

Faith guides family through loss

Jackson Township wife, mother of 11½-year-old quadruplets dies after battle with breast cancer

Starting a family was a complicated uncertainty for Cheryl Clifford. But she relied on her faith and became the mother of quadruplets at age 48.

Now it is those children, along with her husband Steve, who are relying on their faith to guide them through a troublesome certainty - life without her.

The 59-year-old Jackson Township woman, who had terminal cancer and

was under hospice care at a local nursing home, died Monday morning.

I spoke with Steve Clifford a few days earlier about his wife and the family's latest journey.

The Cliffords were partners in every sense: husband and wife, parents, and both ordained ministers who also worked together as tax specialists (Clifford &



Steve and Cheryl Clifford with their quadruplets - (from left) Robert, Paul, Ruth and Heidi - last year. Cheryl Clifford, 59, had cancer and died Monday.

Associates). And their tax clients were mostly clergy.

Steve Clifford's voice quavered with emotion as he talked about his wife of almost 38 years and their 11½-year-old quads - Heidi, Ruth, Paul and Robert.

"Of course, they're curious

like all kids. So we don't pull punches," he said of his wife's rapidly declining health. "I walk a fine line between avoiding fear and telling the simple truth."

Clifford talked about the time a month ago when his children found him crying.

"They asked what was wrong, what had happened," he recalled. "I told them I was crying about what probably will happen. Then we all had a good cry together."

The tension in the house

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Clifford children just out of fifth grade

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dropped dramatically after that, he said.

Being transparent with emotions and facts is the only way to go, Clifford insisted.

Three-year battle

Cheryl Clifford was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004 and underwent a mastectomy. She was cancer-free until last fall.

For a while after that, she seemed to be responding to chemotherapy. But that changed in the spring.

"We went to church as a family on Easter," Steve Clifford said. "But (six days later) on April 14, she broke a rib while coughing."

Doctors found signs that the cancer was growing. They changed the type of chemotherapy and added radiation treatments.

"But by the end of April, she was unable to eat because her throat was inflamed," Steve Clifford said.

The cancer had come back with a vengeance.

Even so, as recently as 10 days ago Cheryl Clifford was able to watch a video of her children's recent band concert.

"As ill as she was, my wife was still doing what she had always done - bringing people together," her husband said, his voice swelling with pride.

Just last week, he noted, "a couple of musicians were serenading her and other nursing home residents."

The Rev. Douglas A. Patton, senior pastor at John Knox Presbyterian Church in North Canton and a longtime friend of the Cliffords, was able to watch the family up close.

"Cheryl loved her kids dearly and really entrusted herself into their lives," Patton said.

"In the early years, we would see Steve and Cheryl going around the neighborhood pushing their kids in strollers. Then, as the kids got older, they would be riding bikes with their kids - everybody in helmets. It was the proverbial image of ducks with their ducklets."

Cheryl Clifford also was active with Canton Area Mothers of Multiples.

"She was a very gifted teacher, which was her strength of focus in the ministry of the churches she served," Patton said. "Just a very compassionate person."

Unshakable spirit

Kathy Beels, also of Jackson Township, who served with Cheryl Clifford as Cub Scout Pack 921 den leader, couldn't agree more.

"She had the quads late in life, but was able to go with the



Cheryl and Steve Clifford are shown with their newborns in 1995. After years of trying to conceive, the Cliffords became parents by using an egg donated from Cheryl Clifford's sister.

flow with everything," Beels said. "Nothing seemed to shake her. She let each child be an individual. She would nurture the strengths in each one and help guide and direct them to what they needed. Watching her interact with her children was just incredible to watch."

Beels said she really got to know Cheryl Clifford when she would take her for chemotherapy.

"We would have these long discussions," Beels said. "That's when I found out that she basically taught herself to read. . . . She lived in a very rural part of Connecticut and graduated from high school, but didn't know how to read. So, she taught herself and became a great teacher to so many other children with learning difficulties. Then she went to seminary and impacted even more people in positive ways."

The Clifford children, who had been home-schooled by their mother, just completed the fifth grade at Sauder Elementary School in the Jackson Local School District.

Cheryl and Steve Clifford became parents after years of trying to conceive. They consulted with specialists, took tests and ultimately decided on the egg-donation procedure in which a fertilized egg was implanted in Cheryl's uterus. That egg came from Cheryl's sister, Heidi Kuchta of Connecticut, who was 20 years her junior.

Cheryl's late mother Gertrude Kuchta, who moved in to help take care of the quads, had her last child when she was 46.

Even in the newness of his own grief, Steve Clifford found himself praying for the safe return of Jessie Marie Davis, the pregnant Lake Township woman whose disappearance last week has become national news.

He also wanted to thank the many volunteers who have

stepped up to assist his family in a variety of ways.

"They've cooked meals, took care of the kids and taken them to ball practice and such," he said. "And they've mulched our flower garden. . . ."

"We don't have any blood relatives in Ohio. But our kids have many aunts and uncles and grandparents to help them bridge this gap."

Clifford, an only child whose parents were divorced when he was 4, is no stranger to grief. He lost his mother when he was 27.

Then as now, Clifford knows "what a blessing wonderful friends can be when they step up to carry us through."

"Of course, we wish we didn't need to be carried," he said. "But there are times like this that the body of Christ shows its strength."

"We know her future is sure. But we still weep for the woman we're losing."

Calling hours for Cheryl Clifford will be 2 to 4 and 7 to 9 p.m.

Friday at First Church of the Resurrection, 901 E. Tuscarawas St., Canton, and one hour before the 10 a.m. Saturday funeral, also at the church.

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