

## Columnists

### **'Amazing Grace' turns into amazing race**

By Esther Baird

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Recently my daughters and I went with our church to a sing-a-long at The Herrick House — the assisted-living residence up the hill from Beverly Hospital.

“And you’re sure our children are welcome?” I asked. “Oh yes, children are the best part — the residents enjoy their energy and enthusiasm,” the church organizer replied. Well! Fancy that. My daughters go nowhere without energy and enthusiasm, so I signed us up.

When we arrived at The Herrick House, we were directed to the main lobby where a number of residents were mingling. Some were working on a puzzle that depicted, best I could tell, a grey cloud floating above a grey sea amidst a driving, grey rain storm. It looked impossible, but two men were making impressive, grey-on-grey, inroads.

“Mommy, look a puzzle. I’m going to help!” my 4-year-old exclaimed. Another one of the children from church wandered over, and together they began to “assist” the men. My 18-month-old, not to be outdone, quickly grabbed a fistful of pieces and crawled under the table.

“It’s fine,” one of the men smiled. “We can always put it back together.” I wondered about that as I watched my daughter put one of the pieces in her mouth.

Once everyone was settled and had a songbook, we began with a few songs that the children would know. My daughter requested, “Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelu, Hallelujah” — an exhausting, knee-wrecker of a song. Every other line requires you to stand up and then quickly sit back down. And, as lively as The Herrick House residents were, a stand-up-sit-down song wasn’t exactly up their alley, so our church group supplied the motions.

Up we went for the “hallelus,” back down for, “Praise ye the Lord.”

Stand up. Sit down. Stand up. Sit down.

Whew! It was warm, warm with a touch of roasting. On top of that, as I dropped for a sit-down, my youngest daughter was no longer under the table.

Stand up.

Where was she? Sit down. “Mommy! See fishes!!!!”

Ah yes. Across the lobby by the fish tank. By the time I managed to pick my way through the standing and sitting, not to mention a few sturdy canes and walkers, she had made a most exciting discovery: The Herrick House had long, colorful, carpeted, hallways. There was only one option: She began to run.

I had a moment to glance back to make sure my oldest daughter was OK singing with the group, and then I took off in pursuit.

When I finally caught up with my little runner, she had dashed into the dining room, darted around several, fully-set, tables, and then gleefully shot off into a side alcove. We found ourselves in a room with a single, long, table. It was set for royalty. There were layers of fine china, crystal and silver all arranged just so, and just at the edge. I broke into a sweat while diving down to grab my daughter as she reached for the shiny, sparkly things.

Back in the lobby I could hear them singing the hymn, ‘Great is Thy Faithfulness’ and I attempted to join in as we jogged back through. “Summer and winter and spring-time and harvest. Sun, moon and...”

“Mommy! Catch! Meeee!”

My exclamation button isn’t stuck — she only has one volume, and it’s hearing-aid blowing. I scanned the group to see if anyone was grabbing their ears. All seemed well, and a few of the women even gave me knowing smiles as if to say, “Don’t worry about it.” Or did they mean, “Oh dear, you’ve sweated through your blouse and your child has just run off down another hallway.”

Down the next hallway we went. This time my toddler discovered the breakfast nook, the beauty salon and a game room. I discovered that wearing synthetic fibers in a highly heated, assisted-residence facility was a bad combination.

Finally I heard strains of Amazing Grace — almost always the final song at any church event. I corralled my 18-month-old back to the lobby in time to watch my older daughter doing a great job. The residents were kind and patient and pretended to need her help finding the right pages; she, in turn, was happy to oblige.

As we watched, one of the women leaned over and smiled at my youngest daughter, momentarily still. “She obviously keeps you busy, but, really, she stole the show.”

I laughed. That was one way to put it. Another way might be that we had delivered on our promise to bring energy and enthusiasm and what my daughter actually stole were a few grey puzzle pieces.

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