

A Conversation with Randee Smith by Koko Kawasaki, M.A., Gerontology



"I have a very strong background in logistics management. At age 3, I stood in front of the door and asked my mother my checklist of questions: Do you have your house keys, your car keys, your lighter, your cigarettes, your purse, etc.? I knew that anything she forgot, she would send me back to find it. So, I learned how to anticipate at a very young age."

– **Randee Smith, Geriatric Care Manager and Owner of Autumn Transitions**

Recently, I had the pleasure of talking to Randee Smith, owner of Autumn Transitions, an eldercare consulting and geriatric care management company. A self-confessed "out-of-the-box managerial mongrel," Randee's impressive list of career accomplishments include producing feature films, beauty pageants, and cable television shows, serving on the executive staff of a Hollywood film director, and working in a marketing agency in high-tech Silicon Valley. Although these activities seem dissimilar, each required the assessing of needs and finding solutions, often under time constraints. As a consequence, these varied positions fine-tuned Randee's unique ability to create order out of chaos.

Prior to becoming a geriatric care manager (in 2007), Randee managed a broad range of care needs for her in-laws who had both suffered debilitating strokes. After 10 years of assisting her in-laws, others undergoing similar situations with loved ones began seeking her advice. Seeing the positive impact she had on peoples' lives, Randee experienced a sense of peace, joy, and tremendous satisfaction. Transitioning towards a geriatric care management career, therefore, seemed to be a natural segue.

Note: To learn more about geriatric care managers, and what they do, The National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers has helpful information on their (<http://www.caremanager.org>) website (<http://www.caremanager.org>).

A Day in Her Life

Randee maintains a full schedule where no two days are alike. In an earlier itinerary from one day in her calendar, Randee's workday started at 7:30am checking email and voicemail, and to make follow-up phone calls. Next, Randee attended a physical therapy session in a client's home, followed by a visit to Stanford Hospital to establish rapport with a new, soon-to-be-discharged client. Afterward, Randee headed to an assisted living residence to check in with a client who had recently moved in, and to help him establish an exercise routine. Later, a pipeline phone call was made to a care manager on the East Coast to ensure a smooth transition for an elder client moving from Washington DC to San Jose. After the call, Randee picked up a client for a scheduled appointment with a medical specialist. Clearly, Randee's work goes beyond the usual 9 to 5, and she is available 24/7 for whatever needs may arise.

Q & A with Randee

What do you find is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

Seeing the difference that the service makes in peoples' lives is the most rewarding, and you can't have that unless you work with people. In working with someone immediately after a stroke, for example, sometimes they can look like they have given up. Seeing them come back to life because you placed loving people by their side giving them the right amount of exercise, nutrition, medicine and time is satisfying. Alternative thinking may not be for everyone, but when I read about something new, like coconut oil being used to help with cognition, I share it with the client's doctor. If the doctor thinks its okay, then we start incorporating it. Things like that give me a great deal of satisfaction.

What are some challenges?

Family members who don't understand what loved ones are experiencing, and getting children to have realistic expectations of their parents. When you're 85, your values and priorities are very different from when you're 55. In Silicon Valley, we're used to identifying a problem, coming up with a solution, and then walking away. Eldercare is not about that. Eldercare is trial and error, patience, anticipation, and compassion. It's a lot of soft skills that are built around an infrastructure of tactical service offerings.

There's a special book written to teach people how to communicate with seniors. Literally, it's called How to Say it to Seniors, and it's written by David Solie. I recommend that to every single adult child I talk to. It's easy to read, and has lots of common sense advice to assist communications between younger and older people.

What is your advice on families who are caring for elder loved ones?

The Alzheimer's Association has an excellent 6-week course called the Savvy Caregiver that people can take. It will give them many skills to put in their toolkit when working with parents and grandparents. In the digital age, they could also research as much as possible online. For example, if it's Parkinson's that you're dealing with, learn as much as you can about it. Educate yourself about the conditions your loved ones have to live with, and learn how to talk to doctors.

Most doctors nowadays will schedule 20 minutes. If you need more time, make sure that the scheduling desk person knows this. Go in with a list of observations and concerns, and bring every single medicine and over the counter drug that your loved one is taking. I make an agenda for every appointment and hand it to the doctor when we walk in so they know what I want to cover.

What do you look for when hiring an in-home care company for your clients?

When I first get on the phone with the spokesperson, or communicate by email, there is a “vibe” I get. Much of my work is intuitive, and I trust my gut feelings. They have to be easy to work with and they have to have a very strong customer service ethic. Typically, when I make matches for my clients, I like to pre-interview caregivers in the agency’s office. I don’t want the agency to choose, I prefer to do it myself. I interview 3-5 caregivers, and create 30-second interviews where each person shares whatever they wish. I show these videos to the clients so they can have a sense of the caregivers’ personalities.

Can you share a healthy aging tip with us?

Yes, and it’s nothing new. I can tell you that my ninety-year-old-plus clients who are slim, are more self-sufficient, and they have done lots of walking in their lives. My overweight clients in that age group are using walkers and wheelchairs, have multiple chronic conditions and did not exercise. Exercise is the primary way to stay healthy, and the “buzz” in many newsletters I receive emphasize the importance of exercise as well. When I last visited a neurologist with a client who has a diagnosis of Alzheimer’s, the neurologist told us that exercise would do him more good than any medication he was taking for this disease. So, if I read the road signs, exercise, exercise, exercise is the key!

Randee Smith is the owner of Autumn Transitions and provides services for families throughout the Bay Area. She is a Certified Senior Advisor and a member of the National Association of Geriatric Care Managers.

For more information, visit Randee’s website at www.autumntransitions.com

