

Summary

In this episode of Aging For All, hosts Jen Yanez Pryor and Andrea Price converse with M. Denise Simmons, a leader in the caregiving and healthcare industry. Denise shares her personal caregiving journey, which began unexpectedly during her college years as she navigated her parents' declining health. She discusses the challenges of balancing caregiving for her parents while raising her children, emphasizing self-care and seeking help. The conversation delves into cultural sensitivities in caregiving, the significance of empathy, and the mission of her home care agency, Wisdom Senior Care, to keep seniors at home where they can thrive. Denise also highlights the importance of preserving the wisdom and stories of seniors, matching caregivers with clients based on shared experiences, and the lessons learned from aging. Tune in and visit wisdomseniorcare.com/111/fort-laude...senior-care-2/

Takeaways

- Balancing caregiving for aging parents and raising children is challenging.
- Self-care is crucial for caregivers to avoid burnout.
- Cultural sensitivities play a significant role in caregiving.
- Education is key to dispelling misconceptions about aging.
- Empathy is essential in connecting with clients and families.
- Keeping seniors at home allows them to thrive and share their wisdom.
- Matching caregivers with clients based on shared experiences enhances care.
- Aging is a full circle moment, reflecting on the roles of care.
- There is a need for more conversations about aging in society.

Jen Yanez Pryor (00:01)

Hello and welcome to Aging For All. We're your hosts. Jen Yanez-Pryor.

Aging For All (00:05)

And I'm Andrea Price. Thank you all so much for tuning in.

Jen Yanez Pryor (00:10)

Recognized as one of South Florida's most influential and prominent black women in business and industry and recipient of the 2021 Legacy Builder Award, Denise Simmons of Haitian descent is a changemaker who is determined to revolutionize her community through the entertainment and healthcare industries. She and her husband Mario have recently taken on the role of franchise owners of a home care agency called Wisdom Senior Care.

demonstrating their leadership and commitment to providing compassionate care to seniors in their homes. Some of her most notable works include the 2019 best documentary feature film for Before You Shoot, a film about humanizing the lives of black men in America and working on Issa Rae's

HBO Max series hit show, Rapsh. She is part of the advisory council of the South Florida Institute on Aging.

And a giver at heart, Denise also hosts dance chair exercises called Grouping in the Chair with Wisdom throughout senior living communities and Broward County.

Aging For All (01:19)

Hello and welcome, Denise.

M. Denise Simmons (01:24)

to be here to chat with you all. Yay!

Jen Yanez Pryor (01:27)

Great, so we don't have you.

Aging For All (01:29)

Yes, yes. Well, Denise, you are one of the most creative people that I know and your life really speaks to your commitment to making a difference. With all that you have done and continue to do, tell us a little bit about your caregiving journey and experiences.

M. Denise Simmons (01:49)

my gosh, okay, so my caregiving journey actually kind of started when I was in college and not too many people knew about this and not even myself, I didn't realize I was a caregiver. So while in college, my parents, just with age, their health started to decline.

So both my parents had diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol. And so while in college, I found myself doing more of check-ins with medication, following up and see how, you know, doctor's appointments went and things like that. And then, so that was going on while in college and then graduating and then, you know, just starting to...

be an adult, their health just continued to decline. And as a young adult, it started to get real strange because going to the doctor's office with my mom, you know, the doctor would ask her certain questions and she wouldn't know like your name, of birth and just, just simple things. And I was frustrated in my, my dad. he was frustrated too. And so, long story short, come to find out my mom.

She was diagnosed with dementia. And so I've been a caregiver for both my parents and now my mom for over 15 years and throughout that time I didn't realize I was a caregiver not until like a few years ago, which is why we started our company wisdom senior care, but it was a challenge because

As I'm becoming in my own as an adult, I was having to navigate and figure out the nuances of caring for an aging adult and caring for an Haitian aging adult. Cause there's a lot of stigmatism, there's a lot of just, it was clearly a mental cognitive thing, but with the Caribbean descent, they think it's something else. They're saying it's something else. And so that was an internal family battle, but

Fast forward to where we are now that has placed us in a position to be able to care for aging seniors in our community because of what I've gone through, the challenges and what I've learned and just things I was able to just kind of gather in my tool belt in terms of like having the proper legal down

documentation, making sure you understand the mixture of medicine and medication. And so all of that kind of equipped me to be not only an entrepreneur business owner, but also someone who is able to empathize with our clients and those adult children, because I was caring for my own children at the same time. And so that was exciting, overwhelming, challenging, but it was a beautiful learning experience.

