

Retired minister devoted self as caregiver

By Jim Edminson



Ann Graham, like many ministers' wives, worked in tandem with her husband. The couple met in 1952 at Carson-Newman University in Jefferson City, Tennessee. J. Billy Graham was a history major and Ann was studying to be a home economics teacher. They married while students.

J. Billy was in the Army before attending college. He served during the Allied occupation of Japan from 1948-1952. He became familiar with the culture and began to learn the language. It surprised him how easy that was for a boy from the small town of Jasper, TN.

After Carson-Newman and a pastoral degree with an emphasis in languages from Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, Ann and J. Billy served as missionaries to Taiwan. Back stateside, J. Billy pastored a few churches before settling in North Carolina and becoming the Associational Missionary for Sandhill Baptist Association in 1979.

In ministry, Ann was as beloved as J. Billy. Her warm smile was a precursor to friendships with many Baptists and those in the community of Carthage where the couple lived and retired in 2002.

"You are never prepared to hear bad news from doctors," J. Billy says. "You may think you are. You have dealt with bad things before. But when Ann was told that she had Alzheimer's, we didn't have words."

The couple retreated to their home, to the many things so familiar to them. The photos that document the life they lived together: their five children, grandchildren, the places where they served; the Asian furniture from their time as missionaries that blends with family antiques; and Ann's colorful watercolor and oil paintings of beautiful flowers and distant places.

As the shock lessened, they determined they would handle this the way they handled their sudden departure from the mission field after Ann developed acute nephritis, a life-threatening kidney ailment – they would handle it together.

“We determined that we were not going to withdraw from life,” J. Billy says. “We would continue to do things hand in hand. Ann went with me to meetings, we attended First Baptist Carthage as usual, and I made sure Ann had something to always look forward to and was active – trips to the zoo in Asheboro, lunch at the K&W Cafeteria, and long drives in the country.”

As the disease progressed, J. Billy worked to meet Ann’s every need. Their days were a regimen: dress Ann including adorning her with her favorite necklace and applying lipstick; prepare breakfast; share morning devotion and prayer together; take part in pre-planned daily activities which often included lunch out; and end the day with dinner together and Ann’s bedtime.

“I believed then, and still believe today,” J. Billy says, “that I was the best person to care for her. I believed I could care for her better than anyone and I was determined to do so.”

Sometimes Ann’s life dealing with Alzheimer’s was humorous, like the time she, uninhibited, approached a bald man as they were being seated at a local restaurant and said, “Sir, I’m sorry to bother you, but your hair is parted on the wrong side.”

J. Billy remembers holding his breath, until the man broke out laughing. Ann loved to see people laugh.

Things became worse over time. Despite how the couple altered their life to adapt to the effects of the disease, it wasn’t something they would overcome. J. Billy began to see a time when he might need help. While attending a meeting where NCBAM central regional director Martha McDowell spoke about the ministry’s outreach and support for North Carolina Baptist ministers 65+, he approached her and asked for a private meeting.

“I told Martha that I was in the category that she was talking about,” he says. “I told her that I had questions.”

McDowell and a close friend of Ann’s, Catherine Blackwell – wife of Baptist Children’s Homes’ president Michael C. Blackwell – came to the Graham home. While J. Billy and McDowell met, Catherine Blackwell visited with Ann. She brought crayons and paper for the two to make pictures. Ann chose a color. “What color is that, Ann?” Blackwell asked. Ann did not respond, unsure. The once artist no longer could name the colors, but sitting on the floor, Ann took the red crayon, drew a circle and declared “GOD.”

“God’s grace was always sufficient,” J. Billy recalls.

After meeting with McDowell, J. Billy was ready for the next stage of Ann’s journey. He had been assured that North Carolina Baptists were ready to help if needed.

“We are good for now,” J. Billy told McDowell. “I’ll let you know when there’s a need.”

A few months later on a clear, sunny day, Ann passed. It was October 10, 2014, eight years after the couple first learned of Ann’s diagnosis.

“I wish Ann had never got this awful disease,” J. Billy says. “But if it was to do all over, I would do it again. I would care for her. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

J. Billy remarried this past April 16. He and Anne Hines, the widow of friend and fellow associational missionary E.J. Hines, tied the knot with family and friends in attendance. Anne was the caregiver for E.J. before his succumbing to cancer. The couple shares many of life’s experiences.

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