

BY ANDY LEVY-AJZENKOPF



Photo courtesy of Andrea & Wayne Nathanson

ANDREA & WAYNE NATHANSON

reaching out
and reaching in

Pain, suffering, and hopelessness are three concepts that far too many families experience when dealing with the failing health of a loved one. And when that loved one is an aging parent, the resulting turmoil in their child's life can be overwhelming. Schedules must be changed. Routines disrupted. Plans put on hold. And the inevitable, daunting questions arise: How best to care for them? Whom to turn to for guidance and advice? Where to find the space to enjoy the time that remains with a father or mother? For Toronto husband and wife team Andrea and Wayne Nathanson, the answer was to start their own company, Qualicare.

Combining Wayne's 20-plus years of business acumen with Andrea's career nursing experiences, the Nathansons' primary focus is to provide top-notch, individual healthcare management to families who want to know what their best options are for their ailing loved ones. Qualicare helps coordinate clients' healthcare needs across the board by providing complementary services either within an institution or with home-based care. Rigorously screened, qualified nurses assure clients get the care they need. It's a service designed to achieve two main goals: augmented quality of life for the infirm and peace of mind for their overburdened families.

"What we're offering is different than what the government is offering. We're offering personalized healthcare. All our case managers are nurses, so you have someone who is medically proficient who can orchestrate and coordinate care," says Wayne, Qualicare's president. "The [Canadian] government offers system-based healthcare. Under that system, you're less of an individual and more of a patient being treated by the system. We look at every person as an individual and we customize, jointly with the government, what we can do to make individuals' situations better, more comfortable, more dignified, and more cost efficient." Andrea, Qualicare's executive director, qualifies her husband's statement. "Our client is never just one person; it's their spouse, kids, and relatives," she says.

Carol Wise, a former contributor to *Lifestyles*, who recently passed away after battling cancer for four years, had this to say before she died. "Andrea has coordinated all of my care and without her, I don't know how I would have managed. She's been my angel. She has helped me every step of the way."

It's this sympathetic, humane approach to treating the needs of the elderly and their families that has helped this husband-and-wife team earn a reputation for kindness. The Nathansons have put together a staff of experienced caregivers who help families navigate through the red tape of an

overwhelming healthcare system and provide guidance to forlorn clients. Whether it's administering medication at home, meeting with doctors, sourcing and purchasing lifesaving equipment, or even just providing transportation to clients who want to attend one last ceremony at their local *shul*, Qualicare is committed to meeting their needs. For Andrea, the acknowledged "heart" of the business, it is more than just a job, it's a *mitzvah*.

Whereas Wayne is more comfortable dealing with the numbers, Andrea, a career registered nurse, jumps headlong into each case wearing her emotions on her sleeve. Though many of her clients require palliative care, she fearlessly travels down that "end-of-life" road right alongside them. "Being in somebody's life, being allowed into somebody's world like we are, is a gift. And you see the richest part of the person," she says. "Yes, it's emotional and I cry...but if I wasn't in their world or didn't have any influence in there, it would be a lot worse for them." It is this attitude that helps her get through the rough times, and for which the families that have come in contact with Qualicare are forever grateful.

"I lose people and we have very meaningful good-byes. I believe that many of these people are still connected to me," she admits. "Their spirits are very strong. The relationships that we've formed are so intense and so close. Sure, maybe their time is short, but what is 'short'? It's a lifetime in three weeks sometimes."

The Nathansons' work is all about ensuring quality time for and with loved ones. But their compassionate sensibilities didn't just happen by accident. They are no strangers to familial

heartache. The concept for Qualicare emerged out of a period of grief and confusion for both partners.

Wayne, always soft-spoken and reflective, recounts how they dedicated the business to his late father, Bernard "Nardy" Nathanson. The senior Nathanson passed away in 1999 after a hard battle with Lou Gehrig's disease. While tending to him, Wayne and Andrea came face to face with pragmatic problems they never anticipated.



The Nathanson family.

They had to move his parents to Toronto from their home in Halifax in order to provide better care. Wayne attended to selling off his parents' home and car, frequently flying back to Halifax to do so. "The situation that we lived through with my father, where so many things had to happen...my parents didn't want to move..." Wayne trails off, shaking his head, finding it difficult to relive those memories. Bringing his parents to Toronto touched off a sequence of care management impediments that eventually led to the formation of Qualicare.

"Andrea contributed to managing his care, dealing with a myriad of doctors, programs, and challenges for his complex disease," says Wayne. "Every day there was a new obstacle that you had to educate yourself to deal with and handle. If it weren't for her medical expertise, it would have

been much worse for him." That's when the idea of personalized healthcare management as a business hit them. If other families were experiencing the anguish they were experiencing, why not try and help them? It was a revelation.

