

# A life together

Hard worker ‘always answered the bell’

by Winnie Odo

I firmly believe that we are called to live our lives in the forward; however, I can only understand my life if I am willing to go back and visit the past, and so a new journey begins:

One Sunday afternoon in May 1971 my mother called to me and said there is a man, Gerald Odo on the phone and he wants to speak to you. I was surprised and my first reaction was, “I wonder what he wants?” I answered and he invited me to go to a drive-in movie. I was 24, working at the Credit Union in the town close to where I lived. Gerald was 25 and unemployed; he was then between jobs.

Little did I know that one year later I would be walking down the aisle of my parish church on the arm of my mom and dad to become Mrs. Gerald Odo, promising God, Gerald and the world that I was in this for life, “for better or worse”. At the time Gerald weighed about 220 pounds. He was a robust man, well built and very healthy. Shortly before our wedding Gerald had offers for two jobs, one at the local steel plant, the other a three-month job at the coal mine which was closer to where he was living at the time, so he chose the coal mines. That three-month posting lasted until 1996 when he lived out his dream of retiring at 50; however his dream became a reality as the result of a disability.

After five years of marriage Gerald and I became parents to a chosen child, Raymond, who was six weeks old and immediately captured our hearts. We were very nervous and scared but wanted to become the “parents of the year,” sharing our lives with this little tyke. Parenting was new to us and wasn’t always the joy we thought it would be. Becoming parents was a huge transition, being responsible for something as precious as our son. The days turned into weeks, the weeks into months, the months into years and one day we awoke and realized that we were old. Gerald was a hard worker and



A proud grandfather

accepted every extra shift he was offered with little regard for the toll his environment was taking on his health. After 15 years above and below the ocean, Gerald was diagnosed with a serious lung disease called silicosis or black lung. The levels at that time were low but worthy of a Worker’s Compensation pension. Being compensated for this disease did not come close to the diminishment that Gerald lost as he lived each day.

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His disability affected many aspects of our lives. We had both loved to dance and he was very smooth on the dance floor. He also loved to sing and play the guitar; trust me when I say, there were very few parties that he didn’t get a bid to attend and there were many times I was left behind. Gerald was the one who could fix anything from a broken window to a broken heart. Now, he

became very arthritic, lost the sight of one eye which played a part in him losing his license because of a car accident. Ultimately he had to accept the fact that his breathing was limiting some of the things that had given him much joy and a deep sense of pride to his manhood.

Looking back, I can see that much of the damage and debilitations took place gradually and happened very subtly. Periodically he had to go to the Pulmonary Clinic for lung functioning and each time he went to be tested, the levels increased and the compensation was also increased. He was a smoker, as were most of his co-workers, which magnified the damage in his lungs. Unconsciously we stopped dancing, we stopped socializing. Life went on and Gerald, with his good work ethic, still answered the bell each time it rang. His condition was not going to get better. In fact, it was worsening with each passing year.

He had left school at a very early age. He was 15 years old when he got his first job at a local hardware store, granted a dismissal from school because he was helping out at home. He loved to work. It was something that really fulfilled his life and made him feel good. As his health diminished and the pain and suffering increased, he turned to the bottle for comfort. It certainly didn’t

remove the pain but it dulled it. This took its toll on our relationship. Some couples grow together through pain; however, pain led to excessive drinking which ultimately caused a separation between us and at the beginning of the summer in 1993 we went our separate ways. Gerald moved into an apartment and I remained in our home in Langan. We could see that we were only hurting ourselves and those around us by staying together. I never stopped loving him and I prayed daily that he would find sobriety. I lived by the words of the Serenity Prayer and accepted the things I could not change. I had tried for 21 years to make our life the best it could be but I, too, reached a point in our relationship when I was no longer able to answer the bell, even though I had promised “for better or worse”. He was in trouble with his employer because now, this man who loved to be a good provider was no longer able to answer the bell. Alcohol had taken over our lives.

As Christmas time got closer he hit his bottom and on December 7 he found sobriety. It was the greatest thing that could have happened to both of us. We were very cordial to each other during this separation and thank God when we tried to pick up the pieces of our lives it was relatively easy to enjoy each other’s company again. I remember saying, “Gerald, we can’t change the beginning but if we are willing to work at this each day, there’s a good chance we can change the end.” Thankfully, together we made that happen.