Jen Yanez Pryor (04:53)

Wow, what a story. You know, I think what's interesting about this is what you said about, I didn't realize I was a caregiver, right? And I think that happens a lot, actually. We kind of fall into these roles that seem natural, right? And so you don't realize that you're actually playing that role. And what you said there at the end, caring for your own children. So you're providing care on both sides.

And I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about how that experience was for you.

M. Denise Simmons (05:26)

That experience was extremely hard. I'm not gonna sugarcoat it at all. It was hard on so many levels because it put a strain on my marriage. It put a strain on myself. It put a strain on my family because here I am stuck in the middle, not understanding what...

to do and figure out doctors appointments and take them here and there. And that's a certain level of stress. And then having to deal with taking kids to school and figuring out their developmental stages. And then my husband still has his needs and all this is going on. I'm in the middle and I was not taking care of myself. So because of that, not taking care of myself and putting time for myself, I was just dealing with some things that I didn't even realize. And it just had a negative impact on both sides.

my aging parents and then the kids because I knew for a fact looking back, I wasn't making the right decisions. felt as though I could, know, looking back, I was like, man, I could have made a better decision if I was more clear minded or had better, you know, resources or just knew how to navigate, navigate. And so once I came to the point, I was at my breaking point, I sought therapy and that helped me.

that really, really helped me. And through my therapist and God, I was able to kind of release some things and I'm in a better mental state now.

Aging For All (06:59)

Thank you for your honesty, because I think that that part of your journey in sharing is what's needed, because people are experiencing these complicated life choices and often don't know how to navigate. So just thank you for sharing how you've been able to navigate. And one thing you also mentioned in terms of your caregiving journey and how to navigate our cultural differences. You are in Broward County, Florida, which is one of the most

diverse areas in the United States period. So how do you help families with different cultures or different beliefs about aging? How do you help families navigate these often misconceptions about what it means to age amongst different cultures?

M. Denise Simmons (07:48)

That is a really, really good question. And what we have been doing more of is the education, because we don't know what we don't know, right? If we don't know that when our auntie or mommy is experiencing, is saying different things about, is talking gibberish or just her speeches is not sounding normal, if we don't know that that is a link,

to Alzheimer's dementia, we're going to say it's voodoo. We're going to say she's crazy and not seek and not put her in the proper care. And so we have just been doing a lot of education, a lot of education with and through entities and people that look like us because that's important too. And although there's not a lot of black and brown healthcare providers,

But it's becoming more of, but it's really partnering up with those entities and those individuals to provide the education by people that look like us and look like them for those individuals in the community.

Jen Yanez Pryor (09:05)

Thank you. I think that is really important to do because, and I'm just saying, I just came from another conversation with somebody about the caregiving workforce and thinking about what the gaps are there. And so I think finding the resources that are out there to bring into your space to train and educate your

your employees to be able to provide the care to the people that are being served by your organization is really important. And the cultural piece, I think, is really one that is often glossed over, I think, in my experience, is that we don't spend enough effort looking at what are the values, the beliefs, you know, all of that, you know, that's really important to the people we're serving.

M. Denise Simmons (09:47)

Yep. Yep.

Jen Yanez Pryor (10:00)

And how do we make sure that the people providing the care is aligned with that? So that's, I love hearing that. And also thinking about how you integrate your own past experience into this. Do you draw on that as well when you're training and educating your employees?

M. Denise Simmons (10:05)

exactly.

I mean, Jen, we have to, because that's the only way that we will be able to get our foot in the door, because it can't be the status quo. It's not black and white. Like, we really have to humanize ourselves to show that we are people. We've gone through and experienced the same things, because that's how I'm able to connect with.

the various people in the community and even my clients like I share my story I'm like look because I find oftentimes I'm speaking to that sandwich generation that mom that daughter who is either away out of out of state or Having their parents live with them and they're overwhelmed their stress and I'm like look I Was and still is in your shoes and having to make these decisions so I understand how it feels and so it's important that we really just

empathize and humanize the situation and just be real because that is how we're going to truly connect and affect people.

