

An enduring story of love

Elliott and Amy McCaughey devoted a lifetime to one another and their three children. Even when illness challenged that devotion, their love for one another survived to the end.

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Dr. Elliott McCaughey passed away last week. His memorial service will be tomorrow, at St. Paul's United Church in Sandy Hill.

He immigrated to Canada from Northern Ireland in 1972, and there are many ways you could write Dr. McCaughey's life story. You could talk of the career that followed his move to Canada; the many scholarly papers and books he published in his life (nine pages on his CV); the years he spent teaching at the University of Ottawa and practising medicine at the old Civic Hospital, where he rose to become chief of laboratory medicine.

You could speak of the family he raised: two girls and a boy; and how he loved his children, and liked nothing more when he was a young father than walking with them around Belfast Harbour.

You could talk of his love of people, entertaining, travel. You could write the life story of Dr. William Thomas Elliott McCaughey in any of these ways, and you would be right. Nobody would ever say you were wrong.

Or you could do something else, to be slightly more right, and write a love story.

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Elliott McCaughey was raised in Belfast, on a street that was razed shortly after he emigrated, although the McCaugheys have lived in the city for generations.

Amy Paul was raised in a small village outside Belfast.

They met at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast. He was a young doctor. She was a nurse. They were married the year after they met, in 1955.



Elliott McCaughey met Amy Paul while he was working as a doctor and she as a nurse at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast.



CREDIT: Chris Mikula, The Ottawa Citizen

Amy McCaughey suffered a stroke that left her with a condition called aphasia. As a result, she repeats the same phrase over and over again.

"He proposed to my mother at the Royal Vic," says their daughter, Gail Stuart. "After my mom said yes, my dad had a friend bring in a hospital tray with a selection of rings on it. That's how my mother picked out her engagement ring. Right in the hospital."



Dr. Elliott McCaughey's daughter says she couldn't find a photo of her father without her mother. 'He never wanted to be anywhere else,' says Gail Stuart.

The year after the marriage, their first child was born, a son who was given his mother's maiden name, Paul. The following year, Claire was born. Then Gail two years later.

Dr. McCaughey was a gifted doctor who eventually moved his family to Dublin, where he would become head of pathology at Trinity College. The family lived in a beautiful stone house. Threw elegant dinner parties. Travelled Europe.

Yet in 1972, after telling his wife, "we can give the children more opportunities over there," the McCaugheys immigrated to Canada. Dr. McCaughey became a professor at the University of Western Ontario in London. Four years later, the family moved to Ottawa.

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For the next 15 years, Dr. and Mrs. McCaughey led a charmed life in Ottawa. He became the director of the Canadian Tumour Reference Centre, then head of the department of laboratory medicine at the Civic Hospital. He was a gregarious, fun-loving man who considered himself a "whisky connoisseur" and future friend to anyone he met. Friends say neither claim was boastful.

She became a real estate agent and one of the most gracious hostesses in the city. Her dinner parties were the talk of the town. There was a sense of celebration to everything she did.

And they loved each other dearly.

"I have been going through photo albums the past few days," says Ms. Stuart, "and I cannot find a single photo of my father by himself. In every photo, my mother is standing next to him. He never wanted to be anywhere else."

And so, as he approached his 65th birthday, Dr. McCaughey began planning his retirement. The kid from Belfast had done well for himself, and money was never going to be a problem. He and his wife would travel the world. They would golf in Ireland; winter in the Cayman Islands; grow old together in peace and prosperity.

And then one year before his retirement, Dr. McCaughey was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. The following year, Mrs. McCaughey had a stroke.

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Amy McCaughey had a massive stroke and it left her with aphasia, a medical condition that impairs a person's ability to communicate. In many cases, a person with aphasia

will repeat a phrase over and over again, even though they are fully aware of what is going on around them, and will have no other mental disability.

That's what happened to Mrs. McCaughey. The phrase that stuck in her mind was: "OK, nothing good." There is no rhyme nor reason for why that phrase, and not another. Some people curse. Some people remember a snippet of a poem. For Amy McCaughey, it was "OK, nothing good."

The stroke devastated Dr. McCaughey, who by then had visible signs of Parkinson's. His hands trembled. His memory was fading.

Doctors told their former colleague that his wife should be placed in a chronic care hospital. He was in no condition to take care of her, and she would never recover from the stroke. She would be a vegetable, repeating her one nonsensical phrase -- "OK, nothing good," -- for the rest of her life. She should be institutionalized.

That was the advice given to him. His daughter says he took about two seconds to reject it.

" 'She's coming home with me'," says Ms. Stuart. "That's what dad told them."

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For the next several years, the McCaugheys lived in a ground-floor apartment in Sandy Hill. They had nurses come during the day, friends and family at night.

Dr. McCaughey would bathe his wife, read to her in the evening, sit with her every morning as they watched the city street outside their window come to life.

He insisted his wife get physiotherapy, speech therapy, anything at all that might help her, and he didn't give a damn how many doctors told him it was useless.

There are people in Ottawa who consider it a miracle, what has happened to Mrs. McCaughey in the 81/2 years since her stroke. Today, she can walk short distances and feed herself. She paints every day. Other than the aphasia, she is in perfect health.

She has even found a way -- I've seen it work -- to communicate by using her three lone words. She does it by inflecting her voice. By pointing with her hands. By facial expressions.

It is a wonder of language that when nearly every word is stripped away, there is still something powerful that remains, something that will let us communicate to one another. "Some days, I forget she is using the same words over and over again," says Ms. Stuart. "We have had wonderful conversations. We really have."

But as his wife improved, Dr. McCaughey's condition worsened. He descended into the hell that is advanced-stage Parkinson's much more quickly than anyone had predicted. He began to suffer from dementia. His body started to shut down on him. Three years ago, he finally had to leave his home and go to St. Vincent's Hospital.

It was at St. Vincent's that he died, on May 26. He was 76.

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And so a life is lived. A good life, an honourable life, one that benefited many people, and what more can you ask of a man?

As I said, a memorial service for Dr. William Thomas Elliott McCaughey will be held tomorrow at St. Paul Eastern United Church on Daly Avenue at 2:30 p.m. In keeping with one of his last wishes, it will be a celebration. "I don't want an expensive funeral," he told his daughter. "No sense burying my money with me. Spend it on a party."

Many stories will be told at the memorial service, although none will be more poignant than the love story that unfolded after a chance meeting at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast, nearly 50 years ago.

And none can be more touching than what happened on the last day of that love story.

For among the many tricks and unexplained wonders of aphasia is this little anomaly -- sometimes, for a fleeting second, the mind finds other words.

It normally happens in response to something someone is saying to a person with aphasia. So, out of the blue, the person with aphasia will finish a sentence left dangling. Or sing the chorus of a song after a final verse. Then, just as quickly, the old phrase returns.

And so on May 26, as Amy McCaughey sat by her dying husband's bedside, her daughter told her that the man who loved her for these years loved her still.

"He loves you, Mom," said Ms. Stuart. "He loves you." And so, in the quiet of that hospital room, with her children watching, Amy McCaughey leaned over her husband, and whispered into his ear: "Love you, love you, love you."

That's the story that matters.

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