In honor of her mother, Michelle Porjes created LA Elderly.org and a Facebook group designed for support, information, connection and inspiration.

Michelle Porjes recalls being in distress, sitting in a social services worker's drab office, seeking help to manage her mother's newly diagnosed dementia. Porjes' stomach sank when the worker casually handed her a pamphlet -- and nothing else.

Out of the need to build a community to support those who care for elderly family members and those in the eldercare industry, Porjes created LA Elderly, a Facebook group for support and exchange of information.



According to the World Health Organization, there are nearly 10 million new cases of dementia every year. It is emotionally draining to find facilities, support, and resources needed to care for those living with this debilitating and life-threatening disease.

Porjes, a distinguished educator in Los Angeles, found herself in the middle of the "sandwich generation," with the challenge of raising children and taking care of parents at the same time, without the support that she needed.

"It's not sexy to deal with the elderly. Kids are cute. Babies in diapers are adorable. Elderly, not so much," Porjes says. "Dementia can feel like it happens overnight, leaving patients, and their family, anxious, frustrated, and confused. It's an imperfect system. And the professionals were not great. Nobody guided me."

That added additional stress to an already challenging situation. She felt that the elderly, who had already contributed to society, as well as the family members who care for them, deserved better.

"My mom and I went on a journey with dementia for over a decade," Porjes says. "There's a lot of support, but it just wasn't easy to find. There needs to be a thought about what it takes to care of elders. It has to go beyond a phone call. These are people that have fought in wars, worked in coal mines, became doctors."

After years of trying to navigate care for her mother, Porjes decided that she needed to make a difference and help others going through the same situation.

"I didn't want anyone else to have to go through this," she says. "I wanted to give peo-

ple hope that you can still live a really great life, even though you have someone with dementia. I want people to know, that you can figure it out."

On December 17, 2017, Porjes' mother, Hannelore Sylvia Porjes, passed away. In her memory, Michelle launched the LA Elderly Facebook Group. She designed it to be a touchpoint that people can use, a place where people could go to ask questions and share their experience and expertise.

"Every field has ranges of wisdom, guidance, knowledge. I believe in educating first. I decided to rely on my skills and let people spread the wisdom," she says.

Once she started spreading the word about the Facebook group, quickly became a place of support, practical advice and referrals. It has grown through word of mouth and now has more than 2,330 members.

"I did this for a couple of reasons," Porjes says, "Number one, I'm a doer. I don't find solace in visiting a gravesite. What can I do to perpetuate the memory of my parents? How can I make it easier for the next person that rolls around? Number two, I have two sons in their 20s. I want them to understand culture, world, religion - what can we do to make the world a better place?"

Porjes intentionally launched the Facebook Group on the Shloshim (30th day following a burial) of her mother's passing. She explains that the 30th day of mourning is marked as a significant occasion -- it's the end of a mourning period and the next part of "the journey."

"By doing this, it was the next step of the journey without her with I together," says Porjes, who wanted to honor her mother, who was "all about family" and was part of the Holocaust generation. Her mother raised her to "know who you are, stand up against hatred, and never forget."

Hannelore was born in Vienna, battled tuberculosis in her 20, and eventually fled to New



In honor of her mother, Michelle Porjes created LA Elderly.org and a Facebook group for interaction, love, support, ideas, inspiration and self-care.

York City with her family. She graduated from NYU with a degree in mathematics and worked in the aerospace industry. She became one of on the first women computer programmers in the U.S.

Upon launching the Facebook Group, Porjes contemplated how she could add to the community and build the community. She logged on to the Facebook Group and noticed that somebody asked a question, and someone got an answer.

"At that moment, we were off to the races," Porjes says.

Since then, she has been providing hope, support, and community to those who need it. For the first-year anniversary, she held a senior fair with splendor and fanfare. She screened the movie, *Lives Well Lived*.

"We value seniors more than other countries do," said Porjes. "The elderly are lonely.



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Where are the events? There are not a lot of activities for them."

Porjes is obsessed with doing more. "I remember being up in the middle of the night and thinking, *what can I do next?"* she says.

So she decided it was time to build a website, LAElderly.org, as an additional resource as a compliment to the support group and designed for interaction, love, support, ideas, inspiration and self-care.

"We drew it out and it just crystalized," Porjes says. "We want people to visit daily and to come back for more information and interaction."

The website is also designed for those not on Facebook. Porjes monetizes the site through ads, offers free advertising the first of the month for people providing services or hosting events for the elderly.

As for the future of the industry and her role in it, Porjes says LA Elderly is not done growing – "not by a long shot. We will continue to evolve."

"My business partner, Neil Okun, and I are taking the concept and bringing it to other cities with ads that change depending on the region," Porjes concludes.

"We want big companies, such as AARP and Depends, to take out ads and invest in what we're doing to build this community." — By Sharael Kolberg, California Business Journal

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