

Miracles still happen...

A chapter in the life of Margaret and Bill Colyn, 2012–14

By Bill Colyn

It was a nice winter day on February 2, 2012, when my wife Margaret and I made a visit to our doctor to have a prescription renewed. I had a bit of a rash above my left eye, so I said, “Doc, what’s this spot on my forehead?” He replied, “Oh Bill, you have shingles!”

Personally, I thought “Well, over my 8 decades, I have had various troubles with my hands, ears and eyes, broken my ankle, had stents inserted into my blood vessels, and had my hips replaced. I survived them all, so having shingles should not be such a big deal. I can handle this too.”

Oh, Yeah!!!! I was in for a total surprise.

That was how it all started. When our daughter Anita visited us a few days later at our retirement community, Fair Havens, we told her the news and then emailed our other children to tell them.

Until then, I had been taking care of a lot of the daily tasks around the apartment, since Margaret had been dealing with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Fibromyalgia for several years. This

means she was often in pain, and tired all the time. Over the years, we have learned that we can both handle a lot of pain. But the shingles pain became excruciating. My whole face became swollen, with most of the left side above and around my eye covered with the shingles rash. My left eye was swollen shut. I couldn't wear my glasses or hearing aids. I was in very rough shape!

Although Margaret did whatever she could to allow me to rest and heal, this was only the beginning, and we had no idea of how bad it would get. Within two weeks, I was spending more time in bed, trying to escape the pain with sleep and Tylenol. Our daughter Sylvia often came by to do whatever was necessary. One thing she did was make a medication chart, so that whichever of our children dropped by would know when I had taken my last dose of Tylenol. I lost track of time between doses and Margaret and I sometimes miscommunicated about doses taken.

By early March, I was virtually bedridden, and essentially crippled by the constant and intolerable pain in my head. While our children helped out as much as possible, it soon became obvious that taking care of me in this condition was too much for Margaret.

The two of us could no longer cope with this. Sylvia started exploring how to get some supports in place through CCAC. In mid-March, Anita visited again, and Margaret admitted to her that she could no longer take care of me, herself and the apartment. Anita stayed overnight and the next day, taking care of everything so that Margaret could rest. But a few weeks later, on March 20, Margaret went to the doctor and was prescribed antidepressants/ anti-anxiety medication.

A few days later – after one particularly trying night which saw both of us on the bedroom floor unable to help each other back into bed – we knew something had to change. Fortunately, Sylvia has some training and experience in physical care, medication, and such. Even more fortunately, she and her husband Isaac invited us to move into their home until we were better.

We agreed to their generous offer, and within 24 hours, they and a few more of our children and grandchildren had us moved into their back room. They had stripped our own bedroom nearly bare, moving our bed, night-tables, commode, clothing, wedding picture, and more to our new room, to make it feel like home. And it truly did! All the children tried to make us as comfortable as

possible under the circumstances. Margaret was relieved to no longer be responsible for me all day every day, and was looking forward to just taking care of little things like driving to the bank or grocery store. But even that turned out to be impossible. Within a few days of the move, Margaret ran out of steam, completely exhausted from the strain and effort of the previous weeks.

Sylvia took over control of most of our physical needs, including meds, meals, and hygiene. She also started giving instructions to whomever came into the house to help. Providentially, our eldest daughter Margaret came from British Columbia on a scheduled visit, only 2 days after the move! This was a gift from God, since, more often than not, mom Margaret was now in bed beside me. Furthermore, daughter Margaret's arrival allowed Sylvia to go to work for half days.

