

Ohio couple married 70 years die 15 hours apart

Anna Rumer, Zanesville Times Recorder 12:55 p.m. EDT April 19, 2014



(Photo: AP)

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When Helen Felumlee passed away at the age of 92 Saturday morning, her family knew her husband Kenneth Felumlee, 91, wouldn't be slow to follow her. The couple couldn't bear to be apart very long, and Kenneth passed away only 15½ hours after his wife of 70 years.

"We knew when one went, the other was going to go," said daughter Linda Cody to the *Zanesville Times Recorder* (<http://www.zanesvilletimesrecorder.com/article/20140414/NEWS01/304140030/Couple-s-love-story-spans-decades?odyssey=mod|newswell|text||s>). "We wanted them to go together, and they did."

After Kenneth had his leg amputated 2½ years ago because of circulation problems, Helen became his main caretaker, making sure he got everything he needed. She continued this up until three weeks before their deaths, when she became too frail to care for him.

"She was so weak, she could hardly do it," Cody said. "But she was still pushing his chair; she was still filling his water cup."

When Kenneth's health started to fail, Helen began sleeping on the couch to be near him. The two hadn't slept apart in 70 years, the family said. Years ago, when the two took an overnight ferry equipped with bunk-beds, they chose to both sleep on the bottom bunk rather than be separated for even a night.

Soon after Kenneth, Helen's health also started to go downhill, and she was confined to a hospital bed near the end of her life. Kenneth took this particularly hard.

"He would just reach out and grab her hand, but he would keep his head down because he couldn't stand to see her hurting," Cody said.

Upon his wife's death, Kenneth was ready to join her, family said. "She was staying strong for Dad and he was staying strong for her," Cody said. "That's what kept them going."



Kenneth and Helen Felumlee of Nashport, Ohio, posing here in the 1940s.(Photo: AP)

Helen and Kenneth's love story began when they were just 18 and 19 after Kenneth's ex-girlfriend, a friend to Helen, introduced the two. They immediately hit it off, dating for three years before deciding to elope.

Lying to their parents, the two said they were taking a day trip to Kentucky to visit Kenneth's old basketball coach. Heading to the courthouse with only \$5 in their pockets, Kenneth and Helen arrived with barely enough to pay the \$2 fee. The couple were wed Feb. 20, 1944, two days before Kenneth was legally old enough to get married. "He couldn't wait," son Jim Felumlee said.

When the couple returned, they were too nervous to tell their parents right away, so they lived separately several weeks until Kenneth developed the courage to break the news of their elopement.

"I would have liked to have been there for that conversation," Cody said.

The newly official Felumlee family grew almost immediately, as Helen quickly became pregnant with the first of their eight children.

Caring for a household of eight children was no easy task, but the couple was determined to make it work. Both Helen and Kenneth had grown up working, and they weren't afraid to put in the extra effort.

Kenneth worked at the B&O/Chessie Systems Railroad as a car inspector while also operating Felumlee's Garage. He later worked as a rural mail carrier for the Nashport Post Office. In addition, he was active in his Nashport-Irville United Methodist Church as a Sunday school teacher and member of the Council on Ministry and administrative board. He also was a member of the board of education from Frazeyburg-Nashport schools, Tri-Valley schools, and the Muskingum County School Board.

His children recall him coming home from one job, grabbing the only hour or two of sleep that he ever operated on, and then heading off to his other job. At night, it wasn't uncommon for Kenneth to leave the house in order to go help someone whose plumbing or car had broken. "Some days, he wouldn't sleep," Jim said.



In this Dec. 29, 2012, Kenneth and Helen Felumlee, of Nashport, Ohio, pose for a photo with their eight children.*(Photo: Dick Felumlee AP)*

The long absences could be hard to deal with, but Helen supported Kenneth in all his endeavors. "There would be hours he wasn't here, and she had all these kids, but she understood that it was a need in him to help other people," Cody said.

Helen spent her days cooking and cleaning not only for her growing family, but for other families in need in the area. She even changed diapers for a neighbor's child, as the father was not keen on the task. She taught Sunday school and served on the Council on Ministry and Friendship Circle at the church, but was known even more for her greeting card ministry.

Not only would Helen just send birthday cards, she would also send sympathy cards, greeting cards and holiday cards to everyone in her community, each with a personal note inside.

"She kept Hallmark in business," daughter-in-law Debbie Felumlee joked.

Jim added, "If you would forget your birthday, she would remind you."

Together, the couple served their community, were active in the lives of their many grandchildren, and visited nursing homes on Sunday. Beloved by the community, Kenneth was jokingly dubbed the "self-appointed mayor of Nashport" by those that knew him well.

When Kenneth retired in 1983 and the children began to leave the house, the Felumlees began to explore their love of travel, visiting almost all 50 states by bus.

"He didn't want to fly anywhere, because you couldn't see anything as you were going," said Jim.

The two grew with every day, their children said, and remained deeply in love until the very end. Even in their last days, Helen and Kenneth would eat breakfast together while holding hands.

About 12 hours after Helen died, Kenneth looked at his children and said, "Mom's dead." He quickly began to fade, and was surrounded by 24 of his closest family members and friends when he died Sunday morning.

"It was a wonderful going away party," Cody said. "He was ready. He just didn't want to leave her here by herself."

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