

On another St. Valentine's Day, health struggle only strengthens bond of couple

The love story of Jerry and Renee Buettner, one that begins in the early 1970s, is intertwined with their faith. Over the years they have exhibited loyalty, strength and dedication, both to each other and the Catholic Church, especially at their home parish, St. Francis of Assisi in Baltimore.

Their 43 years of marriage has been spiced by four daughters, four grandchildren and service to their faith community, both as paid staff and as volunteers, across the spectrum of parish life.

Love is apparent in the Buettner household in their northeast Baltimore home, but not always spoken, as Jerry's support of Renee increased after her 2011 diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's disease.

While Renee's ability to communicate verbally is diminished, they happily spend their days together, at home and out and about, where they've befriended so many people over the years.

"We go different places," Jerry said, "and there's always someone that she (Renee) knows, that she's touched their life."

Roots

Renee grew up in Washington, D.C., got an early education college degree and became a postulant with the Sisters of Mercy.

Jerry was born and raised at St. Bernard in Baltimore, attended its parish school and graduated from Calvert Hall College High School in Towson. He was studying third-year theology at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore when both he and Renee were assigned to serve at his home parish.

The two shared an affinity for social justice, and walked the same picket lines promoting equality.

Both left the religious life for the vocation of marriage, as they were wed in 1974.

“We just became friends,” Jerry said. “I just feel like we were really lucky. It’s God’s hand that brought us together.”

Their long list of friends include many from their days at St. Bernard.

“A lot of those folks ... they’re still really good friends of ours,” Jerry said. “That was ... the building of our community.”

They eventually found a parish home at St. Francis of Assisi.

“It’s one of the smallest parishes,” Jerry said, “but it’s really vibrant.”

Their oldest, Molly, was born in 1976. Renee continued to teach part-time through the birth of Katy in 1980, but became a stay-at-home mother after Christine arrived in 1982. Mary Colleen rounded out the household in 1985.

The girls attended the parish school at St. Francis of Assisi, where Renee coached CYO soccer and basketball. In the late 1980s, she approached their pastor, Monsignor William Burke, about filling a hole in the neighborhood’s education.

“(Monsignor Burke) is the kind of guy that lets things happen,” Jerry said. “If you have an idea, he says, ‘Go with it.’”

Renee obtained the necessary licensing and opened Mayfield Christian Preschool, where the first students were Mary Colleen and her four-year-old peers. Its first home was at St. Matthew’s United Church of Christ. It eventually became part of St. Francis of Assisi School.

Renee earned a master’s degree in reading from Loyola University Maryland, and put her passion for teaching kids to read to use at St. Francis of Assisi School from 2000 until 2011, when she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, the disease affects more than 5 million Americans. Five percent of those cases are early- or younger-onset, affecting people, such as Renee, who were under 65 when symptoms appear.

Parental role models

As the Buettners' second daughter, Katy Buettner Coley, raises two children of her own, she finds herself asking, "What would Renee do?"

Katy and her sisters, who all graduated from Mercy High School, continue to be influenced by the model of their parents' relationship.

"I always wanted to find the person (husband) who was most like my father," Katy said, adding that his sense of humor helps everyone cope with her mother's health.

"He always speaks very kindly of her," said Katy, adding that her father calls her mother "an angel."

After focusing on aging and Alzheimer's disease while pursuing her master's of administration in human services, Katy said an anonymous quote has helped her cope with her mother's illness.

"Love is not a memory," Katy said, recalling the quote, "it is a feeling that resides deep within your soul."

Life of the parish

Katy said that people came to, and stayed at, St. Francis of Assisi because of her mother's welcoming presence.

In addition to being involved in the school and CYO sports, the Buettners led and participated in workshops and retreats. Jerry cites as one of the main catalysts of the parish's stability a three-year program called Renew, which started in the early 1980s. Jerry and Renee were among approximately 40 leaders trained to host smaller groups, totaling 100-150 parishioners, in their homes.

"It was social as well as spiritual," said Jerry, who added that the program allowed parishioners to interact with those with whom they shared a pew on Sunday

mornings.

At its conclusion, Jerry and Renee continued the spirit of Renew, coordinating continuing fellowship among six couples. Still going strong after 30 years, it evolved into their prayer group.

The Buettners were also active in Just Faith, designed to meld spirituality with social justice, the cause that brought them together. Through the program, they learned about systemic change and participated in charity work in the neighborhoods surrounding St. Francis of Assisi.

After Jerry retired in 2004 from teaching special education in Baltimore County public schools, he became the parish's part-time youth minister and coordinated Baltimore-Appalachia Workcamp trips. Renee? She led the parish's Vacation Bible School.

Their social justice ministry involved an annual trip to El Salvador, where, in 2005, they attended a Mass marking the 25th anniversary of the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero.

"We've had a really fulfilling life, and continue to," Jerry said.

Along the way, the Buettners have opened their own home to people in need, offering a safe residence and companionship.

"Both of us have always felt that our house is open," Jerry said.

Now the parish is opening its doors for Renee. After 9:30 a.m. Mass March 4, her 70th birthday, the church will host a birthday party to celebrate with Renee, the Buettner family and the countless friends that they have made.

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