One by one, our children came to live in or help at Isaac and Sylvia's. Anita came again from Owen Sound for several days during her spring break. Our eldest son Joe stopped in whenever he could, and his wife Joanne came from Michigan during her reading week break. James came home from India, and since he was between jobs, he could stay indefinitely. Our son David and

his wife Aly were always available when a need arose, driving in from Kitchener whenever they could. Our daughter Dorothy often stopped by on her way to or from work, delivering meals and doing whatever needed doing. Isaac took responsibility for the household meals while we lived there – and they were always delicious! And Sylvia kept in close contact with our doctor. Margaret and I were in awe of how the family pulled together. Those first few weeks, the family was dealing with two very sick, weak people. The shingles pain was excruciating, and it lasted for weeks on end. The only time I found relief was during sleep, but even that was minimal. A cold damp cloth on my forehead felt good, and I always had a bowl beside me with water and ice cubes to freshen my cloth. We were virtually immobile, so our meals were delivered to us in bed. Taking showers was too big an ordeal to even consider, and the medication charts continued. Sylvia's home began to look like a hospital ward, and even our family doctor came for house calls! An occupational therapist provided through CCAC came, and recommended some physical supports to get through the next few weeks: a gel pad to prevent bed sores, a rollator/walker, and more. It was amazing how

everything fell into place.

One evening, we were in no condition to pray, but daughter Margaret said “Okay Mom and Dad, let’s pray together. ‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray you Lord my soul to keep, and if I die before I wake I pray you Lord my soul to take. Amen.’ ” On that evening, this prayer that Margaret and I had taught our children to pray years ago took on more meaning than ever for us.

On March 28, I took the first shower I’d had in a long time. It was a major event and I was exhausted afterward, but it felt so wonderful. Of course, the pain in my head was still unbearable, and it seemed that the pain meds barely made any difference, but I was awake more and becoming more alert. Eventually, as we regained our strength, we started joining Sylvia’s family at the dinner table. And despite the intolerable pain – which now seemed almost normal to me – I was showing signs of improvement. Margaret, however, was weaker than ever, and she was prescribed puffers to help her breathe.

Still, every night when it was time to settle in, we and the children prayed together, as we have done all our lives. When we were too confused or weak to pray, our children came to our bedside and

thanked our heavenly Father for the life we all had and asked God to watch over us during the night.

Being bedridden makes the world fly by. At the end of March and the beginning of April, the children got us outside on nice afternoons to sit in the sun against the back wall of the house: two old people wrapped in blankets. Isaac had handrails installed at the steps by the front and back doors, making it safe and a bit easier for us to climb up and down the few steps.

However, our children had laid down the law, telling me not to go outside by myself. They knew I was not stable enough to go down the 3 steps indoors and 3 more outside to get down to ground level. But I can be a bit stubborn, so one day in April when everyone was gone, I decided to go outside. I shuffled behind my walker, down the hall to the top of the steps. I moved the walker carefully down the steps – and ended up falling on my butt when my walker decided to go ahead of me.

But by late April, both Margaret and I had improved enough, so plans were made for us to move back home. Our doctor described it as, “Two sick people moving home to look after each other. That is unreal.”

At the end of the first week of May, we were moved home. We were immediately visited by supporters and helpers from CCSN and CCAC in our new environment. Supports were all set in place, with regular visits from the housecleaner and meals on wheels, and daily visits from Personal Support Workers (PSWs). The Occupational Therapist came by to fit us with whatever gadgets would make us comfortable in bed and bath. And since Margaret was not getting any stronger, we bought her a nice walker. I was still using a borrowed one, but hoping to use it less and less as I regained my strength.

The first few months back in our apartment were challenging, but we had lots of help, and we were happy to be home together. James headed overseas again to start a new job in Singapore, and the farewell between us was bittersweet, especially since the future was so uncertain. As a family, we had all grown to love and appreciate each other so much more over the past few months.

In June and July, we were able to get out to our patio with not much difficulty, almost every day! Our daily life seemed to be getting a bit easier again. But then, during the first long weekend of August, Margaret started having more trouble breathing.

