

# Normandy Care Center

## Resident Of the Month

### *Dana Weston*

Dana LaFern Swonger Weston was born at the tail end of the Great Depression and a few years before the start of World War II when Hitler was already rallying. Her father Floyd was a pharmaceutical salesman, and her mother Fern graduated in the same high school class in a rural Indiana town. Family roots in America go so far back that no one knows for sure when their immigration from Europe took place, but family says they can trace the family tree to the late 1700s.

World War II threw everyone into chaos. Floyd was so concerned about the Nazis in his former homeland of Germany that he joined the war and eventually became a tank commander in the Alsace Region near the French border. At home, Fern did double duty as a mother and pharmaceutical salesman.

In the years after the war, Dana had a typical childhood. Her pre-teen years were spent in Lima, where we know she made good friends because Dana's daughters remember visiting them decades later when they were the same age. There's reason to believe she learned to skate, ride a bike, and played jacks.

During high school, the Swongers lived in Canton and Mom attended Lehman and eventually McKinley High School. It was there that she met Walt Weston, a football player and good student, a quiet and big guy who fell in love with her when they were in Methodist Youth Fellowship together. Her soon-to-be boyfriend was enchanted when the beautiful young woman sat on his lap in the back of a car while on their way to Christmas caroling.

When Walt went off to Case Western University in Cleveland to study engineering, Dana took the bus up on weekends. There was never any doubt that they would be together, and during the summer after Dana graduated from high school, in 1956, Dana married Walt against her father's wishes, for her new husband had dropped out of engineering school and was now planning to be a minister. The first years of their married life took Walt off to college and then to seminary while Dana worked as a secretary.

The couple soon had three daughters. Claudia was born in 1959 while Walt was a student at Boston Theological School, Beth was born in 1961 when Walt was a student pastor in Killbuck and attending Oberlin Theological School, and Faith was born in Conneaut in 1963 during Walt's tenure at his first church as a full pastor.

Conneaut, just west of the Pennsylvania border, was a small town surrounded by farms, and the parsonage was just across the parking lot from the church. Across the street from the church was one of the town's firehouses, and because Walt became a volunteer fireman, every time the alarm sounded, he ran off to gear up and jump onto the fire engine. Once when a fire raged in fields south of town, Dana piled her daughters in the car and took sandwiches out to the men, the fires not too distant. Another time, when Walt was spending the night at one of the firehouses near Lake Erie, the car almost became submerged in an underpass when Dana was trying to visit in a rainstorm.

As a minister's wife, Dana held women's group meetings at home and taught her daughters how to serve food on glass trays with grooves for teacups. She made sure all her daughters knew how to clean—every Saturday morning was cleaning time. One of Claudia's earliest memories is of living in the house in Alliance, when she was about four, and stepping around the fabric laid out on the floor with patterns pinned to it as Mom cut the fabric to make clothes. Dana didn't make all her daughters' clothes, but she sometimes took on projects, like Easter dresses with matching lined spring coats, all the same but in different sizes.

It was the 1960s, and the reason for the Vietnam War was dwindling. Walt's sermons for peace and equality landed the family in an urban inner-city black church in Akron in 1968, the summer after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. Walt saw it as a challenge, and Dana shared his belief that they could make a difference. It must have been a real test of their marriage because their lives were often threatened, and the family was sometimes forced to pack up and drive across town to safety.

After four years, the family moved to Lorain, where Walt was a minister at Delaware Avenue United Methodist and Dana completed a degree in nursing at Lorain County Community College and began working as a labor and delivery nurse at St. Joseph Hospital. There, they made friends with church members and settled roots in the blue-collar town where the Ford Plant, US Steel, and American Shipbuilding supported most of the church's congregation. Lorain truly became home for their daughters, especially for Beth and Faith.

After ten years and three high school graduations, Dana and Walt moved on to other churches. Their daughters married and had children. Dana has six granddaughters and two grandsons, ranging in age from 37 to 21. The longest place Dana lived was Wadsworth, where she worked at Wadsworth Hospital during Walt's semi-retirement as a writer and faith healer. It was where she and Walt built and lived in their very first home. Dana coordinated the adult Sunday school and Walt lectured on wide-ranging topics. They became part of a new church community.

The couple liked to travel, but Dana was a traveler who liked to relax more than explore, and she was Walt's navigator during car trips. The couple made two cross-country camping trips with their daughters, and when the family stopped for the night, Dana set up her portable kitchen to cook dinner while the rest of the family pitched a tent or hoisted the camper top in the dying light. Their major trips were to Hawaii and the Caribbean and Mexico.

Walt had a major stroke the year they built their house in Wadsworth in 2001. He recovered quickly. Those years in their large new home were happy years of golfing, having breakfast with fellow ministers, entertaining their children and grandchildren. They celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with friends and family in 2006.

A couple of years later, as Walt's health declined, Dana's memory lapses also became a concern, and the house was sold in 2009. The couple moved to an apartment in Sheffield near LCCC, but Walt soon had to be treated for throat cancer and Dana nursed him with feeding tubes and doctor's visits until she was no longer able to do it and they moved to Our House in Westlake, then to Wesleyan Village in Elyria where Walt died from pneumonia soon after their arrival.

Dana embraced life at Wesleyan Village and while still in assisted living she walked all over the nursing homes and was vibrant and friendly and well liked. She had one close friend with whom she spent a lot of time, and she enjoyed the wonderful food, the gardens, and the activities. The memory unit at Wesleyan Village wasn't equipped to care for late-stage Alzheimer's patients, so Dana moved to Arthur's Place at The Normandy in the fall of 2018.

Beth, Faith, and Claudia are grateful that Dana seems happy and content and always in the present moment. Resilient, adaptable, accepting, Dana carved out who she was in each of the twenty places she has lived, based on her surroundings and the people around her. She had faith and trust in the goodness of people and the brightness of the future. That's still who Dana is. Those who know her at the Normandy know she likes to sing (she always sang in the choir)—look for her during Sunday church services mimicking the tunes, no longer knowing the words, but filled with joy.

