

Cathy Leiker, the Royal Presidio Chapel, and the Mysteries of the Mind

Robert Eliason

Every so often, Stephen Leiker brings his wife Cathy back to the San Carlos Cathedral in Monterey to visit the Royal Presidio Chapel and again see the results of the years she spent working to conserve this historic place. Her smile returns as she marvels at the saints and angels in their beautifully restored surroundings.

"She got the ball rolling and helped to raise money so they could get to work.," Stephen says. "The pews, statues, and altars—everything in the chapel—were taken out and cleaned. They peeled off eight layers of paint, down to the original paintings and decorations. They shored up the walls that were ready to collapse. Cathy would be the one to tell you about all the details, but she can't remember anymore."

Alzheimer's disease is slowly robbing Cathy of her memories. She now requires constant support from Stephen and her caregivers as the disease progresses. Her time back in the chapel allows her a few moments of respite, security, and serenity.

The Diocese of Monterey first hired Cathy as a business manager for the chapel, one of the oldest operating cathedrals in the United States. She quickly took on the role of fundraiser and cheerleader for the restoration. In 2006 began working closely with Dr. Ruben Mendoza, Professor of Archeology at California State University, Monterey Bay, who provided oversight on the project.

"Cathy was organized, very efficient, and very respectful of her responsibilities," Mendoza said. "She had a massive chart based on some very sophisticated computer software that she kept updating. She detailed everything with respect to the archeology, engineering, geology, and final restoration. It was brilliant work."

Appointed project manager in 2007, she oversaw the 20-month-long, \$7.5 million restoration effort, tracking the daily progress and learning enough about archeology and the site itself to be a valuable partner.

Mendoza said in one instance, a late-afternoon call from Leiker led to the rediscovery of a significant archeological and historical treasure.

"She told me workers were excavating in front of the chapel and asked me if I had authorized them," he said. "I told her I hadn't, and she said, 'Well, I think they may have struck something. I need you to come out and take a look.'"

Mendoza dropped what he was working on at Mission San Juan Bautista, drove to Monterey, and saw what had drawn Cathy's attention: a large, but otherwise non-descript, granite boulder. "I knew it was not native to the area," he said. "The contractors were not happy with me, but I immediately ordered a halt to the work. Cathy's sharp eye and her oversight alone saved what remained of the earliest known chapel associated with St. Junipero Serra."

Cathy showed some minor signs of Alzheimer's shortly after the restoration was completed in 2009. The onset of the disease is always barely noticeable—most likely, she had been suffering from it even while overseeing the project.

"I have thought about it many times," said Stephen, "and I haven't been able to pin down when her memory loss started. But I know that sometimes when we'd be in the kitchen, I would ask her to put something away, and she'd forget. And I would ask her to do it again, and then a third

time, and she would get upset and say, 'Well, you forget things, too.' I began to get an inkling then. She didn't seem to forget everything, but she would keep forgetting the same things." The Mayo Clinic estimates that 5.8 million seniors are affected by the disease, which may last up to 20 years before death. It causes the brain to shrink as cells begin to die and connections degenerate.

At this point, Cathy was in the first stage of the disease, which causes short-term memory loss and impacts the ability to carry out complex tasks. Her condition worsened, and, at first, her doctor diagnosed her as having Parkinson's Disease. Stephen took her to the University of California at San Francisco for cognitive testing. She failed 17 out of the 30 questions, leading her doctor to refer her to the Department of Motor Vehicles for a reexamination of her driving skills because Alzheimer's slows reaction times by decreasing decision-making skills.

"This is when I really knew something was wrong," Stephen said. "When she was studying for the test, she could not remember the questions. When she finished the driving test, the instructor told me, 'Cathy drives OK on city streets, but she can't drive on the highway anymore. It would be best if she did not drive at all.'"

Shortly after that, she had an incident while driving on the freeway and voluntarily stopped driving. At this point, Stephen became her sole caregiver, giving up everything to take care of her, a common situation: an estimated 83% of care given to Alzheimer's patients comes from family, friends, or unpaid caregivers.

"I thought, 'Steve, you have been looking for something to do since you retired,'" he said. "It has become my vocation in life to care for her the best I can. Whatever she can't do, I will do."

Cathy can eat by herself and will brush her teeth and wash her face when reminded, but she does not cook or clean, has stopped working in the garden, and needs help deciding what to wear every day.

She has recently developed Capgras syndrome, a rare condition in which someone believes their loved ones have been replaced by doubles, which adds more confusion to an already difficult mental struggle.

"Sometimes she says things like 'I wonder where Steve is? His car is in the driveway, but I can't find him,'" he said. "So to her, sometimes I am an imposter. We figured out a way, finally, a secret signal we both know that confirms to her that I am her husband, Stephen James Leiker. Then she will know that and believe it."

As Cathy recedes from her awareness of her surroundings and loved ones, Stephen himself struggles with the stress caused by having to tend to Cathy constantly and suffers from a form of ambiguous loss—grieving for the loss of a person's mental identity while their physical body still lives and functions.

"To be honest, it is very taxing, the most taxing thing I have ever done, including being a Vietnam combat veteran," he said. "Sometimes, I get frustrated and a little angry. I close my eyes, and I don't know what to do. Her life is in decline, and it is challenging to watch. I have help sometimes from caregivers, but Cathy gets scared when I leave. But I need that hour, that time to myself. I don't have to think about what is going on at home."

Over the last six years, the struggle to cope has been difficult as her symptoms significantly worsened, but Stephen has found peace within himself.

"One morning, I went through a transformation," he said. I told myself, 'Steve, this will be OK. Go along with it as best you can.' Even though I lose my patience sometimes, I always get back to

where I should be. I want to give her the best possible life for as long as she lives. And every day is a new day.”

And on some of those days, you will find Stephen and Cathy Leiker at the Royal Presidio Chapel, treasuring their time together among the angels and the saints.

If you are serving as a caregiver for someone with Alzheimer’s disease, you do not have to face the responsibilities alone. Health Projects Center offers support through its Del Mar Caregiver Resource Center and Multipurpose Senior Services Programs in Santa Cruz, San Benito and Monterey counties. You can contact the HPC on weekdays from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm at (800) 624-8304.