On August 6, I brought her to the hospital emergency ward, and she was hospitalized and put on oxygen. Within a day she was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis, which made her lungs less pliable and therefore less able to supply oxygen to her bloodstream. After she spent one week in the hospital, she was discharged – with oxygen tanks in tow. But we had been told that there was no cure for the disease, and that in fact it would become progressively worse

Every day, palliative nurses came to attend to her, and they were on call anytime that we were not comfortable with her condition. The children started taking turns sleeping over, on the mattress in the spare room, not wanting us to have to care for each other in the middle of the night. Within a few weeks, we had a PSW staying the night shift, to dispense meds and help whenever needed. The days were filled with nurses and PSWs coming and going, to chart Margaret's condition and help with her physical care. We were loaned a wheelchair to move Margaret around the apartment when necessary, but mostly she just wanted to stay in bed. And even though she was not active, her oxygen requirements kept increasing.

At the beginning of September, our daughter Margaret and son James were called to come home, to see mom alive once more. And while there was talk of moving Margaret somewhere for end-of-life care, she insisted that she wanted to stay at home. This meant that the family had to learn a lot about end-of-life care – but, conveniently, it was on-the-job training!

My birthday is on September 16, and that year I turned 80. We did not think Margaret would last that long, but as the day drew closer the children planned a family get-together in the "Upper Room" at Fair Havens. On Friday, September 14, our family had a large pot-luck dinner, with a birthday cake for dessert. This was the first time in close to 9 years that me, Margaret and all our 7 children were together.

We had thought that Margaret was too weak to join the dinner in the Upper Room, so the children planned to take turns visiting her downstairs in our apartment during the party. However, she insisted on getting up, getting dressed, and joining us upstairs. Normally, for me to walk 100 feet was not a big deal, but for us that was a chore to get to the elevator to the dinner. But I had my walker, and Margaret was in her wheelchair. We joined the

children and a few grandchildren just in time for the meal, and had a grand time.

By the time the meal was finished, we were exhausted. We returned to our apartment to rest, two old people with young hearts feeling like a real old couple. After the children cleaned up the meal, everyone came down to the apartment. What followed were some of the most precious moments we ever had. We sang hymns and songs of praise, we laughed and we cried, we reminisced about when the kids were young and about our family camping trips. We gave thanks to God who gave us many good years. Margaret stood and spent a few moments with each of us, looking stronger than we had seen her in weeks. She was on her feet for almost half an hour – and we all thought that she was not going to be with us very long. We will always remember those precious moments.

The next morning Margaret woke up and said she had decided she wanted to go to McNally House, our local hospice. She said she was getting confused by all the people coming and going in and out of the apartment. She said she would be more relaxed with a professional nurse on hand all the time. So we informed the

CCAC and waited to hear from them. As the news came that she could move in on the September 17, Margaret said to me “I hope I am doing the right thing”. I responded with “You know we always planned to pass on at home, but that can suddenly change. I believe this is the right decision.”

As we took Margaret to McNally House, we really thought that our Father would take her home to heaven very soon. And that’s the way it seemed, because she spent most of her time in bed, and she had hardly any appetite.

We found out what a treasure McNally House is to families facing the loss of a loved one. At any time of day or night, members of the immediate family were welcome at McNally to be with mom or to just spend time together near here. Coffee and tea are readily available, and there are home-like seating areas to make visitors comfortable.

Soon after Margaret moved into McNally, our daughter Margaret made the difficult decision to go back to her family in B.C., and James returned to his home in Singapore. They thought they might not see their mother again.

After the difficult times we had experienced for most of the

first 9 months of the year, things became much easier when Margaret was settled in at McNally. And Margaret and I are forever grateful that we belong to a body of believers that are willing to help out. People all over North America were praying for us: in British Columbia, Alberta, Michigan, The Netherlands, and many churches in Ontario. That gave us the courage to trust and believe.

Moreover, we were showered with many comforting words, hugs, cards, and phone calls. We were visited by Pastor Sid Couperus, Pastor James Van Weelden, pastoral care elder Art Koornneef, and many other wonderful people. Most of these visitors to McNally were restricted to 10 minutes, but they were always valuable minutes

Our doctor assured us that this was Margaret's home now, and stated that she would not be returning to the apartment. She was content with that. We talked about heaven and dying, and she was not afraid even knowing that death is the enemy. She wondered if she would have pain and if Satan would make it hard on her.

