

Country Connection

Article By:

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Sue Johnson of Buckfield Maine has published her first book, 'Til Death Do Us Part. Using her father's journal notes and her own experiences with her mother, she has written an account of her family's journey with Alzheimer's and her father's dedication in caring for his wife at their home in Lewiston.

When Ray pronounced his "I do" to the wedding vow, 'Til death do us part,' he meant it. Like many of us who have responded to this familiar phrase, he did not know what form of sickness or health would visit his family. He likely never thought that after fifty years of marriage, his wife would not know who he was and start calling him "Daddy."

Just as my family and countless others around Maine, Alzheimer's entered Ray's family and took up its intrusive residence. Bea was diagnosed in 1990 although symptoms began appearing a couple of years before that time. She passed away on August 2, 2004 after 14 years with this unwelcome visitor. Until that day, she was rarely out of sight and reach of her loyal husband.

Sue Johnson is the daughter of Ray and Bea. Her love and respect for her parents and especially her father's dedication and endurance in caring for Bea, inspired her to write a book. The book is appropriately titled, "*Til Death Do Us Part.*" Sometimes, authors and publishers have to search hard for a book's title, but in this case, the simple yet never trite phrase chosen by Johnson fit the story perfectly.

Johnson was a nurse by training and employed as the Charge Nurse of a Skilled Unit in a nursing home for approximately 10 years. She presently teaches in a child learning center and has previously worked as an aide with disabled children in the public schools. Like her father, she enjoys writing for personal reasons. It

was this avocation that prompted her to take her father's journal notes and develop them into a readable chronology of her family's journey through the disease.

She began sharing her work with relatives and friends who encouraged her to polish the writing and seek out a publisher. During this time, she came across a book review in a newspaper. Johnson noted that the book had been published by a small Maine company called Just Write Books of Topsham Maine. Following an interview with the owner, her idea was accepted. "*Til Death Do Us Part*" was published in late December of 2006.

The story provides the reader with the family's personal journey through the worsening phases of Alzheimer's. For the reader who may just be starting their own encounter with the disease, it will also provide some insight into the common behaviors exhibited by the afflicted family member. As I read of Bea putting inappropriate items in the refrigerator, leaving the water running and burners on or constantly repeating meaningless tasks such as folding napkins or wiping counters, I was reminded of my own mother-in-law doing the same things.

"*Til Death Do Us Part*" is filled with examples of Ray's devotion towards his wife: How he would sing 'Let Me Call

You Sweetheart' to her, familiar music being one of the last things to depart her memory. How he would bring her with him as she gently shuffled while he raked leaves. The author noted how her father had become more demonstrative with his feelings toward her mother, complimenting her looks and calling her "his Darling" or Sweet Honey." When Bea could no longer perform household chores, she would follow Ray as he did them and tell him, "You're such a good Daddy." As the disease continued to take his wife from him in its piecemeal fashion, he would spend time just gazing into her eyes as they rested together. Ray wrote in his journal, "There will come a time when those eyes will be closed forever and I want to be able to look at them for as long as I can." There are many other instances of Ray's dedication to his failing wife recorded in Johnson's book.

Though this small book will likely not become a major piece of non-fiction, it is a well written and very readable account of a 'classic' marriage between two wonderfully common people, who decided at a church altar in 1945, to honor each other "*Til Death Do Us Part.*"