Aging For All (11:26)

Great. One of things I like is your tagline for your business. We keep wisdom at home. So why is that important to keep this wisdom at home?

M. Denise Simmons (11:39)

So thank you for highlighting that because that's what really connected me to our organization so much because the wisdom is multifold, right? The wisdom is just, wisdom we know it's knowledge, right? It's this great knowledge that we apply, but wisdom is also our seniors. They've gone through so much through life and we even have clients that are 99. So.

If you take the opportunity, just sit down with them for 10 minutes. The wisdom that will come out of their mouths, my gosh, is a game changer. And so that's why I love wisdom senior care because our focus is to keep our seniors, keep that wisdom at home because we know statistically they thrive better, they live longer when they're at home, they continue to share and pass on legacy and traditions to their families and that just, you know.

makes an even greater impact for the community when we're able to keep them at home instead of, you know, going into a facility and that's where we start to see declines or, you know, that isolation. So that's why we're so focused on keeping wisdom at home and happy.

Jen Yanez Pryor (12:54)

love that. You know, I love how that also fits with what you mentioned about the importance of storytelling and connecting with others. I'm curious, do you do anything with the people that you work with to intentionally preserve that tradition, that history, so that they can physically maybe pass on something to their families? Is that part of the practice?

M. Denise Simmons (13:18)

That is something that I eventually want to get into, but there are organizations that digitize the storytelling and come in and record and have it be able to pass on. But it's not something that I'm physically able to do now, but the moments.

Every time I go into a client consultation, I'm not just asking them, what are your needs? What are the days? You know, what's happening? What's the situation? But I'm always asking, so what did mom do back in the day? Like what type of music she listened to? So I'm pulling on that wisdom. You know, I'm being a little selfish for myself, but I do share it with my team. Cause you know, we have to match our clients and our caregivers, you know, appropriately, make sure it's a good fit.

But I do, every chance I get, I get to Glynn and I'm asking more questions than I should. But that's giving them an opportunity to think back and to share and to reflect. And you just see the smiles on their faces.

Aging For All (14:21)

Awesome, awesome. And you hit a really good point there. You said, want to make sure our caregivers and our clients are a good fit. And we know in this space often some people are sent into homes with people that are, they're not good fits for each other. So talk a little bit about the importance of that and how you guys manage to make sure those matches are good matches for the caregiver and those who serve.

M. Denise Simmons (14:45)

Yeah, so what we do, we are very intentional in our onboarding and recruitment process of our caregivers. So when they're coming in, we have a very extensive and thorough screening process where it kind of forces the caregiver to really engage with us. And then when we see they're not engaging or asking what

answering our questions, they kind of just weed themselves out. And so the ones that do kind of make it into orientation, our orientation is very intentional in getting to know our caregivers. Like we're asking them, you know, very social type questions to get to know them and build a rapport. And we even have them record a video of themselves, you know, saying what they like to do for fun, what they're into. And so

we use that as a way to kind of show our clients as well, because sometimes they want to see who's coming in their homes. And so we showed this video like meet your caregiver. once I know that a client loves Italian food or loves Caribbean dishes, and we knew on the orientation that this caregiver loves to cook a mean red beans and rice and curry chicken and jerk chicken, then we just match them up and show the video. And then you know,

There it is right there. it's our onboarding recruitment process. We're very intentional. ask, you know, the questions that really allow us to get to know our caregivers. And then it just makes it a match made in heaven.

Jen Yanez Pryor (16:20)

I love that process. I want to switch gears a little bit and I want to sit in the role of the family member and the individual needing services. And, you know, there's a lot of providers out there. You know, what are some of your top tips for like, how do I find the right company? You know, what am I looking for? How do I know that, you know, what I'm going to get is kind of what you're describing that really

person-centered, individual-focused care and attention.

M. Denise Simmons (16:55)

That is a really good question. Because I think about what I was going through when I was looking for a caregiver for my mom. Because when it got to the point where I couldn't physically take and do

things for my mom, I had to go through agencies and caregivers to find that right one. it's really, I think what's important is to ask.

the right questions besides what's your price and what services you offer. Because with home care, it's all the same, bathing, assisting with eating, or whatever. how do you go above and beyond? How do you treat your caregivers? How do you acknowledge your caregivers? How do you show appreciation to your caregivers? I think it's very important, because we're able to speak and stand on that. We're able to say that, how we acknowledge our caregivers.

