

# Jessica

## Still Here: A caregiver series

People are like, you must prioritize you. And it's like, “Yeah, but have you been a caregiver?” Right? Like, have you—have you ever had to think about, like, waking up every couple hours, or being on edge because you don't want your mom to wander outside, or you hear the door open—like, the stress is enough to bring you down.

My name is Jessica Guthrie, and I am the caregiver of my mother who is living with Alzheimer's disease.

I was my mom's “39-year-old surprise.” She thought she had the flu. I kid you not. My mom was a hair salon owner. She was traveling the world, right. She—um, hair shows, conventions, fashion shows... like my mom was living her life.

She gave up her business after 17 years to move to the suburbs to raise me so I would have better schools.

And honestly, it's the sacrifices she made that are the reason why I have sacrificed so much to care for her these last nine years. People often think like, you get Alzheimer's, like, great your memory is gone.

But like, my mom worked for as long as she could. I wouldn't say she denied—it was like, “Oh, I'm fine. I'm fine.” You know. Like, and I could tell, okay, my job now as her daughter is to protect the image of Constance.

It was all about “Operation C.G.'s Fine”, right? “What are you talking about? She's okay.” Or, “She's having some memory things, but just repeat for her.”

And there was one day when my mom was still working and I get a call from her principal. And her principal is big, is a big guy. So deep voice. And he was like, “Jessica, what's wrong with your mom? She's not following through on things.” And in that moment, my heart sank. The moment that, “Oh, our secrets—secrets out.”

It's really clear that she can no longer function. Other people are judging us. Other people now know that she's not okay.

And in this moment, you know, I'm 26 years old. I don't have anyone else. I was like, “How? How am I supposed to do this?” I think on the outside, it looked really calm. You know, Jessica's got it.

And what was happening behind closed doors was like, Jessica was meal prepping 45 to 50 meals so she would have enough to eat while I was gone for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Jessica was figuring out, okay, how do we make sure that my mom knows that these are dirty clothes versus clean clothes? And so, what systems was I creating?

Like, there was never any like, rest. It was always, “What's the next thing I can create to make this better?” And that's exhausting. Exhausting.

Navigating the system as a young person that happens to be a black woman, that is also someone who is single by myself, navigating it—it was like, all those things are compounded. It makes for a terrible experience.

I ask all the questions. I am always present. I speak very clearly and articulate—like all the things, right? And I still wasn't listened to. I was still talked to as if I didn't know what I was talking about, when I am the expert in Constance.

The support groups or resources did not feel supportive. They're older, they're white, and they're more established in their lives and careers.

So even them telling their stories, I can't relate. That's not—that's not my lived reality. But I will tell you, sharing on social media created a community for me that I didn't have in real life.

And that's also why I started sharing so publicly on social media. I found other young black women who are caregivers.

And there is something really comforting about realizing like, “Oh, your story's—your story's actually not unique, right? Your story is actually one of, you know, thousands.” And that's both really empowering and unfortunate. Because, I didn't realize how lonely it would be to be a caregiver.

We are humans that still want to be connected to who we were before being caregivers. Don't take that away from us. Still send the invites. I want to be able to have the choice to either have to make a really expensive decision to say yes, or say no, but like, you have to have a life in order to give to someone else.

If I take the moment to think about the last nine years, I have absolutely not been alone. I think about the ladies from church who pick my mom up to still engage in choir rehearsal.

The people who brought groceries. There's actually a lot more moments of community that I can think of that I just didn't probably see in the moment.

There's a piece of advice here is like, caregivers, take the moment to pause and see all the ways that people are showing up for you. I'm forever grateful for those folks because we wouldn't have—I wouldn't have made it without them.

I have watched my mom completely change and completely, like, drift away from all that she once was.

But at the same time, she's still here. My mom's presence, her personality, her energy, while it can't be expressed in a way that it has in the past, there's—there's elements of C.G. that are still here. And for that, like, I will do whatever I can.