

Grandma's Cinnamon Buns

Category: Dementia

written by Lynn O'Donnell | March 11, 2025

Grandma was famous in our family for her cinnamon buns. Born in 1900, she was of the age of never following a recipe. My sister and I would ask her how to make cinnamon buns, and all we got was "watch me." We wish we had watched more closely and taken notes.

When Grandma announced she was moving to assisted living, we were surprised, as she appeared to still have good health other than somewhat weak legs and poor hearing. Her cognition seemed fine, and we never worried about her living alone. But now in her eighties, her older siblings had passed, and her youngest sister lived four hours away. So when she chose a group home owned by a great-niece, we thought all would be well.

Shockingly, not long after her move, she began what would become a sharp and alarming decline in her cognition. Looking back with my eye as a nurse, I believe her move to a new place where she lost her independence and her ability to make her own meals—including those delicious cinnamon buns—was just too jarring. It was a lovely home, but the constant noise all around—from televisions and people—was distracting and stressful. Because of the noise, and her poor hearing, she had trouble following follow conversations with the other residents.

Before long, my grandmother became severely paranoid and was moved from the group home to a psychiatric hospital which did nothing to help her. Ultimately she was moved to a nursing home where she was now even more confused, paranoid and angry. She often screamed at caregivers. She was declared incompetent, and when she no longer was able to take nutrition orally, her guardian allowed a PEG tube to be placed without anyone consulting me or my sister. Oh how I wish she could have been placed in hospice care and allowed to pass with dignity. Instead, at age 93, she passed away in a dismal nursing home.

Grandma was never able to teach me how to make her famous cinnamon buns, but she taught me what a dignified death should look like. I have used that experience in my nursing career to counsel families in similar situations. I just wish I could have learned that recipe.

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