

HEALTH AND FITNESS

Couple's love transcends early onset dementia



Julie Grassel gives her husband, Mike Grassel, a kiss goodbye as she drops him off at art therapy class at the Donna Lexa Art Center in Waukesha. Credit: Michael McLoone / for the Journal Sentinel

By Crocker Stephenson of the Journal Sentinel

Yesterday 10:36 p.m.

Mike Grassel loves Julie Grassel and Julie loves Mike. That's the way it is and that's the way it has been for more than 30 years.

And someday, Julie says, when they die and join each other in heaven, she will remind Mike of all that has happened.

Mike remembers some of it, though he remember less than he once did, and in the years to come he will remember less and less.

As for now, he remembers meeting Julie on their first day of college, in a psychology class at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. As for now, he remembers how it quickly became clear to them both that they would live out their lives together.

As for now, he can remember that in their sophomore year, as his mother was driving him to work on Interstate 94, a wheel came loose from an oncoming car, smashed through the windshield of their car and, without harming his mother, hit him in the head.

When he regained consciousness a week later, he didn't know who Julie was.

Julie stayed at Mike's side as he re-entered his life. He re-learned to walk. Re-learned to talk. Re-learned the simplest things. People asked Julie why. Even Mike asked her why. He was changed. The man she fell in love with was now a different man. She could go on with her life. Without him. No one would blame her.

Why not go on without him?

"I didn't even understand the question," Julie says. "I had made a commitment. Nothing changed for me."

In time, Mike returned to school, got his degree, he and Julie married, built careers, had a couple of kids — Stephanie and Nick — and settled down in Brookfield.

And then, about seven years ago, Mike began to forget. Connections in his brain came apart. Well-worn neural pathways came to confusing dead ends. Where once there was something, there was now a gap.

Mike was just 43 years old, and his doctor thought he might have early onset Alzheimer's disease.

The diagnosis was modified to [progressive dementia](#), the result of his brain injury. But Mike's prognosis remained much the inevitable same as it had been for Alzheimer's.

He will forget.

...

Early onset Alzheimer's affects people younger than 65.

[The Alzheimer's Association](#) estimates that about 5% of the more than 5 million Americans with Alzheimer's have an early onset, sometimes called younger onset, form of the disease.

Many people who sustain a severe head injury never develop Alzheimer's disease or dementia. [More research is needed to understand the link.](#)

Mike and Julie have adjusted their lives so that Mike remains social and connected; they are very active in the array of programs offered through the [Southeastern Wisconsin Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association](#).

To Mike's surprise, he has found a new passion.

Art.

...

On a recent evening, Julie drops Mike off at the [Donna Lexa Art Center](#), located in a building behind the First Baptist Church in Waukesha.

Donna Lexa offers art classes to students with special needs: cerebral

palsy, schizophrenia, brain injury, Down syndrome, stroke, autism, Alzheimer's.

The classroom smells like glue and markers. A riot of work hangs on all the walls and covers virtually every horizontal surface. Dolls hang in a set of windows that run the length of a wall and look out to a park across the street.

A dozen students, and about half as many volunteers and staff, sit around a table in the center of the room. The mother of one the students, Mary Green, has died. In grief, Mary has drawn a portrait of her mother on a sheet of cardboard and cut it out. The cutout sits on the chair beside her.

The room is already a blur of activity, but everything kicks up a notch when Mike comes in, wearing a T-shirt he's dyed with Packers green and gold. He goes around the room distributing hugs and compliments.

"That's really cool," he says. "Oh that's awesome. Wow, look at that!"

The windows darken. Wind pushes against them and there's a lashing of rain. The classroom is warm and bright and loud. Mike puts music on his phone. He gets people to sing with him. He gets them to dance.

Mike is working — more or less — on a landscape collage. By the time Julie comes to pick him up, he's only added a few things.

The dominant feature of Mike's landscape is a rainbow. Rainbows appear in a lot of his work. They stand for hope, he says.

That's what he's about, he says. Even now. Especially now. Hope.

"I almost died," Mike says. "I was gone and then I was there."

"It's all bonus," he says, and then he says it again.

"It's all bonus."



About Crocker Stephenson

Crocker Stephenson covers public health. He has won many regional and national awards for his stories concerning infant mortality, child welfare, poverty, urban life and welfare reform.

 @crocker_mjs  cstephenson@journalse...  414-224-2539

Find this article at:

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/health/couples-love-transcends-early-onset-dementia-b99715382z1-377713971.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.