It was a blessing for all of us to hear that she was ready to

meet her maker. I assured her I would be with her as long as I could, and trusted that the Lord Jesus would carry her after that. Although Margaret did not have much pain, she was occasionally troubled by anxiety. Sometimes, after a particularly anxious day or evening, the staff would invite me to sleep over. The sofa bed in her room pulled out, so I could lie almost beside her, and we could reach out and touch each other. Before settling in each night, the two of us would sit together and open the Bible to find comfort and strength. We also had a hymnal there to sing songs of praise. We may not have sounded great to anyone wandering the hallways of McNally, but for us two, it was great to praise our God for all the excellent care we were receiving there.

On October 11, the McNally staff served us a delicious turkey dinner for Thanksgiving. We were joined by Sylvia, Dorothy and her husband Rudy, and Margaret even got up and dressed for the occasion. After weeks of having her meals in bed, it was great to be able to sit with her and eat at a dining table. The hospitality at McNally continued to impress us.

During these months, I had to prepare for a written driver's test, since I had just turned 80. Many people were concerned about

it, owing to the fact that I had fallen a few times, but I passed both the vision test and the written test. I was thrilled that I could continue driving myself back and forth to McNally every day. Over the following months, however, I experienced a few more falls, possibly due to the side effects of medication or the lingering effects of the shingles. But on those days that I did not feel it was safe to drive, there were always wonderful people I could call on to pick me up and bring me to visit Margaret.

November came, and Margaret was still with us and, in fact, making a slow turnaround. Her health improved and she started to focus on living. I visited her every day, because I did not want to miss anything. Almost every day, I walked her around the room, back and forth, and slowly, she got stronger. She has always been a very disciplined and determined woman.

Before long Margaret was venturing out of her room in her wheelchair to make her way through the hallways, because she wanted a change of scenery. While seated in her wheelchair, she slowly put one foot in front of the other until she found a smiling face, a plant to inspect or a different window to look out of. Eventually, she found puzzles to work on.

One lovely fall day, Margaret said she'd like to go for a drive, so Sylvia and I took her up the escarpment, along Ridge Road, down McNeilly Road and back along Highway 8. For us, this was literally a trip down memory lane, as we passed by homes and places where we had spent our dating years as teenagers.

We stopped to look at grapes on the vine and the breathtakingly beautiful fall colours on the escarpment. We were so moved on that wonderful morning, and we shed more than a few tears. Of course, Margaret was too tired to stay out for lunch, so by noon, we returned to McNally House. She was exhausted but happy to get back. In fact, when Sylvia was driving us around, I had asked Margaret "Would you like to go home to Fair Havens?" She had replied, "No. The doctor said McNally was my home now."

We were assured that Margaret would not be asked to move out of McNally House, but as time went on, we realized that we should make her bed available to another patient. The nurses and PSWs all agreed, saying that Margaret's condition was so good that she should technically not be in McNally House, and they suggested that we start looking into other living arrangements.

As for me, the McNally staff and volunteers treated me royally.

Every day, they greeted me at the door with a cup of coffee. And even though I brought my own lunch, they offered me a nice bowl of hot soup every day. The staff was so caring towards me, even though I was not under their care.

Now that Margaret was staying awake longer, I would often stay until after supper. The volunteers were always happy to warm up the meal I had brought from home, and sometimes they even brought me a dessert or other treat. Both Margaret and I felt spoiled, and we truly appreciated every bit of kindness. We had got to know the staff and volunteers there very well, since we were there so much longer than the average patient/family. On more than one occasion, we were asked to share the secrets to a long and happy married life. Perhaps this was one of the reasons God placed us here for this time. We were happy to share stories of our marriage, our close relationship with God, and our commitment to each other. We have been truly blessed with a wonderful marriage and family.

