

A Candid Conversation With Our First Caregiver

After visiting numerous doctors in search of an explanation for the changes friends and family had noticed in her husband, Lou, Angie Ruvo met Leon Thal, MD, in San Diego. The renowned researcher put his hand on her shoulder and said, “Mrs. Ruvo, you have a 24-hour-a-day job here. Lou has Alzheimer’s.”

Fewer than three years later, in February 1994, she awoke in the night to find that, despite one of the tricks of caregiving she had learned “on the job” — tucking the bedcovers tightly around him and then under the mattress — Lou had gotten out of bed. She found him dead on the bedroom floor from a heart attack.

“Just go along”

Those three years had been just as challenging as Dr. Thal had predicted.

“I’d say Lou, you need professional caregiving help. He said, ‘You’ve been my wife for 50 years. You’re taking care of me,’” remembers Mrs. Ruvo.

Along the way, she developed a homegrown caregiver toolkit.

When her husband refused to eat, Mrs. Ruvo remembers, she would say, “‘Lou, here comes a choo-choo train. Open your mouth.’ And I’d shove the food in.

“He thought I was his mother and I’d say, ‘I’m your wife. You married me,’ but I soon realized it was easier to just go along with whatever he said.”

At Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, “that’s exactly what we tell our caregivers today: ‘Don’t argue, just go with it,’” says Lucille Carriere, PhD, the inaugural Angie Ruvo Endowed Caregiving Chair (see page 29).

Funded by Camille and Larry Ruvo and presented to Angie on her 94th birthday, the Chair provides financial support for its



Endowed
Chair holder
Dr. Lucille Carriere
with Angie Ruvo,
our first caregiver

holder to conduct research into caregiving and expand the center’s evidence-based education and support programming.

“The Chair, I couldn’t believe it. Only Camille and Larry would think of that. They always spoil me,” Mrs. Ruvo says.

Make time for yourself

In Las Vegas prior to the 2009 opening of the center that Larry Ruvo established in his father’s memory, there were few board-certified neurologists specializing in Alzheimer’s disease. There were even fewer support group options, and Mrs. Ruvo says the one she found didn’t help.

Says Dr. Carriere, “Groups have come a long way in the last couple of decades.” One thing that hasn’t changed is the challenge of making time for self-care. She frequently reminds caregivers to try to practice a relaxation strategy. Even something as brief as a 20-minute call with a friend or a quick walk can be restorative.

While Mrs. Ruvo endured back surgery due to frequently lifting her husband following falls, today she enjoys bingo, shopping and baking her family’s favorite desserts. Her wish for her 96th birthday in 2020? She wants to see George Strait in concert and receive a birthday kiss.