

BULL RUN OBSERVER™

Friday, August 6, 2010

WESTERN PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY'S FAVORITE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER

Vol. 11 No. 24 ONE DOLLAR

Peggy Ragan keeps her chin up to help others while her angels help her

By KATHY SANSONE
Observer staff

Peggy Ragan is an inspiration. Blessed with an indomitable spirit, a positive outlook and an unyielding faith in God, she lives her life to the fullest despite hardship and disability. Her journey is made possible by a group of volunteers who give of their time, their hearts and their skills.

Just six years ago, her life was very different. Ragan and her husband Bernie were an outgoing couple, who were involved in the community and helping others. Ragan worked as a nurse practitioner. For roughly 28 years, Bernie was a deacon at St. John the Evangelist Church in Warrenton. Two of their adult children—Chris and his wife Kim in Bristow and foster daughter Sueann Collins, married and living in Sumerduck—were local. Their youngest son Patrick lived in Roanoke.

The Ragans bought a home in a 55-and-older community in Vint Hill Farm Station, in the Warrenton-Nokesville area. “We were looking for a new home that would also accommodate my mother, who was 94 years old and had been living independently. It was perfect timing that we found one of the last homes to be sold,” she said. The Ragans moved in. “My wonderful guy Bernie just jumped right in and took care of my mother. She was with us until her passing the following year,” Ragan continued.

For some rest and relaxation, the Ragans joined 10 other couples on a cruise to Bermuda in 2005. One evening, in the midst of dancing the electric slide, Ragan took an unexplained fall and fractured her left hip. As the months passed,



© Bull Run Observer 2010

Kathy Sansone / the Bull Run Observer

Peggy Ragan, who has ALS, volunteers as a reader to young children and is thankful for the many angels who help her make it through her days.

the doctors became concerned that her good hip showed signs of progressive weakness.

It wasn't until 2008 that Ragan was diagnosed with ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. A neurodegenerative disease, ALS affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. Voluntary muscle action is progressively affected; in the later stages of the disease, patients suffer paralysis.

Then, on Christmas Day 2009, Bernie Ragan lost his struggle with cancer. Bernie and Ragan had been best friends for 45 years. Bernie's greatest wish was that his wife could stay in their own home. At his funeral, a table was set up for people to volunteer to care for Ragan. An e-mail was also sent to family, friends, neighbors and church members, asking them for help. The neighbors were especially wonderful, as everyone works to help one another. Within

a few short weeks, “Peggy's Angels,” as she calls them, were in place.

The volunteers were organized through “Lotsa Helping Hands,” an Internet-based community that helps coordinators manage volunteers with the use of a group calendar. E-mail reminders of appointments and health updates are sent online.

“Peggy's Angels” help Ragan live a quality life, satisfying her need for social interaction, fun and interesting pursuits. She has chronicled her journey over the past two years by writing an Internet blog.

“My angels come during the day and spend quality time with me. I like to talk with them to find out what their strengths and interests are. They help me work with a computer, using voice-activated software; help me write my blog; do bookkeeping; take care of my plants; answer my mail; play

bridge... I know they love me. We give each other lots of grace, and I look forward to their visits.”

Marilyn Henry of Gainesville has been Ragan's friend for almost 25 years. Their husbands served as deacons together, and the two women became close. Recently, Henry coordinated some new experiences for her friend, a home visit with several alpacas and a Reiki session, which is a Japanese technique designed to promote healing. According to Henry, “I try to find something a little bit different to bring some joy into her [Ragan's] life. I don't search; rather, I think God gives me the idea or an opportunity to discover something new.”

Ragan labors to be a positive role model to others with her “willingness to be open to new things and to serve others. I believe I am here for a purpose.” Ragan said the challenge is finding out what that purpose might be and to pursue it with faith, not fear.

Ragan approaches her life fearlessly. Before Bernie died, the Ragans took a Mediterranean cruise with their long-time friends Julie and Bob Lynch. Julie Lynch reminisced, “We were quite a picture, Bob and I traveled with Peggy in her wheelchair and Bernie in his scooter. It was so much fun, and everyone was so helpful. One of the challenges in Venice [where the cruise originated] was getting the wheelchair and scooter from the dock to the boat, since both were moving! Never let anyone say that handicapped people can't travel. We can always find a way.”

Ragan agreed, “If you want to do something, do it! The help will be there.” She wanted to keep

working and did, with her co-workers driving her to and from work, until about a year ago.

Now, she puts her energies to work helping youngsters. Each Monday, Ragan offers a storytelling session to a group of youngsters, which includes her granddaughter Sarah. She loves to read to children and has even created tapes of her voice as she reads favorite books.

Sarah and her parents spend the night at Ragan's at least once a week. They believe everyone who touches the ALS patient's life is affected by the disease. The family started the “Peggy and Bernie Project” Web site to share what they have learned with other families, including information on practical knowledge such as a video on using a lift to get the patient in and out of bed.

“When you are on a journey you didn't intend to be, you must realize that God is present in the people around you. The people around me are the hands and feet of God. I wouldn't be here [in this house] without their help; my husband wanted me to stay in this house,” Ragan said.

In her May 1 blog entry, she wrote: “ALS may rob my independence, but it will never take away my sense of humor, my thought process or my ability to love and pray.”

Ragan's blog is online at www.peggyandbernieproject.org/.

©2010 Bull Run Observer
All Rights Reserved.
Used with Permission.