

FIRST PERSON

doctor love

Rather than pursue a career in medicine, *Anna Johnston* followed her heart.

I often wonder if I am the only person in the world to forgo a career in medicine to become the activities coordinator at a nursing home. Did anyone else go from reading drug charts and monitoring blood pressure to reading out bingo numbers and monitoring balloon tennis? I did, and it was the best decision I ever made.

My father was a wonderful doctor, and I always aspired to be like him and worked hard to get into medicine. While my fellow med students were fascinated by cadaver dissection and pharmacology, I was struck by the number of older patients who were socially isolated and the tangible effect this had on both their mental and physical health. In medicine, we learnt how to keep people alive, yet I saw so many who had a pulse but were not really living. A defibrillator could keep a heart beating yet could never give it someone or something to beat for.

I was shocked to learn that loneliness is as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day and, in older adults, increases dementia or cardiovascular disease by up to 50 per cent. My news feed and TV screen were crowded with ads for vitamin supplements and healthy meal delivery services. Where was the ad that shows an isolated person whose brain and arteries are deteriorating, not from saturated fats but from being lonely?

The more I knew, the more I wanted to be a part of prevention rather than treatment, to prepare rather than repair. Having enjoyed a close relationship with all of my grandparents and even my great-grandfather, I was drawn to work with older people (and not just because we shared the same taste in music and a strong preference for eating dinner at 5pm). I transferred to a Health Promotion degree and developed a local government program teaching older widowed men how to cook. This resulted in a decrease in Meals on Wheels services but, more importantly, an increase in self-esteem and social connectedness in the men



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who formed friendships and proudly hosted their families for dinner because they could now cook the Sunday roast.

After my grandfather and best friend Fred was diagnosed with dementia, I followed my heart into his nursing home, where I took the job of social support coordinator. Despite sharing a home with a hundred other residents, rates of social isolation and depression were sky-high. When someone moves into an aged care facility, the most valuable thing they leave behind is not their home

or belongings but their community, sense of identity and purpose.

Knowing my grandfather so well, it was easy to find ways of connecting him to the life he knew before. Pa was a wordsmith and an inspiration to me as a writer. Right until his early 80s, he wrote beautiful prose for my gorgeous grandmother, Dawn. When dementia took away that ability, I helped him write to her. A joyful baritone, he was one of the most valued members of the residents' choir and I adored belting

out our favourite tunes from *Pirates of Penzance* together as I wheeled him down the hall. Seeing the difference this made in my grandfather, I aimed to help all residents find creative ways of fostering relationships and purpose, regardless of their physical health or dementia diagnosis. I became a seeker of connection and hunted for pockets of joy in the darkness, passionate about challenging assumptions of what older people enjoy and are capable of. After all, just because life ends in a nursing home, living doesn't have to.

We brought the residents into the decision-making process, resulting in a vibrant program, including social media classes that connected residents with their grandchildren. I'll never forget a particular gentleman with dementia who loved sketching and animals. Ignoring the assumption that because he could no longer feed himself, he could no longer draw, we put a pencil in his hand. His resulting sketch of a horse remains the most moving piece of art I have ever seen.

Shortly after my grandfather died, an injury left me unable to return to aged care, so I began to write about it, channelling my experience onto the page. As in life, older people are often overlooked, stereotyped or simply invisible in the arts. I wanted to create not just an elderly character but an elderly hero who highlights the importance of companionship and purpose and shows that worth, unlike eyesight, does not diminish with age.

I will always have the utmost respect for wonderful doctors like my dad, but I've never regretted my decision not to become one. I'll never be able to write scripts for penicillin, but I hope that through my experience in aged care, I will write books that dispense something that also holds the power to save lives: love and connection. •

The Borrowed Life of Frederick Fife (Penguin Random House) by Anna Johnston is out now.