

# One couple's enduring gift | Kitsap Week

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*Reporter's note: Sometimes in this line of work, you head down one path and a different story appears out of nowhere. This is one of those times.*

*Wanting to hear stories of Christmases past, I scheduled interviews with seniors in the community. Then I met John Floyd and his wife, Claire. This is a story of love and giving of one's self, perhaps the greatest Christmas gift of all.*

On Christmas Eve, John Floyd will read to his wife from the book of Matthew in the Bible, just as he has for 53 years.

Instead of reading from their home in Port Townsend, for the fourth year in a row he'll be reading at the Messenger House Care Center on Bainbridge Island.

It's a journey of 44.2 miles from John's driveway to the parking lot at Messenger House, a journey he travels four days a week.

Because inside the walls of the Mediterranean-style building lives Claire Floyd, the woman John immediately fell in love with in 1958. "I just looked at her and I loved her," John said.

John met Claire by chance in a hotel dining room in Tucson, Ariz. Four days later, he proposed.

John was in the Marines and, soon after the engagement, was shipped to his post in Kodiak, Alaska. Six months later he returned to marry Claire. Between the day they met and their wedding day, Claire and John were together 12 times. And now, John travels 88.4 miles roundtrip to spend time with his sweetheart. Claire has lived at the care facility since 2008. She has vascular dementia, and though she doesn't communicate as well as she once did, she is able to tell John "Good morning" and "I love you" upon his arrival.

John's schedule is precise — what else would you expect from a retired Marine? He arrives at Messenger House at 8:15 a.m. and stays until 2 p.m. The couple spends the day together watching old movie classics starring Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire. Claire watches from her bed, while John sits next to her, holding her hand and talking with her.

*(Photo circa 1971 at Marine Corps Ball, Hawaii)*



Claire can no longer feed herself, so John helps her — often some of her favorite foods he prepared at home, like asparagus or beets.

“I understand that [Claire] is better off here than she is with me stumbling around the house trying to do all the things she needs to have done,” John said. “But at the same time, there is some guilt.”

Growing up in rural Texas during the end of the Great Depression and during World War II, John said people wouldn’t dream of placing family members in care facilities.

“If you put mama in what they then called a rest home, people didn’t speak to you at church on Sunday,” John recalled. Both of his grandmothers suffered from dementia and were cared for at home by family members.

“Although I understand it intellectually, it’s hard for me to get used to the idea that I can’t care for her on my own,” he said.

During John’s career in the Marine Corps he was often away for long stretches of time, leaving Claire to care for their two daughters and their home.

If that wasn’t stressful enough, Claire was burdened with the constant worry about John’s whereabouts. To this day, a bumper sticker in Claire’s room reads, “Marine Wife! Toughest job in the Corps.”

“Over the years, my debt to her kept building and building and building,” he said.

Inside the decorated living room at Messenger House, John reminisces of Christmases past. With the lights from the Christmas tree twinkling off his glasses, he talks about his time with Claire and their family. During his military career, the Floyds moved so frequently, they never were in the same house for more than two Christmases in a row.

But no matter where they lived, the traditions stayed the same: decorating the tree with ornaments collected over the years, reading from the family Bible, hanging the stockings John’s mother made.

“We really never changed those things,” John said. “We tried real hard to remember what Christmas is supposed to be about.”

This year, John will spend Christmas Eve with Claire, and then come back again to be with her on Christmas morning.

“I see Christmas as a special time for family and friends,” he said. “It’s a time to remind yourself that we are all on this planet together. And if we can make other people’s lives better, then our lives are better.”

Although he travels hundreds of miles a week and spends hours behind the wheel, John doesn’t think he’s doing anything remarkable. It’s nothing Claire wouldn’t do for him, he said.

And now, John must excuse himself and get back to his bride.

“Truth be told,” he adds before leaving, “I am in as much love with her now as I was in 1958. I come over here because I want to help her, but the other part is that I love being with her.”