Time marched on and December arrived. On nice sunny days, we were able to sit outside in a sheltered corner. Since Margaret has always been an outdoors person, she loved that. And

she continued getting stronger. She sometimes put aside her wheelchair, and started using her walker again.

Occasionally, I took her out for brunch at Clausen's restaurant.

The staff there came out to meet us, taking over control of the wheelchair from me and ushering Margaret inside. And I followed like a lame duck.

On our anniversary on December 9, Dorothy and Sylvia treated us to a lovely dinner in the McNally dining area. And the staff and volunteers made sure it was not just an everyday occasion. They went above and beyond the call of duty, and found some fine china and a few candles! Then, a few weeks later we were also treated to an excellent Christmas dinner. The staff and volunteers here seemed to be giving us a foretaste of what is to come.

McNally House is not a hospital, it is a home – but with angels!

Mere words will never be sufficient to express our gratitude.

But we were thinking of moving on. In the last week of December, Anita and Sylvia toured several local nursing homes, pursuing a possible placement for Margaret in January. Nothing definite was decided but we all knew that a change was imminent.

On January 1, 2013, I had a bad fall when I was walking out the

door at McNally. My head met up with a concrete bench, quite unexpectedly, and I suffered a major gash. An ambulance took me to the nearby hospital, where it took more than a few stitches to close my wound. This brought on another change in meds. As a result, I was not supposed to drive until the meds were stabilized.

As a result, and without much discussion, I was moved back into Sylvia's home. This time, I was given a single bed in the spare room, since her boys had moved back home. I had to rely on friends and family to get me to and from McNally House, but still managed to get there every day.

Margaret surprised us by announcing one day that she wanted to move back to Fair Havens rather than to a nursing home. We immediately made plans for this, though we were not sure how it was going to work out. But then, at the end of January, Margaret was taken off the oxygen she had been on since August 6. The children and I were shocked. At first we wondered if they had taken her off only for the day, but they said it was for good.

On February 3, Sylvia picked us up from McNally and dropped us off at our apartment, where we had lunch and a nap. This was

just a 'visit' to our home, to get the feel of the place. It was very emotional for both of us: Margaret and I sat at the dining room table crying our hearts out. We never ever thought this would happen. We prayed and thanked our heavenly Father for his goodness to us.

Later that afternoon, Sylvia picked us up and returned us to McNally. The next day, we moved Margaret home. It was a huge transition. Neither of us was used to living together in the apartment. Margaret was used to the lifestyle with excellent care at McNally House, so being home was not easy for her. She often became confused. She slept a lot, and often her mind brought her back to McNally. We sometimes needed a lot of patience to be around each other.

I prepared the meals and did my best to meet most of her needs. Since my fall in early January, I was walking with the walker again, and I was happy to get back the privilege of driving later in February. I was blessed with a lot of patience and understanding during this situation.

As before, it was arranged that palliative nurses and others would come to our apartment to care for us and assist us. One nurse,

however, could not believe her ears; when she was assigned to go to our apartment at Fair Havens to tend to Margaret, she exclaimed, “But that’s impossible. That lady went to McNally a long time ago!” Her boss simply advised her, “Go and see,” and when she came she could not believe it. God had worked a miracle in our lives.

We were thrilled to be back home together, even though we had to expend a bit more effort than we were used to. In time, Margaret started getting out of bed more. She also started getting dressed every day. And since spring was in the air, we started spending time on our patio again. And once a week, we went out for breakfast, as we had done before. We were feeling more comfortable, and our apartment was feeling like our home again. In April, however, we were offered a suite in the Shalom Gardens community for the elderly. We started thinking about moving there, but both of us had a tough time deciding whether to go or not. The suite we were shown was very small, and we were so looking forward to spring and summer with our patio and flowers and such. After much thought and prayer, we decided not to take the suite, but stay in our apartment. And we are so glad that we

stayed.

