Cabrillo program shows how to care for relatives

By JOHN SAMMON
newsroom@santacruzsentinel.com

Caring for an elderly, disabled or sick relative at home may be your only option given today’s cost of nursing facilities, but if you’re the caregiver, it can be the biggest challenge of your life. You’re facing burnout and stress.

“The challenges can be huge,” said Anji Buckner, coordinator of the caregiver training series at Cabrillo College Extension. “A growing number of people want to be at home and not in a skilled nursing facility. It’s also much less expensive to keep somebody at home.”

The course teaches students how to care for a disabled or elderly relative at home without exhausting themselves.

“You can still get exhausted, but we show you how to get through it, and identify the resources you’ll need,” Buckner added.

Approximately 44 million Americans provide 37 billion hours of unpaid care per year for family members with chronic illnesses or conditions. The majority of caregivers are middle-aged females who also work a job outside the home, and who provide 20 unpaid hours per week caring for a parent.

Buckner said home care is coming back in vogue due to the expense of managed care and fewer available health and social services.

The caregiver program provides basic hands-on training in how to care for and bathe a senior or disabled person at home, plus numerous other skills, how to cook and clean for someone with special needs, how to transport a senior to the doctor, how to make medical appointments and talk to doctors about the condition of a patient.

“We use mannequins in the training, so it’s hands-on and feels real,” Buckner said.

Buckner, who has a master’s degree in public health from San Jose State, said the idea for the program came about after an assessment showed that instruction was needed for at-home caregivers and those who wanted to be.

“We talked to seniors in the community and health agencies,” she recalled. “We asked, how can we help? The idea was to develop a program for community colleges.”

Grant funding got the program started three years ago and it has been running ever since from enrollment fees. The curriculum has 10 teachers who are experts in their fields, and includes making end-of-life decisions.

“It’s challenging enough caring for someone around the clock and giving them their medications and transporting them,” Buckner noted. “The big issue for care givers is burnout. We show you how to avoid it.”

The program partners with a number of local health and seniors organizations including Hospice of Santa Cruz, Elder-day Adult Day Health Center, Health Projects Center, Seniors Council, Lifespan Care Management Agency and Visiting Angels Living Assistance.

Scott Newland, a student in the program who lives in Soquel, said he completed the course last November.

“I have a couple relatives getting up in age and one had a stroke,” he said. “I wanted to learn what to do if they became incapacitated, and I learned how to change bed sheets and bed pads or give a sponge bath. It’s great because I feel now like I can step up and help out.”

Nancy Zafares of Aptos said she took the course because her mother was aging.

“I wanted to learn the basics,” she said, “like how to lift them up out of bed. The course is not just physical, but psychological and emotional. You learn for example about Alzheimer’s and dementia, how someone with it can lose their most recent memories first. You learn how much patience is needed, how you need to slow down when you deal with someone like that.

“It’s a great course,” she added.