A Lifetime of Love
By Stephanie Pritchard

Fifteen-year-old Stephanie Pritchard wrote this essay about her mother, Jenn Craigue, and other direct-care workers

For as long as I can remember, my mom has been a direct-care worker. When I was little, she used to take me on her jobs to help. I can still remember her client, George; she used to give him his favorite candy bar every day just to see a smile on his face. My mom loves working and being with her clients. She makes sure that each and every one of them is properly taken care of. People say, ''don't get personally involved with your clients because it might interfere with your work.'' That may be true in most jobs, but you need to be personal when you are a direct-care worker.

I recently met two of my mom's clients: Brenda and Samantha.* Samantha is one of her well-off patients. She has family, friends, and just celebrated her ninety-fifth birthday, which my mom and I attended. Brenda, unfortunately, is one of her worse-off patients. When I first walked into Brenda's building, it was horrifying! People had ragged clothes, shopping carts to hold their very few possessions. People were stealing from other tenants because they don't have enough to survive.

She's closer than ever to my mom, but she has no family and very few friends. Mom threw Brenda a sixtieth birthday party. It made her day when my mom and I made her favorite cake and when she saw her presents. Before my mom came along, Brenda had to staple her pillow cases together because she had no money to replace her pillows, even after ten years.

Brenda can barely buy food for herself because she uses her money to make sure her two animals are always well fed and taken care of. Brenda and others in the building have to walk three blocks away to get food from a food pantry. Three blocks to walk everyday is very hard because most are either elders or people living with disabilities. When they finally get there, they barely get any food because the shelter is running out of supplies. Mom always makes sure she has some food on days when the weather is bad; she doesn't want Brenda walking all that way in the cold for a little bit of food. My mom does many special things for her clients, which sometimes saves their life.

Direct-care workers do remarkable things to change the lives of the disabled or the elderly, but the public never has noticed what they do. A lot of direct-care workers have to deal with being undervalued, under-paid, and receive little to no benefits. One of the students in my class said, ''Health care workers are stupid because they are overweight, and some smoke!'' Who isn't overweight or underweight in America? No one is perfect.

Many direct-care workers get hurt while helping their clients, but they still go to work every day in pain to help their clients. My mom has fibromyalgia -- joint, nerve, and muscle pains and spasms around the body. Most nights she has a hard time walking up and down the stairs. She has 12 medications. My brother and I have another seven between us. Medicine is so expensive these days, it costs my parents

over two hundred dollars per month! There is barely enough medical insurance to cover her alone, let alone three other people.

Wages are sometimes as low as $5.50 an hour and most workers have a hard enough time paying for rent and other necessities. On top of that, home care workers have to deal with the uncertainty of what their paychecks will be like week after week. If a client goes into a hospital, nursing home, or passes away, home care workers lose their hours. And nursing home workers have to deal with being short-staffed, which means high patient-to-staff ratios.

When are direct-care workers going to get a break for all the great things that they have done and continue to do? I have respect and love for all the direct-care workers. Pretty soon everyone I know will have to be taken care of in their homes or nursing homes. Direct-care workers are the key to life.

*names changed for clients' protection

Direct Care Workers
by Stephanie Pritchard

When people are lost,
They want to be found,
They want to be held,
They want to be loved.
Special people find them.
They care, they love, they respect.

Direct care workers
Help them find their paths.
They guide their clients to a happy and caring place.
Nurse aides,
The key to people's lives.

But --
No respect,
No love,
No care, no benefits,
Never taken care of,
No coverage.
No lives of their own,
Hearts and lives are hurt,

Without our guardian angels,
Our world will slowly come to an end.