



# Bella



## Joyce Simard\*

*School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Western Sydney, Australia*

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\***Corresponding author:** Joyce Simard, School of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Western Sydney, Australia,  
Email: [joycesimard@earthlink.net](mailto:joycesimard@earthlink.net)

## Opinion

I might be a little jealous, well maybe I'm very jealous, as Bella seems to be more popular than I am. I have over 38 years of experience in long-term care, wrote a book now in its second edition on Namaste Care, a program I developed for people with advanced dementia, and I speak all over the country and now internationally. Yet, I am consistently upstaged by a shaggy dog puppet I have named Bella. Whenever she appears, everyone in the audience smiles. I don't talk for Bella, she just makes faces at the audience and at me; they love her!

When I visit resident in nursing facilities, assisted living communities and hospice patients, they usually smile at me but they give Bella huge smiles, giggles and hugs they love her! Upstaged again. Bella is an example of what so many staff and families forget, people in all stages of an irreversible dementia still like to have fun! Most like a good laugh. We see this when children and animals are around them, but most of the time these are "programmed" visits. Bill Thomas had the right idea when he developed the Eden Alternative and filled his nursing home with pets. Let's spend more time "normalizing" life for people with dementia with animals and think of ways to encourage more fun for everyone, our residents and our staff.

In spite of state rules and regulations why not have a pet in your community? Better than that, have many pets! If the regulations seem to rigid, work with your state agency to get them changed so that it is easier to have pets. When interviewing for staff, make sure they know that your "home" is really a home and has pets that staff need to be comfortable caring for as they care for their own pets.

I have met administrators and executive directors who let some staff bring pets to work with them! Some have resident's volunteers that take care of them while the staff person is working. Walking a dog around the community is the best exercise for residents and they love this responsibility. Now of course the pet needs to be healthy, have shots and large enough so residents don't trip over them. Infection control regulations must be followed but then again, that's what we do, follow regulations. Do not let this stop your home from being a "home".

One hospice I visited has a bird feeder outside every patient's room in their hospice house. It brings life and joy to patients and their families. The boy scouts made the birdhouses and volunteers, families of patients and staff make sure the feeders are filled.

We are overwhelmed with regulations and sometimes it's just too much trouble to do anything but meet them. Many long-term care communities are facing staffing shortages. That is our reality. Let's not let these challenges get in the way of having fun!

Bella is such a good example of how easy it is to bring smiles to almost everyone. This puppet is available for less than \$50. She (I named her, and decided it was a she) can easily be disinfected with a spray. Can you imagine Bella living in the nurse's station and when a resident is unable to sleep, or having problems with anxiety, Bella is the answer, not medication? Bella would be available to all staff so they can use her for a resident or maybe when they are very stressed and she accompanies them on their break.

I visited a resident who was in a nursing facility, on hospice and had just a few days to live. She spent most of these remaining days in a reclining chair looking pensively out of the window. When asked her if I could visit she welcomed me with a small smile. She took one look at Bella and laughed! The staff person I was with began to cry, as she had not seen this resident laugh for a very long time. Bella and I visited her several times a day and as she was actively dying I gave her Bella to hold. She died with her face nestled in Bella's soft fur.

My journey with Bella has taken her too many countries, Iceland, Canada, Singapore, Taiwan and the Czech Republic. I only speak English and Bella doesn't even speak! However, residents could care less about conversation they just break into smiles when she appears. They have a one-sided conversation with her and I just give them my international smile.

Please join me and so many others, who are committed to making life for the residents we care for and care about more fun. One way to help this become a reality for your community is through pets, real (I can't say not real in case Bella is reading this); create your own Bella or Bella's. Have a contest to name

your pets, have staff and residents to adopt them. Consider dogs, cats, gerbils, birds, fish (big enough for residents to see!), and have them free to roam or in a place where residents can see them. And,

be ready to have your Bella become more popular than you are! (Figure 1)



Figure 1



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