"To be able to rely on that kind of expertise while so many changes were happening in the family's life and the way everyone conducted themselves on a daily basis...something like

[Andrea's management] had a tremendous impact," recalls Wayne. His wife concurs.

"There were 40 people involved in Mr. Nathanson's case at the end of his life," she says. "And every single one of those people had an important role. Friends, family, and volunteers. As horrible as it was to lose such a wonderful man, the gains were huge." Not only did his case inspire Qualicare, it also forever changed the way both

Nathansons lived their lives.

Even prior to his father's illness, Wayne and Andrea both recall experiencing the beginnings of a shift in life perspective. They had two young children (at the time) and their careers were firmly established. Wayne was a successful executive working for IBM in the technology sector and traveling more than 120 days a year and was seriously considering an offer to relocate the family to Singapore as part of a company promotion. Meanwhile, Andrea had steady employment as an occupational health nurse for a private company. Everything seemed to be playing out as it should, but something didn't feel right. The reasons for their uneasiness became clear during the three years they cared for his father.

"Before my father passed away, I was disconnected from myself, and so was Andrea," says Wayne. Andrea animatedly recalls a particular instance

Photo courtesy of Andrea & Wayne Nathanson

that helped put their lives into context. "I remember one day Wayne got home from a trip. He'd been sitting beside a guy on the plane and he said, 'I met the greatest guy on the plane today! He's such a cool guy! And he travels 250 days a year!' So I looked at him and asked, 'This is your role model now?' He was never home," she says. In the aftermath of his father's death the Nathansons realized that their lifestyles and daily worries seemed trivial compared to what really mattered: family and each other. That's when they found a different life path and turned their travels inward.

"We've become more religious over the last six years," says Wayne. In fact, they have embraced Judaism as *ba'alei t'shuva*. This rediscovered spirituality has helped stabilize their lives, reinvigorate their marriage, and has also been incorporated into their work.

Initially, they ran their business from their home and were on-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It was hectic and sometimes disruptive for their young family. Plus, the Nathansons found that they were burning out. Religion has helped mitigate that, somewhat. Instead, they now work 24 hours a day but "only" six days a week because of *Shabbat*, when the Nathansons take a well-deserved break to recharge and decompress so they can resume their work more effectively. And they now have separate business offices outside the house, where they can better serve their clientele. What's more, their children are also encouraged to participate and are developing a sense of *chesed* (kindness) through Qualicare's clients.

"I'm trying to teach them acts of

kindness they can do when someone is unwell to help us along," says Andrea. "We incorporate spirituality into ways we can help all our clients. Whether it's baking challah for our clients or having clients into our *sukkah*."

It's clear the Nathansons are now content to live their lives and operate their business according to the compassionate tenets of the Torah. Ironic, then, that Qualicare was launched on a day that was rife with heartless action: September 11th, 2001.



Qualicare staff meeting.

To hear Wayne tell it, that fateful day was both surreal and comical. "I registered the website at 8:54 A.M. that day and I came rushing upstairs to tell Andrea, 'We have a website! We're in business!' and she's watching TV. I'm all action-oriented and excited and she's watching TV?!" he says, mimicking his exasperation at the time. "I'm thinking, 'This is who I'm going into business with?'" It took him a few moments, as it did most of the world, to truly understand what was being shown.

Andrea, ever the optimist, chose to view that infamous day in a positive light. "As something was coming down, something else that was all about truth and kindness and compassion was coming up," she says, referring to their then-fledgling business. And they have made a difference.

With Wayne's expertise as a marketer and businessman and Andrea's

exceptional abilities as a nurse, Qualicare is a much-sought-after service, earning them rave reviews and emotional thanks from families all over Toronto. But it hasn't just helped others—the Nathansons have learned a lot about themselves, too.

"I've never been in a business that has been so gratifying," says Wayne. "In the technology world there were small wins and contributions that made a difference...but gratifying in the way that Qualicare has helped people?"

There was nothing like that in my other work." And he's proud of the company they have built. "We've been able to find good people. We have more than 75 people in our staffing pool. Our people are the key. We said from the very beginning that we'd look after our people so they'd look after our clients," he says.

He hopes to extend the reach of Qualicare in the next few years to help even more families nationwide. It's clear he has found his true calling.

For her part, Andrea continues to love the work she does. Qualicare is an integral part of her life. She sits quietly for a moment and thinks hard before finally concluding our interview with the following. "Our business is completely holistic. It starts with Wayne and I, and extends to our clients. We offer them whatever we have. There's nothing that we won't do for them," she says sincerely. "No matter what the diagnosis is, we will find a light in it and move toward that light." To which all of their grateful clients can only respond, "Amen." lifestyles

For more information on Qualicare and the wonderful services they provide, please visit their website at www.qualicare.ca.