

Thank you, Mr. Vice President

By Debbie Selsavage, CDP

My partner Ed and I were recently visiting a memory care community. During these visits, I like to try to meet and talk with as many residents as possible. I extend my hand, palm up, and say, "Hi, my name is Debbie, and you are?" Usually, they will break into a smile before I have even completed the sentence. Some of them are unable to respond through language, but they always respond through their eyes and their smile.

On this occasion, I approached a man who was sitting at a lunchroom table, and extended my hand. But before I could even speak, he looked at my name tag, and with precise diction said, "You are Debbie Selsavage." This threw me. You cannot imagine how many people without dementia can't manage to pronounce my name, and here was this man with dementia pronouncing it with the correctness and clarity of some kind of media professional!

I learned his name was Doug, and I began to inquire about his history and his interests. Early in our conversation, Doug used the word "recidivism," again with perfect diction. I knew right away that Doug was an educated man with an interesting past. Turns out, he had worked at a senior level in social services in Florida state government. But I did not yet know the half of it!

I pressed on and asked Doug what else he had done, and he responded with confidence and a certain amount of surprise that I had not already recognized him, "Well, I was Vice President of the United States!"

Okay, now I realized I might be out of my depth, and I called my partner Ed over to meet Doug. Ed is fifteen years older than I am and pays more attention to politics. Ed once told me that he could distinctly remember his first political argument. He was nine years old, and got into it with some kid about whether to vote for Eisenhower or Stevenson. He recalled, with contempt, this kid couldn't even pronounce Eisenhower's name! He kept calling him 'Heidenhower!'"

Ed sat down with Doug, learned of his Vice-Presidency, and said, without skipping a beat, "For whom were you, Vice President?" to which Doug responded, "Johnson." And the two of them were off to the races, discussing political history, according to the Book of Doug. They talked for probably 45 minutes, during which Ed learned that the real reason Johnson did not run for a full second term was because he had chosen someone other than Doug

as his running mate, and this, according to Doug, was a fatal political error. Doug concluded the discussion: "There are still many people who want me to run now, but I won't do it because I do not want to stand in the way of a Goldwater victory!"

Doug was a reminder to us that people with dementia often live in a different reality. But their reality is as valid for them as ours is for us, and often it is a great deal more fascinating than the lives we live!

Is there a single reason under the sun that we should correct them or tell them they are wrong? No, there is not. People like Doug deserve to be listened to and encouraged, because validation contributes to their self-esteem and quality of life. Quality of life is all we can give them, because we cannot cure or reverse their disease.

And they, like the rest of us, deserve the best!

Debbie Selsavage is a Certified Trainer and Consultant in the Positive Approach to Care®, and a Certified Dementia Practitioner. Her company, Coping with Dementia LLC, is dedicated to making life better for individuals living with dementia. Contact Debbie at deb@coping.today to learn about free support groups on line.