By 2020, which is just three years away, there will be 214,000 Americans 100 years and older, according to Lunden. And by 2050 that number is expected to explode to one million.

“We have to rethink about how we think about aging,” she said.

A career of sharing for Lunden

Lunden, 66, has seven children, including four middle-schoolers, and spent many years in the “sandwich generation” caring for her mother and brother long distance, while raising her children. She also battled breast cancer. Diagnosed in June of 2014, she publically shared her journey through cancer treatments including surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation.

She is now doing the same with her experience as a caregiver.

In a sit-down interview following her keynote address, Lunden said her career as a journalist has given her the platform to share life’s challenges with her viewers.

As an anchor on Good Morning America, Lunden’s viewers tuned in every day, and got to know her as a real person.

“I was always conscious of being in people’s homes every morning,” Lunden said. “You create a very personal relationship with people. So it started so organically, that sharing.”

Her caregiving story took a sudden and untimely turn when her brother, who lived with their mother, died suddenly from complications of Type 2 diabetes at just 56 years old.

“It hit me in the face. So I decided to soak it all up, learn everything that I could, take notes and share what I learned,” Lunden said.

Lunden emphasized the need to know where all of the key documents are, and to make sure the advanced healthcare directive has been filled out and turned into health care providers. If senior parents are reluctant to talk about it, offer to do your own at the same time, Lunden suggested.

“My mother used to think that if you talk about death, it would make it happen sooner,” she said. “I think a lot of people feel that way, that’s why we aren’t having these conversations. But they’re so important, and everyone will feel a huge weight lifted off their shoulders once it’s done.”

She offered a few additional tips for people as they plan ahead for caregiving.

“I recommend a planned interview with aging parents with a video camera. Record their memories and thoughts on life,” she said.

Lunden learned when moving her own mother, that moving is hard, especially for the elderly. Her daughter took pictures of everything in each room before the move, and then they were able to place things in familiar places in her new space, which made a big difference in her mother’s ability to adjust.

Her most important piece of advice was to remember the love connection, and keep it going.

“Tell them again and again that you love them. You can’t say it enough,” Lunden said.

Healthcare directive forms are unique in each state. The forms for Maine residents are available from Maine Health Care through doctors offices, health care providers and can be downloaded online through the Maine Hospital Association at **www.themha.org**.
