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Paying attention and paying tribute to a father and a soldier

August 15, 2015, marks the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII. With cooperation from our friends at the Keep the Spirit of '45 Alive! organization, ASA and **Aging Today** will help mark the occasion with a series of stories leading up to the anniversary.

As Roland Joseph Champagne idolizes his father, who was an ambulance driver in WWI, so too does Roland Mark Champagne love and respect his dad, who earned a purple heart in WWII's Battle of Okinawa. The elder Champagne now lives in a memory care unit of an assisted living facility in San Diego. The younger Champagne, 54 (who sometimes goes by Mark to prevent confusion), is a clinical study director at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego. Most nights after work, he stops by to visit his father.

His soon-to-be 90-year-old father has had Alzheimer's for about 10 years and although he seems to recognize his son, he isn't always certain who Mark is. That doesn't keep him from remarking to others, "He's a really nice guy." Which is true, especially if one considers the effort and love Mark has put into communicating with his dad.

Memory Walls, Books and Certificates

To engage him in conversation, and pay him tribute, Mark has created an Honor Wall of photos of his dad's past—from pictures of his dad's parents in their youth to Roland's service in WWII—all on Velcro-backed paper that adheres to the wall and can be easily taken down and passed around as conversation pieces.

Mark realized early on the photos were better off as copies outside glass frames, so there's no worry over breakage or damage. "My dad is extremely proud of his army experience, so there he is, up on the wall, in uniform," he says.

While helping to move his parents, Mark discovered shoeboxes with hundreds of letters from his father during WWII to his parents, brothers and sisters, including colorful postcards from his army training days. There were letters from Okinawa and the Philippines, and Mark admits at first he zeroed in on the exciting ones, looking for combat action.

Then he began to read them all. "I realized how much I was learning about my dad, how he was fresh out of high school when he went into the war, and I could see the progression in his maturity and how he changed over the course of three years," says Mark.

"I saw that similar to how we have yearbooks from high school or college, [that generation] was in combat," Mark says, describing his inspiration for making a memory book. He also had the bright idea to caption the photos from his father's viewpoint, which helps trigger his dad's memories. This particular memory book runs to almost 70 pages. And that's just Volume 1—there are two others of equal or greater length, detailing his father's battalion as it trains in Hawaii and then lands in, and eventually liberates, the Philippines.

“Sometimes the look on his face will be much more alert, you can tell he’s with it,” Mark says about the time his dad spends with the books. And when he gets to a photo of his dad, he’ll say, “That’s my dad, he was a good one!”

Spreading the Word on Memory Books

When he’s not directing clinical trials or spending quality time with his dad, Mark volunteers at the Veterans Museum & Memorial Center in San Diego. That’s where he met Warren Hegg, who runs the Keep the Spirit of ’45 Alive! campaign, and who invited Mark to a conference earlier this year. Mark gave a short presentation detailing how to make an Honor Wall or memory book.

At first, Mark wondered why he was singled out because he wasn’t part of a national group, but then he realized that there’s a huge population of veterans out there who need the type of individual attention he gives his dad.

Mark says with relatively little effort, volunteers—from high school students to adults of any age—can figure out the war background of vets in nearby assisted living facilities or nursing homes. They then can print photos from where the vets served during WWII to help engage the vets in conversation.

He also recommends making “Certificates of Appreciation” for their service. He makes them for his dad, and has them signed by friends at work who are captains and commanders in the Navy. “They make him so happy and proud,” Mark says.

“I ended my [Spirit of ’45] presentation by saying that there are an estimated 1.6 million WWII veterans still with us, and that conservative estimates put the percentage of people over the age of 85 with some type and level of dementia at 50; therefore, we are talking about 800,000 WWII veterans who are still with us and have some form of dementia.

“Let us not forget that population as we celebrate the upcoming 70th anniversary of the end of WWII.” ■