



Deanne Graham and Michele Waterworth

For Deanne, caregiving didn't begin in adulthood. It began at just 16 when her family first met Tanya. At that time, Tanya was just over a year and had spent most of her life in hospital before being placed in an institution. Born with complex medical needs and frequent grand mal seizures, she was frail and believed to be both deaf and blind.


With an uncertain life expectancy and too young to remain in the institution, Children's Aid began searching for a foster family. It was then that Deanne's older sister, Darlene would first meet Tanya during her nursing placement and learn about her experience. Shortly after, Deanne's parents also met Tanya and decided to bring her home.

They did not see a child defined by limitations, but a sweet girl the whole family instantly fell in love with. While the transition wasn't easy, with patience they began to understand Tanya's cues and how to comfort her. Then, eight months later, something remarkable happened when they saw that Tanya began tracking movement with her eyes and realized she could see. In that moment, a new world opened for Tanya and the entire family.

For the next 33 years, Deanne's parents devoted themselves to her care and hands on support she needed. When their mother's health declined, Deanne and her wife Michele moved Tanya into their home, a full circle moment as her son JJ was then 16, the same age Deanne was when Tanya first entered their lives.

Overnight their lives changed. While balancing full time careers and education and JJ's busy sports schedule, they also adapted their home, adding ramps and accommodating equipment, creating space and privacy for Tanya and her support workers. As Tanya requires constant care and cannot be left alone, making their home one of coordination, vigilance and deep commitment was important. They brought Tanya everywhere possible, even to JJ's sporting events, navigating spaces not designed for accessibility.

It wasn't easy in those early days, but being together mattered. Because Tanya cannot speak or move independently, she relies entirely on others for her care and advocacy. At just 65 lbs, she's especially vulnerable, where even a small issue can quickly become serious.



Deanna and Michele ensure that Tanya is always surrounded by people who understand her. Together they are her voice, and over time, they've built strong relationships with support workers, some of whom have been with the family for years. Still, with new staff require ongoing guidance explaining, teaching and ensuring Tanya's care is understood in a system that isn't always designed for someone like her. They advocate across hospitals, agencies, and programs and have developed clear tools like laminated guides and visuals to help others provide consistent, informed care. They also encourage connection, ensuring anyone that enters Tanya's world understands not just her needs, but her humanity.

Today, nearly 15 years into their caregiving journey, Deanne and Michele continue to lead with love, patience, humor and remarkable expertise. JJ, now 30, remains closely connected, bringing joy to Tanya with every visit. With Deanne deciding to retire early to provide primary care duties to Tanya, Michele continues her work as an educational assistant supporting children with autism that are also non-verbal, carrying her deep empathy and compassion in both her home and in her career. They strive to give Tanya experiences like exploring the many events in and around Peterborough. They want to give her a full life and encourage her independence, which is why it's important for Tanya to get out on her own with her support workers into the community, attending library programs or trips to the mall or local park.

Even more impressive, in encouraging Tanya's independence, over the last several years she's taken handy transit on her own to and from her weekly day program. Something truly remarkable given her level of need. At home it's often the simplest things that bring her happiness. Tanya enjoys anything Christmas and country music, and while Deanne and Michele are not particularly fans of country music, they'll put it on knowing how much Tanya enjoys it.

But caregiving at this level comes with sacrifice. Respite is rare and time away is unpredictable, with plans often changing in an instant. And in order for them to get away for even a weekend, it requires three to four workers from different organizations. However, Deanne and Michele make the most of what they can, often joking that going for a drive to grab a coffee or talk is their typical date night. They have completely devoted their lives to caring for Tanya.

It wasn't until last year, with the support from Darlene, that Deanne and Michele were able to take their first extended vacation in nearly a decade. A chance to rest and reconnect.

In her acknowledgement and submission, care coordinator, Cindy, commented on how dedicated Deanne and Michele are to managing Tanya's care. She shared, "I can't think of any two people that work better as a team. You can truly feel the love in this home."

Thank you for going Above and Beyond!