His dream of retirement came in 1996 when, having attained the magic number – his age of 50, plus years of service totaled 75 points – he had reached the requirements for pension. No more clock, no more exposure to the dust that plagued our lives and damaged his lungs. By now many breaths depended on puffers prescribed to help alleviate the inability he experienced as he tried to live as normal a life as his body was able to manage. He was acutely aware of the danger he was in with cigarettes but was now adversely addicted to them. On more than one occasion I would try to encourage him by saying “Gerald, if you knew how much I am enjoying your pension, you would quit, now are going to try and give them up?” Not today would be his response and so life went on.

About 10 years ago, through Gerald’s worker’s compensation advocate we were introduced to Threads of Life and to the Family Forum at Oak Island. We struggled because these weekends always seemed to clash with our son Raymond’s birthday. But from the moment we took part in the Family Forum we were head over heels in love with Threads of Life. This became the highlight of our year. It seemed the perfect place for us to be as a couple living with a life-altering illness, a place where we could learn coping skills from others with the same issues, a place where we



Gerald and Winnie on their wedding day

could let our hair down and even feel young again.

Last spring, just as we began to live with COVID-19, Gerald was sent for a chest X-Ray. Within days our doctor phoned to say that he was very concerned about a large mass on his right lung and wanted to send him for further explorations. During a biopsy procedure, his heart became very erratic which started a new regime of testing. The inevitable was before us but I really think that we both clung to denial as we prayed that “this too, shall pass.” On April 11 Gerald didn’t get out of bed. I checked in on him around 10:00 am and he said he didn’t feel good and wanted to stay in bed. I suggested we phone an ambulance and adamantly he said “no, don’t do that”. I went back in around 10:30 and said, “I’m calling the ambulance to ensure that everything is OK. This time he said “Winnie, I tried to do this on my own and I can’t anymore. I have to allow someone to help me”. The ambulance arrived around 11:15 and as they drove down our driveway with him in the back, the thought came to mind, “he’s not coming home” and he didn’t.

Three weeks later his on-call doctor came with the results of a recent X-Ray, to tell him that he had cancer and that the prognosis did not look good. She laid out his options, one of which was to simply let nature take its course, assuring him that they would take the best possible care of him. His response was, this is the one I want. He turned to me and said “Winnie, are you OK with this?” My response was “No, Gerald, this is not OK but what choice do we have? We have to play the hand we are dealt. If you are willing to play it with me, I am willing to play it with you!”

As the doctor was leaving she told him that she would be back tomorrow and again on Wednesday. This all took place on Monday, April 27.

At 2:00 am on Tuesday the phone rang. It was the hospital telling me his condition had changed. I arrived at 2:20 am and spent the next few hours with him, never dreaming for a second that he was dying – denial is powerful; it helped me to spend that time with him and to remain calm in the midst of all that was going on around me. At 8 minutes after 7:00 his earthly life ended and his pain-free, peaceful life began.

I was filled with emotions; some sad, others filled with gratitude. I am as normal as the next one and can be just as selfish but at that time I was very aware that this was not an ending, it was a new beginning. The pain and suffering that were his and mine, these past few years were over. Gerald fought the good fight, he finished the race and in a strange way I knew that I would be OK. Gerald was very peaceful and so ready to go to God and it would be wrong for me to stand in the way of all that he had gained.

We do live our lives in the forward but only understand what is happening when we go back in time. When Gerald asked me on Monday if I was OK with his decision, he was really asking me for permission to die. I had no idea at the time, what I was saying yes to!

This is a new day. Gerald was laid to rest on August 5 directly across the road from the home he built for us in 1974. Every morning I go for a walk, but only after I go across the road to spend some time with him, to thank him for all he did for us while he was with us and to acknowledge my gratefulness for all that he is still doing for us. In a beautiful way, I felt Gerald’s presence with me as I put this story of our lives together. In an even more strange way, I feel it is part of our closure and is all part of a divine plan.