

## COMMUNITY

## ON THE HOMEFRONT

## A lasting view of love from the far side

By Constance Johannessen

He sits in his living room evaluating a myriad of pictures, some in color, and some in black and white. Memories come to life reflecting years of love that lasted through numerous days of sharing. His heart pounds and he smiles, laughs and cries yearning to relive each moment. His first image of Lillian was in a community hall. He was one of the entertainers, and she was on the sideline smiling as he belted out the tune "Oh Danny Boy." Later they were introduced by one of her five brothers. She was blond with dark brown eyes, athletic and pretty. He was smitten immediately. As the years passed that initial picture of her always remained in sight when he looked at her.

We often think of love stories existing in the wake of youth; however the real love stories are those beginning

in youth and lasting through years of joy and sorrow.

How is it some couples are able to sustain love throughout the years? Robert Levenson, Laura Carstensen, and John Gottman, and more recently John Gulman, have done extensive research on long-term marriages. In reviewing their different works, numerous overlapping themes appear. They are: the importance of communication, the role of conflict, the necessity in getting needs met, and the ability to compromise and negotiate. Karl Pillemer states, "Communication around differences of opinion is where the secret to a long marriage lies."

The manner in which couples handle conflict is extremely important. Involved in resolving issues is the ability to communicate one's perspective and identify one's needs.

It also means listening to your partner's perspective and understanding his or her needs. Conflict exposes individual differences. Learning to embrace differences is difficult, yet healthy to keeping a partnership alive. The goal is to integrate each person's opinion through compromise and negotiation. An example of this is of a couple who faced a dilemma regarding the husband wanting to purchase a motorcycle. To him, having a motorcycle means adventure and saving money on gas. To her, the idea of him riding a motorcycle evokes fear and worry. Scenes of potential accidents spark her imagination. After much conversation, they negotiate a palatable plan. He gets the motorcycle and agrees to refrain from driving on major highways.

An outcome of healthy conflict is the acceptance

of differences. As couples age Levenson, Carstenson and Guttman found that conflicts were significantly fewer. Couples had grown to accept their differences more and to be selective in choosing their battles.

In my work with people who have been in lengthy partnerships and their loved one has died, I hear two resounding themes that held their marriages intact. The first is their partner made them feel special. This occurred through simple daily expressions. The making of the morning coffee, the clearing the snow off their car, hugs, are just a few examples of the thoughtfulness and caring.

The second theme is the couple's ability to manage struggles. Over the years, couples grow to unite their strengths to navigate through difficult times. Long-term marriages typically have sustained

numerous critical moments.

This is true of the man at the beginning of this article who was sitting in his living room. He now lives alone due to idiosyncratic Parkinson's disease and his lovely wife lives in a separate assisted living place because she has Alzheimer's. Their daughter watches closely as they navigate this stage. She looks to her father and reflects silently:

"I watched you grieve the separation of the one you love. It was gradual. You denied your pain. Truths overran your desire and you were forced to gain the wisdom in starting anew. Your brilliance, tenacity, and humor assisted you in creating a new rhythm. Frequent visits substitute the daily marriage. You become happy with the world you reconfigured. Again you have visited the betrayal of your body and

are looking to your God to navigate. You tug at every strength to fool others of your normalcy. Yet, we all know your visits to your loved one is threatened by your crippling core, and your courage to overcome the pain endures."

J. Grohol (2007). *5 Secrets to a Successful Long-Term Relationship or Marriage*

R. Levenson, L. Carstensen, & J. Gottman (1993). *Long-Term Marriage: Age, Gender, and Satisfaction*

K. Pillemer (2013). *Huffington Post*

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