What is your agency doing in the community? Because that shows we give back. we do programming for our senior communities. I also share with our potential clients, we have various strategic partners where we're able to offer even more resources and add value to what we do. Not only are we coming into your home,

to provide care for you, but we have a strategic partner that can offer cognitive resources for you that's covered by your insurance. We're able to have a physical therapist be able to come to you if you're having problems walking or maybe you are fall risk, they can come in and do the education. So we add more than just the direct service. And I think that is what, you

People should be asking, like, what are you guys doing differently? How, you know, if I have this situation where I need, I have questions about what legal documentation I need to have in order to make the decisions for my parents needing a, you know, power of attorney, are you able to, you know, connect me? And we are because I've gone through it. asking those questions.

Aging For All (19:01)

And what better person to lead such a business than somebody who's had these experiences. And you can really speak directly to those experiences and speak directly to the people in a way that's quite common, but unique at the same time. There are many people who have experienced these things, but some of the people have to step up and lead like you are doing through your work right now. So what have you learned about aging in general through your experience and your work?

Jen Yanez Pryor (19:02)

Thank you.

M. Denise Simmons (19:31)

my gosh.

There's, with aging, there's a full circle moment where there's the saying, twice a child, once an adult. That's interesting to go through and experience that, where I have witnessed and experienced my mom being a strong Haitian, proud woman, and just on her own, independent. She was even an entrepreneur herself.

And then now she's completely just bed bound. just, you know, being a young adult, being a child, experiencing seeing my mom in this light and then to see her progress to this light. Like that's a full circle moment in the midst of, you know, I just had a baby, so he's one. And so I'm, you know, watching the stages and understanding and reflecting like my little one.

keys and diapers and he's learning how to walk. And it's like almost like a Benjamin Button type of moment because there was one at one point I was caregiving for my mom. She had to stay with us for a while. And so I'm putting, you know, I was feeding her like soft foods and then I was feeding my baby baby food at the same time. And I was just like, wow, just this full circle moment. Like, you know, it's a beautiful thing. Like I'm learning it's beautiful and

even the moments where we think it's like, it's not what we expected it to be, but it's still beautiful that you can be in a position to care for your loved one and watch them and have these memories of grandeur of who they used to be. even though you see them decline, but you're in a position to be able to care for them because that takes me back.

My mom was caring for me when I was a baby. She was putting baby food in my mouth. So that's that full circle aha moment. And it just makes me be very grateful and thankful that I can.

Jen Yanez Pryor (21:45)

Wow, I think my favorite, you said so many things I loved right there, but I think what I loved the most was when you said, you know, this isn't what we expected, but it's beautiful. You know, it still can be beautiful and reflecting on the magic and the beauty in all situations. And you also had me thinking about, you know, in gerontology, we talk a lot about how we aren't ever truly independent. We always depend on others and we're more interdependent.

and what you were describing as, caring for my baby, but also caring for my mother, you know, we care for one another. And I think that that in and of itself is just a beautiful thing. And so just everything you said there just gave me goosebumps.

M. Denise Simmons (22:27)

this.

Even when you're saying that, Jen, it's like we never stop caring, right? It never stops. that's almost like the beauty of just aging. You have the opportunity to care for a baby up until someone is like 99. So from one, I can honestly say I have cared day one.

Jen Yanez Pryor (22:34)

Yeah, right.

M. Denise Simmons (22:54)

up until someone's like 99, either through my business, you know, because I care, I do caregiving for my clients. Sometimes we have to step in. So I have that huge scope, right? Once in 99. So yeah.

Aging For All (23:07)

I always say we need each other to survive. Yeah, and so I'm glad you mentioned that too, because you have to step in every now and then when you need a sub, for instance. So just as a business owner in this space, how have you grown?

M. Denise Simmons (23:11)

Yeah.

my gosh. Mommy!

Jen Yanez Pryor (23:32)

Coming with the hard questions, huh?

Aging For All (23:33)

Well, we need to know because you have shared so many great nuggets and wisdom. You work for the perfect company named Wisdom. You have shared it today, Denise. So yeah, mean, is, as people, as America continues to age, there's going to be even a greater need for services like this. So if somebody's listening, they might be really interested and say, maybe that's what I need to do. So what do you want to share with those people?

