

Buckfield author chronicles Alzheimer's fight — and family's love

by Duke Harrington

BUCKFIELD — Suzanne Johnson's first book, "Till Death Do Us Part" is subtitled, "A Story of a Lifetime of Devotion," but it is much more than that.

It's also a story of compassion,

heartbreak and enduring love.

In the slim 42-page paperback, Johnson chronicles the 15-year battle waged by her parents, Ray and Beatrice Legarde, against the ravages of Alzheimer's Disease.

"The book describes my mother's decline, and the losses, and

the tenacity of my dad to hang on and do the best he could for her until the very, very end," said Johnson, from her Buckfield home. "Doctor's advised against it, but he said, 'As long as I'm alive, she's going to be home with me.' He was very deter-

mined."

Johnson began writing the book just nine days after her mother passed away in 2004, surrounded by loved ones at the family camp on Thompson Lake, in Oxford.

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The work was, she says, part of her own grieving process.

For the story, Johnson made use of daily, meticulous notes taken by her father, which dated all the way back to 1990, when he first began to notice his wife's small memory lapses.

"My father is a note keeper. Everything he's ever done, there's a record for it," says Johnson. "So, there was documentation for 15 years of their life with this disease, even if it was just, 'Didn't eat today,' or, 'Had a bad day today.'"

Before Alzheimer's, Beatrice Legarde was an active woman, who played golf and tennis, and made a hobby of upholstering furniture.

"There was nothing that she couldn't do, or, if she couldn't do it, she would learn how," says Johnson. "It was a shame to see all that ripped away."

As Johnson began adding personal thoughts to her father's notes, a thick sheaf of loose-leaf papers began to form. The collection was not meant to be a book, so much as a tribute to all that Ray Legarde had done for his wife, and his family.

"He always felt like he never did enough, like he was lacking something for her," says Johnson. "My main goal was for him to read it and hopefully to realize that he did do quite a lot to keep her comfortable."

After reading the book, Johnson's father passed it on to her two sisters. From there, it rapidly made the circuit amongst an ever-widening circle of relatives.

"Finally, the word got back to me that I should do something more with it," recalls Johnson. "I was encouraged to take it to another step."

Johnson sent her manuscript to Just Write Books in Topsham.



A LIFETIME OF DEVOTION — Suzanne Johnson, of Buckfield, poses with the portrait of her parents, Ray and Bea Legarde, used for the cover of her book, "Till Death Do Us Part." The book, Johnson's first, chronicles Ray's dedication to giving comfort and support to Bea during her 15-year battle with Alzheimer's Disease. (photo by Duke Harrington)

The publisher, Nancy Randolph, called her back within weeks.

"She was like, 'Oh, we can do something with this,'" says Johnson, but even then she was dubious that her book would be meaningful to anyone outside of her immediate family.

"The main reason I wrote it was just to pay tribute to my dad," she says. "I thought, well if I get it published, I'll give a copy to him and I'll be happy. But I was surprised. It's been very well received. The reaction has been very positive."

Johnson gave the first copy of "Till Death Do Us Part" to her father just before Christmas. Less than two months later, the book is already into its third printing.

"If I had known I was going to turn this into a book, I would have put in a lot more history," Johnson jokes. "I've already been asked to write a prequel about how they met."

That may yet happen, or the book could be expanded, if

demand warrants. For now, Johnson says she hopes "Till Death" can bring some peace of mind to readers who share experiences similar to what her family has gone through.

"I would hope that anyone out there with a loved one who has Alzheimer's, or cancer, or any horrific loss, may be able to read this book and know that they are not alone," she says. "Maybe it will help give them some strength or support, somehow."

Johnson has lived in Buckfield for 32 years with her husband, Ken. She left a nursing career in 1981 to raise their two children and returned to work in 1993 as a child-care provider and assistant preschool teacher in Turner.

Her book, she says, is just a small reflection of the love her parents shared during nearly 60 years of marriage. It's a love that goes on, even now.

"It's been two and a half years, but he continues to visit her at the cemetery every single day," says Johnson.