

Marriage

'Togetherness' abides, despite progression of disease

By Lee Strong
Associate editor

Bill McHugh gently takes his wife's hand into his and squeezes it twice. He leans over, brings his face up next to hers and says, "I'm going to kiss you sweetie."

He does, several times on the cheek, then asks, "Do you want to kiss me?" He puts his cheek next to her lips. She remains still, eyes shut. Her lips don't move.

Bill straightens up, smiling despite her non-response.

Only in her early 60s, Olive — Ollie as she is called — has Alzheimer's disease. She is generally unresponsive to Bill's steady stream of loving touches and words.

But occasionally she responds, kissing him back or saying a few words. Just a few days previously, she had answered his query, "I love you. Do you love me?" with a clear, "Yeah."

The St. Pius X parishioners marked 43 years of marriage on Jan. 2. Ollie has been a resident of the Fairport Baptist Homes since Dec. 20, 1995. Bill has been a daily visitor.

"She's my wife," he simply says. "She's the person I want to be with."

Bill realized that the first day they met in November 1951.

He was a senior at the Eastman School of Music. Ollie's sister, who worked at the school, arranged for Bill to date a friend of hers. Ollie and a date of her own accompanied them.

"For me, it was love at first sight," Bill recalled. "I knew she was the one."

Ollie, who had graduated earlier that year from Our Lady of Mercy High School and was working at Eastman Kodak Company, "was a little more cautious," Bill acknowledged. Still, they went out one week after they met, and by February she admitted she loved him.

"When she told me she loved me, it was like a sudden flow of relief that went over me, because I knew she consented to be with me," Bill recalled.

They dated over the next two



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer

Bill McHugh visits his wife, Ollie, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease, every day at the Fairport Baptist Homes.

years while Bill, who had enlisted in the Navy, was stationed at the former Sampson Naval Training Base in Seneca County. They married Jan. 2, 1954.

While Bill was still in the service, the first two of their eight children arrived. Meanwhile, Bill, who played with the base band, completed his degree in music and public school education at the Eastman. After leaving the service, he worked for four years as a programmer for a local business, then found a job with the Gates Chili Central School District as a music teacher, remaining there for 32 years.

Raising eight children on just his salary was at times a struggle, Bill admitted, but the couple's faith — and love for each other and their children — sustained them through hard times.

"Our parish is one of closeness to our story and church and God," Bill explained. "Our faith kind of cemented everything."

As for the children, Bill added, "The happiest time was always having fun with our family. We enjoyed our children."

They also enjoyed being together as a couple.

"I always worked with Ollie," Bill said. "I always tried to help her change diapers, get dinner ready, because I just enjoyed being with her."

That enjoyment in working together found a channel through Marriage Encounter. They became active in the marriage enrichment movement in 1973, serving as staff at a number of weekend sessions.

"One of the nicest things about Marriage Encounter is sitting down at night and exchanging a full-page love letter," Bill said. "It was an activity, a discipline that was very meaningful for us."

In addition, they helped with marriage preparation in their parish, often working with couples in difficult situations, including those who had been married before or who were pregnant.

When they ceased their involvement with Marriage Encounter in 1980, they immediately got involved in Engaged Encounter, remaining active with that marriage preparation move-

ment until 1991.

In 1990, when Ollie was just 57, her illness began to manifest itself. During their daily rosary, she would forget which decade they were on, or parts of the Hail Mary. She began having a difficult time following conversations, or even carrying out such simple tasks as writing checks.

Ollie went to see a doctor about these problems. He attributed them to such causes as tension or "empty nest syndrome."

But the problems persisted, and in 1992 she went to a psychologist, who then referred her to a psychiatrist. Finally, she visited a neurologist who confirmed that she had Alzheimer's.

Fortunately, Bill had been planning to retire that year anyway, and thus was able to be at home with Ollie.

"There were a lot of tears" at first, he recalled. "At that time, she was fairly aware of the disease, but not totally."

That awareness helped to make it more painful for her.

"The first part of the disease is very traumatic," Bill said. "The ill

person knows they are drawing blanks. They just can't do things they used to do."

It was also difficult for Bill. "As a spouse, you see their awareness fading away," he said. "The challenge is to sustain, as you care for your loved one, as much of the closeness as you can."

By late 1995, however, he was no longer able to provide the level of care Ollie needed. Family members held a conference, and decided that the best solution was a nursing home, so they placed her in the Fairport Baptist Homes.

Bill visits her there each day to talk to her; touch her; bring her Communion, help her in any way he can.

"The act of feeding her for me is sustaining, something I can do for her that gives me satisfaction," Bill said.

The visits also help to keep alive the sense of closeness he has had with her for 45 years.

"I come here to get from her that closeness," he explained. "It's keeping alive the Bill and Ollie togetherness."

At the nursing home, he also uses his musical talents to entertain the residents, leading weekly sing-alongs. As he plays piano and sings, he encourages the audience not only to sing, but to clap their hands, wave their arms and tap their feet. And he asks them questions about the songs, their lives or their own musical abilities — in effect turning the concert into a form of therapy for them.

In addition, he facilitates four Alzheimer's groups in the area, helping to provide support and encouragement for families affected by the illness. He also plays organ for funerals and weddings, is the interim director of a church choir, and is the music director of the Barbershop Chorus of the Erie Canal.

But the center of his day is his visit to Ollie.

"She's my life," Bill said. "We married each other for better or worse. She's cared for me, and I'm sure she would be here doing the same if it was a reverse situation."

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