M. Denise Simmons (23:59)

Yeah.

my gosh, so how have I grown? I've grown in many different facets, whether it's spiritually, physically, mentally, professionally, personally, I've grown in all those areas because I've been challenged, I've been stretched, I've been provoked, I've been, you know, just so many things have happened that it just kind of puts you in a position to grow in so many areas. the main areas I can, you know, just growing,

I would say just spiritually, my faith has gotten even more stronger because just being a business owner, you're taking a risk, you're taking a leap of faith and you have this vision of you're in business to make money, but we all know the statistics in the first few years, it's hard, you're barely breaking even. And so we've gone through that as a business.

in the earlier stages and those were hard. Like when you're looking at the income that's not coming in versus the expenses that continues to come in like clockwork, it really tests your faith and your faith just has to be, you know, it has to be big, it has to be bold and it has to be continuous because of the challenges that goes on. So spiritually, my faith has been strengthened. Personally, I think I've...

giving myself more grace. I've grown in the area of just giving myself more grace and not being so hard on myself as a mother, as a woman, as an entrepreneur, as a community advocate for seniors. Like I just learned to Denise, you don't have to be all things to everyone at the same time. And if you mess up, that's okay. Give yourself grace. Yeah, just.

Those are the two main things, because I could go on and on, because I'm looking at my whiteboard. Like, I could just list a whole lot of stuff, but yeah.

Aging For All (26:04)

Well, that's great and thank you for sharing.

Jen Yanez Pryor (26:09)

You know, this is kind of like maybe future thinking, I don't know. But I was looking at your work in the entertainment space again, with your documentary and the show with Isla Rae. And I wonder, do you have thoughts about bringing together the entertainment and the caregiving in any way?

M. Denise Simmons (26:32)

Jen, you are in my head and in my heart.

Jen Yanez Pryor (26:36)

Am I telling secrets or?

M. Denise Simmons (26:39)

my gosh, my gosh number one, this is the greatest interview I've ever done. Number yeah, so Truthfully as a as a creative Andrea, you know this like you it's hard to Be get the the accolades and the income coming in for your art for your creativity And so being business minded I was like, okay

Jen Yanez Pryor (26:45)

Ha

M. Denise Simmons (27:07)

Lord, I wanna produce these films and I don't wanna have to beg and plea and raise funds for the stories I wanna tell. And so, help me. And so God put this business in my life and it's a way to create consistent income so that eventually I can kinda have this business running on a well-oiled machine and I can be able to create, cause I love to tell stories and there are so many stories to tell about.

the wisdom in this world, the conversations that I have had with seniors, like I've gotten so many downloads of just documentaries that can be told and just the way that we show aging, right? Like, I think there is, there are some, you know, negative connotation about aging and there's a way that...

There's stories that need to be told so people understand the beauty of aging. And that's where I want to do.

Jen Yanez Pryor (28:07)

Yeah, I love it. I love it.

Aging For All (28:09)

I will look out. Because all of your other work, your creative work has been amazing. So I look forward to this because it is an opportunity to reframe and retell and reshape the story of aging. always say we still need truth tellers when there is so many things that aren't necessarily true in our world about what it means to do a lot of things in particular aging. That's what we talk about. We still need people to give the counter narrative.

M. Denise Simmons (28:11)

you

Yep. Yep.

Aging For All (28:41)

And that's what you will do. there anything else that you would like to share with our listeners today?

Jen Yanez Pryor (28:45)

Silence.

M. Denise Simmons (28:51)

No, I just think this is a on time platform that you guys have for aging. Like when I heard the episodes you sent it to me, was like, my gosh, this is brilliant. There needs to be more conversation and content. So I just thank you all for, you know, believing in yourselves and stepping out on faith because we need, we need conversations and platforms like this around aging to understand how it impacts and affects us all. So I just thank you all and thank you for the opportunity to be on this show.

Jen Yanez Pryor (29:22)

Wow, thank you. This has been an incredible conversation. So I want to thank you so much for joining us today. I also want to thank our listeners, as always, for tuning in.

Aging For All (29:32)

And please join us next time for another amazing episode of Aging For All.