

Support for Caregivers Starting Up in Millis: Open to All Caregivers

By J.D. O'GARA

Shirley Riga knows she could have used the support.

When she was a caregiver to her daughter for 32 years, what she, and other caregivers like her, lacked, was advice and moral support.

"I took care of my daughter for 32 years, which is where my passion for caregiving comes from," says Riga. Caregiving, she says, "takes up the whole person." Riga's daughter was born with two liver diseases in utero that shaped her life.

In those 32 years, Riga learned a thing or two, and she put together some advice she'd built from life experience and from training she's taken in her book, *Tools for the Exceptional Parent of a Chronically Ill Child*.

The book is based on tools I've gleaned over the years," says Riga. "Probably the first seven years (of my daughter's life) I survived by reacting and getting her to live. We had an HMO, and I knew I had to talk to somebody, and one of my therapists suggested I start journaling just to get my feelings out."

When her daughter was

seven, the bins of journals Riga had piled up became inspiration for her book.

"One of the ideas is learning how to stay present," says Riga, who says she would worry about whether her daughter would be alive in the future, and that it was a "huge tool for me to live for day to day life."

Riga started a support group for caregivers in the 1990s, and found the thoughts she had put together in her book held true not just for parents, but for anyone serving as a caregiver.

"I want anybody who opens it to get something around it," Riga says of her book. "People can put it right to use. I needed this when I was going through it."

Now, Riga has begun a caregiver support group, with snacks, at Millis Public Library's local history room, on the last Wednesday of every month, from 6-7:30 p.m. Any caregivers are welcome, and if it takes time to free up that hour and a half for any caregiver, Riga will hold the space.

"I scheduled it during the

supper hour. Sometimes it's helpful," she says.

Riga says she hopes to help caregivers learn tools to balance their lives.

"I lived for 32 years trying to survive, to be the best I could be for my daughter. I gave so much of myself I got sick. I didn't understand how to balance. I didn't have any tools," says Riga. "In writing this book, I realized the tools I have to help myself and shared it with people, and they found it helpful."

Riga says she meets caregivers who say "'I never have a day off. I have no life.' If I can reach just one person to remind them to take care of themselves, or to just give them a safe space to vent, it's invaluable."

Riga's group is called on Meetup under Metrowest Caregiver Meetup, and it also has a Facebook presence. The next meeting will take place on the last Wednesday of the month, January 25, from 6-7:30 p.m. in the local history room of the Millis Public Library, 961 Main Street, Millis.