

## Loss long before death

By Erin Carlyle/Staff Writer

On a sunny Wednesday morning, 18 people suffering from various stages of Alzheimer's disease gathered for karaoke at Arbor View Retirement Community in northeast Santa Maria, where they live.

Gwen Roberts boogied down to the strains of one old tune. Joe Arguelles tapped his feet in his wheelchair. Ed Dykeman cried mid-verse during "Amazing Grace."

"Ed always cries with that song," said aide Virginia Puerta.

Others looked ready to fall asleep.

The scene is all too familiar for Don Ward, whose wife Sharel spent the last year and a half of her life at the retirement facility before dying of Alzheimer's disease in 2002. But Ward's wife was unable to participate in such classes, because her disease was so far advanced.

Ward brought his wife to the facility only reluctantly, and he visited her every day.

After 44 years of marriage, Sharel Ward's death left a void in her husband's life so deep that it's difficult for him to say what he misses most about her.

"Everything," Ward said. "She was one of a kind."

Although his wife died just more than a year ago at the age of 75, Ward says he lost her long before that. The disease ravaged her personality, turning the vivacious, capable homemaker and mother of three into a woman who eventually didn't recognize her own husband.

A registered nurse and former president of the League of Women Voters, Sharel Ward was a community activist who volunteered for the American Heart Association and was the North County coordinator for the Lung Association.

After her children were grown she became involved in antique dealing, eventually selling her items throughout the Central Coast and in Washington and Wyoming.

"She could do anything she wanted to," recalled Ward, 71. "She could do those crossword puzzles in 20 minutes - in ink."

But as the disease robbed her of her cognitive skills, those abilities slipped away. She became more forgetful, confused. At first it was little things, like not being able to keep track of keys or credit cards.

Then she began driving to Waller Park on Sundays for her weekday walking group.

"As time went on she would burst into tears," Ward said. "She said her mother died," although the death had occurred decades before. And although her husband would comfort her and assure her that everything was all right, the episodes would repeat.

"Maybe even the same day she'd start all over again," he said.

Her upbeat, sunny personality also changed. She'd sometimes become angry and irate when her husband closed the door quietly, and would say that it was too loud. She wandered off. Ward eventually had to lock the doors to prevent his wife from leaving.

He bought her a silver identification bracelet from Safe Return, a national hot line that links caregivers with Alzheimer's patients who wander off. But his wife refused to wear it, because she knew what it was for.

So Ward got her a more attractive gold version, which she instantly loved.

"That's what you have to do," he said. "You have to be sneaky."

The Wards used the bracelets several times when Sharel got lost - once in Seattle.

Ward learned other coping skills in the three years he cared for his wife at home, though he eventually let her go to Arbor View because his children convinced him that she would get better care there, and that he would have wanted her to do the same for him if the situation were reversed.

His wife never admitted that she had the disease, which made helping her more difficult, he said.

Humor was essential throughout the ordeal, Ward said. He remembered one time when their dog, Nittney, came home with a new haircut, and his wife told everyone they had a new dog.

"You've got to have a sense of humor about these things or you'll drive yourself nutty," he said.

For Ward, participation in a Santa Barbara support group with the California Central Coast chapter of the Alzheimer's Association was an enormous help.

Neighbors and friends also provided relief, by helping him look for his wife when she wandered off and by bringing meals as things got more difficult.

He's grateful for the time he and his wife had together after he retired, for the trips they took across the nation and to Europe. He's thankful they were retired and did not need to work. He recognizes that other families may be worse off.

Now Ward tries to help others with what he's learned. He passes on books and tells patients and caregivers what is ahead, trying to be tactful but direct.

"A caretaker for Alzheimer's disease is one of the hardest jobs there is," he said.

"I always think, what's worse, physical or mental illness? I came to the conclusion that mental is. It takes away a person's personality. Their total self is gone.

"I think everybody at one time asks the question why," he said. Although Ward hasn't figured out the answer himself, he was struck by the response a priest gave his brother when asked why he had been chosen for tragedy after his wife died: "Why not you?"

\* Staff writer Erin Carlyle can be reached at 739-2218 or by e-mail at [ecarlyle@pulitzer.net](mailto:ecarlyle@pulitzer.net).

March 28, 2004