By early summer Margaret could occasionally be found puttering around in the kitchen or picking up a dust cloth. As for me, I had come to love cooking, and now I do not have to ask Margaret as many questions as I used to. It all works out fine as long as I stay in the kitchen. Once when we were sitting in the living room, we heard a loud bang from the kitchen. I went to check it out, and found that the pan of eggs that I had been cooking had boiled dry and the lid had blown off. I am not going to brag, but with time my cooking clearly got a bit better. And for just the two of us, I don't need a culinary course from Niagara College. After all, we have Hungry Man and Michelina frozen dinners at our fingertips.

In the summer, we occasionally made lunches and went on picnics at Charles Daly Park or Fifty Point Conservation Area, where Margaret loved looking at the boats drifting on the lake.

Another time, we enjoyed a major outing when joined by my sister Gerda and her husband Andy for a picnic at Port Dalhousie. It took us a while to get used to the smell of the algae, but once we did, our lunch tasted great in the open air.

Now that Margaret was up and around every day, she

occasionally bumped into things, which resulted in some minor injuries. Over the past year, her skin had become very thin and brittle, and now the slightest bump would cause bleeding. This kind of thing happened a lot, so Margaret always had a few bandages on. One day in October, when I called her to come and talk with Anita on Skype, she hit her left shin on the coffee table and it started bleeding like a pig. We were both a bit alarmed, but I quickly got the nurse's box and started doing what I saw the nurses do. I used the disinfectant, placed the patch on her wound, and taped it down. Having taken care of this situation on our own, we both stood up and hugged each other. When the nurse came, she complimented me for doing such a good job. The healing process is slow due to the medications, but we have lots of time to let things heal.

Of course, we both sleep a lot. Those first months home, I had to give Margaret her meds by 8:00 a.m., and put her to bed at 7:30. Now, however, she is often up later than I am, double checking that the stove is off and the doors are locked. We see many signs of Margaret being stronger as the months go by. A while ago she said, "You know, the way I am, I could live for quite some time!"

About 6 months after leaving McNally House, Margaret started doing her crochet work again. In the past, she had made dozens of afghans, but during the last two years, she did not make any. It was difficult to get the technique from her head to her fingers, but being a determined lady she got it figured out. Then one day she said "Bill, I have to go to Walmart to buy some yarn to make an afghan for McNally House". I thought I had to get my ears checked, but she had her mind made up and she was ready to start. So we got her the yarn, and she worked on it for the next month. She ended up with a beautiful afghan, with no flaws whatsoever – a major accomplishment for someone who had been in not-so-great condition just months before.

It has been a busy life, with the PSWs, the nurses, the cleaning ladies and the doctor all working to help Margaret stay at home. When we were preparing for our first return to the apartment in May 2012, our daughters had arranged to have our medications put in bubble packs. That was something else for me to learn. I had had my own system and I knew exactly who needed what and when. Now, it was important for me to be able to handle all the medications for both Margaret and myself. They say it's hard

to teach an old dog new tricks, but I soon learned to appreciate those bubble packs.

Now, in the first months of 2014, we are looking forward to Margaret's birthday on February 25. None of us thought that she would see her 78th birthday in 2013, but now we will celebrate her 79th!. Some time ago, she was so optimistic that she said "The Lord willing, I could live to be 80!" Of course, we do not know what the future will bring, but we do know that our God is in control.

This week Margaret went shopping with Sylvia to buy more yarn to make an afghan for Sylvia. After that, she hopes to make one for our youngest grandson, Dave and Aly's son Willem Colyn (who, I might add, is named after me).

These days, we often think of the saying "For the concert of life, no one is given a program."

Our God does not promise smooth sailing, but he ensures that we will have a safe arrival. All praise and honour be to Him, who makes it all happen.

This has been our 2-year journey – with all its ups and downs. But that's in the past, and now, we are looking forward to continuing

our journey in the future.