

National Family Caregiver M O N T H

**Honoring
Sue Starrs**
Former Caregiver

Recognizing the Signs

Bill Starrs was diagnosed with Alzheimer's at the age of 59, while still working as an engineer at GM. He was extremely active with biking, walking, camping and cross-country skiing. He was the "neighborhood dad" helping fix kids bikes and was known as a kind, gentle soul. He was a mentor to many at work, and was a talented tenor singer. All these things made his diagnosis even more difficult.

His wife, Sue, was familiar with the signs and made his care her first priority. "My husband's family has a history of Alzheimer's, so I knew what to watch for," Sue shared. "Bill's mother, sister, grandmother and his two maternal aunts all suffered from dementia. When my mother-in-law first started showing signs, we didn't know what we were dealing with and I turned to the Alzheimer's Association for resources. It was the things I learned while caring for her, that made me able to spot early signs with Bill."

Caregiver Tips

Sue was a caregiver for Bill for 11 years at home before he transitioned to a memory care facility his last 3 years. As a hospice Chaplain, Sue is uniquely qualified to understand the demands of caregiving. "My biggest advice for caregivers is that you have to make your decisions based on the safety of the person you love and your health as a caregiver," Sue shared. "Many people have no concept of what it is to live with someone with Alzheimer's, thinking of it only as forgetting names or places. Some may lay on guilt saying 'I'd never put my loved one anywhere.' That just shows they don't understand the extensive behavioral changes Alzheimer's can bring. You know your family best. Don't feel bad about the difficult decisions you come to. Bill was very self-sufficient in the kitchen, but one day he wanted to make hot tea and when I walked into the kitchen he was holding a glass of boiling water and didn't know what to do. Even when you live with someone, you can't predict how things can quickly change and you need to do what's best for everyone's safety."

"I also depended heavily on the Alzheimer's Association," Sue said. "I used the 24/7 Helpline and read up on resources from the website, but one of the greatest things in the world was going to an Alzheimer's Association support group. It was so helpful to be in a safe place where you could share and get practical tips."

Continuing to Support the Mission

Bill lost his battle with Alzheimer's in September 2020, in the midst of the COVID pandemic. Sue and her son had rapid COVID tests in order to see him for one hour each on the day he died. Her son was with him as he took his last breath.

Sue lives in Michigan and has been a supporter of the Alzheimer's Association for years, including when Bill participated in the Greater Michigan bike ride, Mind Over Matter. In recent years, Sue has brought her support to Wisconsin, volunteering at the Walk to End Alzheimer's in Walworth County, where her daughter Moni Ledtke is the Co-Chair for the event.



Thank you, Sue, for your dedication to caregiving and continued role in creating awareness for this devastating disease.

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