

Life experiences drew her to challenging work: special ed teacher, domestic abuse counselor and senior center volunteer

Description

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As a child, Darlene Crisp watched her mother spoon-feed and pillow-prop her brother. Born with muscular dystrophy, he needed care 24-7. Decades later â?? Crisp is now 79 â?? memories of David, who died at 28, persist. At a younger age, they led her to a career in special education.

â??I wanted to be a teacher who works with handicapped students like David,â?• she said. She got a teaching credential in college, then took a job in the San Mateo-Foster City School district, working with students with a wide spectrum of physical, learning and behavior challenges. â??My goal was to help my students to get a good foundation in reading and math, to become contributing members of society â?? maybe admitted to college or get a good paying job.â?•

She remembers helping a girl with schizophrenia reach her third-grade level in reading math and spelling. â??She was unresponsive; did not emote, talk or make connection with anyone,â?• said Crisp, who worked her one-on-one. â??By the end of that school year, she â??was teaming with other students at recess and PE.â?•

Daughter of SF butcher

Crisp was born in San Francisco and has two older brothers. Her father was born in Jerusalem, Palestine, in 1898, emigrated to the United States around 1915. He survived the depression of the 1920s and became a butcher like his father. He started a meat market in Atlantic City during the 1930s. Eventually, he ended up in San Francisco, where he met Crispâ??s mother. He later owned the butcher shop in The Crystal Palace Market on Market Street.



Crisp said many women who experience abuse often stay because â??he is a good parent.â?• (Photos by Myra Krieger)

Crispâ??s mother was born in 1912 in Oklahoma City and raised in Texas. The family was poor. Her mother, who never got an education beyond fourth grade, was a homemaker â?? one reason Crisp was

determined to be self-supporting.

Crisp worked for 28 years, then retired in 1995. Not wanting to be idle, she began volunteering. Flexible hours would give her time to travel and be with family and friends. â??This was my retirement.â?•

She underwent training and became a hotline volunteer, counseling women experiencing domestic abuse. She was ultimately hired part-time at the womenâ??s shelter as the intake person.

It was no accident she chose this particular volunteer work: She suffered abuse in her first marriage. â??I wanted to use my skills and use what I had learned regarding negative relationships to help other women.â?•

Whatâ??s a good parent?

What stood out to her was what many such women said about their partners. â??But, he is a good parent.â??â?•

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Her response was always: â??A good parent will not show violence or control to the mother or their partner. The children will witness or hear it and that affects them in how they will be as adults. The children are also affected by the lack or type of communication going on between the abuser and the abused.â?•

She left after five years. It was a stressful job, she said.

Crisp finally found the sweet spot in volunteering when in 2009, she signed on with the On Lok 30th Street Senior Center, which is close to her home. She chose to volunteer in the dining room so she â??could be active and move around versus sitting at the front desk.

â??It was a good reason to get up every day. I loved it. I met so many wonderful seniors and staff.â?•

A new family

And, about halfway in, Crispâ??s personal life opened up in a way she had never expected.

In 2015, she met the daughter she had given up for adoption when she was 19 and in college. Jaime Levy found Crisp through Ancestry.com after her adopted mother died.

â??I was beyond happy because she returned to me 64 years later and this completed my life,â?• Crisp said, adding â??She was so happy to have me in her life. She is so happy to have two more sisters. My family has embraced her, and her family has embraced me and my other two daughters.â?•

Sheâ??d wanted to travel in retirement and now, as the mother of three daughters â?? not two â?? and the grandmother of three children, she has plenty of places to choose from. Levy lives in Calabasas; her other daughters and their families in Hawaii and North Carolina.

Unwittingly, Levy named her own daughter Kenya, which Crisp had named her second daughter. Crisp said, â??Theyâ??re all alike in so many ways.â?•

In addition to gaining a daughter in later life, she found two new loves: Michael and fly fishing. She and Michael, married in 1984, have been together for 38 years. He lives in Tennessee on a 17-acre property by the Cherokee National Forest. They spend time there â?? he taught her to fish â?? and in San Francisco.

Since they were both divorced, with young children, she said, â??I told him the children stay put to see both parents, and we will go back and forth.â?•

Though their children are now adults, they havenâ??t changed their routine.

â??Neither one of us wants to give up our place.â?•

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