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Ailing dad shares a dream

Hospital staff hastily plans a memorable wedding

By George Barnes TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF



Pictured: Matthew T. Baird and Lindsey W.F. Baird, are seen with their dog, Maybelle.

A family tragedy was turned into the most memorable event in the lives of a young couple through the efforts of nurses and staff at UMass Memorial Medical Center.

Lindsey Baird is mourning the loss of her father, D. Mark Forkey, 64, of Sterling, who passed away Dec. 11 after a three-year battle with cancer. But in her grief, she wants people to know of the exceptional kindness extended to her and her husband, who were married at the hospital's University campus Dec. 9 with her

father in attendance.

"They went above and beyond what they could have done," said Mrs. Baird.

With just 24 hours notice, the hospital staff organized almost everything for the

wedding, giving the couple much more of an event than they were hoping to do for themselves.

The Bairds planned to get married at the hospital on Christmas. Mrs. Baird's father was suffering from terminal chronic lymphatic leukemia, but indications were he would survive through Christmas. Mrs. Baird absolutely wanted her father at the wedding. She said she adored him and could not think of getting married without him.

"There are not enough good adjectives in the world to describe him," she said. "He was absolutely the most amazing father, the most fantastic husband.

Mrs. Baird said her father and mother, Martha J. Forkey, were married 42 years.

"They absolutely adored each other," she said. "Nothing was an inconvenience to him. He is very deeply missed."

Mrs. Baird said having her father with her at her wedding meant the world to her.

"He knows I have my soul mate, just like he had," she said.

Mr. Forkey was a home inspector for several years before falling ill, but was a ski instructor for 40 years at Wachusett Mountain. A Coast Guard Vietnam veteran, he also was a member of the Wachusett Greenway, the New England Mountain Bike Association and a former chairman of the Ambassador Committee of the Wachusett Regional Chamber of Commerce.

"He was incredibly, incredibly active," Mrs. Baird said, adding that he continued to be active for a long time after he was diagnosed with cancer. "Even the disease did not break his spirit."

Mr. Forkey was diagnosed with cancer in 2008. Mrs. Baird said it is believed the source of his illness was exposure to Agent Orange, a defoliant used during the Vietnam War to defoliate enemy positions. Many of the people on river patrol during the war were exposed to the chemicals.

Mr. Baird proposed to his wife-to-be while they were buying a Christmas tree, and plans had been moving steadily forward from that point for a Christmas wedding. Then the hospital contacted her Dec. 8 at 7 p.m. that her father had taken a serious turn for the worse and was not expected to survive through the weekend, let alone to Christmas.

"We had only a day to pull it all together," Mrs. Baird said.

The couple had a major obstacle they needed to deal with before they could get married.

A three-day waiting period is required before a marriage license is issued. To waive that rule, the couple needed a judge's permission. They spent the morning in court and then Mr. Baird went and purchased a wedding ring.

Along the way to the hospital Mr. Baird decided to get a suit. They then stopped at Pronuptia Bridals on Shrewsbury Street.

"I told them I'm getting married in an hour. Do you have anything that would fit me," Mrs. Baird said.

They found a dress that fit perfectly and the store even gave them a discount.

For all the rushing around, the couple expected little more than a simple ceremony with a few family members. When they walked into the hospital, what they found was something so incredible they will be talking about it for the rest of their lives.

First, at the hospital, along with family, were his father's friends. He'd gone through his contact list Thursday night to let his friends know that his death was imminent. Many stopped by to visit. Also present were many of the staff and nurses who had taken care of her father after he was diagnosed with cancer.

Hospital staff were the ones who contacted Mrs. Baird's mother to let her know her husband had taken a turn for the worse and her daughter needed to hurry if she hoped to have her father at her wedding. They also contacted a chaplain at the hospital to conduct the ceremony and set up and decorated a waiting room where

the service was held. They made a cake, got the flowers, put together a meal for the reception and even got a black robe for her father so that he could be somewhat dressed to see his daughter married.

"They really put together a wedding," Mrs. Baird said.

It was not easy. Mr. Forkey was extremely ill, but the staff made sure he was able to attend the ceremony.

"He watched us say our vows and returned to his room right after the vows," she said.

That night the couple stayed at the Beechwood Hotel, which donated the room after a nurse contacted them about the wedding.

Mrs. Baird said she does not have words to thank the hospital staff enough for their outpouring of love and support. She said it was a wonderful moment that turned out to be in the last hours of her father's life. The following day, she said she and her husband returned to the hospital and joined family gathered as her father's health went rapidly downhill. On Sunday, Dec. 11, he died.

The family is in mourning for a man who died young, but Mrs. Baird said she and her husband will always have the memory of their wedding and that her father lived a full life, even up until the end.

"He didn't have unfinished business," she said. "He was too young in a sense, but he gave us enough good memories to last a lifetime."