

LOVE

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When he moved into her home at Shell Point Retirement Community in 2006, they bought the unit next door, because the neighbor had died. He wryly noted the advantage of having two bathrooms.

Shell Point is an expansive, idyllic community near Sanibel Island, almost a city within itself. There are four restaurants, a salon, an auto-repair center, two hotels and a pharmacy. The assisted living building in which they live provides a sense of peace, that things are taken care of, Mr. Johannessen said. But here, there are often reminders that time is of the essence — as if he needs them. Residents' deaths take place almost daily and are announced over the intercom and by memorial pictures in the lobby.

"The day will come, it'll be our turn," he said, but not morbidly, pale blue eyes lingering on.

It's not uncommon to find intimate love late in life, said sex therapist and psychologist, Shirlee Passau-Buck. But it is sometimes discounted by a culture that automatically awards youth for being good looking, hip, toned, with it. But if what Oscar Wilde wrote is true—"The tragedy of being old is not that one is old, but that one is young" — then some elderly folks are actually getting the chance to waste their youth all over again.

"You don't view the elderly as being intimate and having loving affairs," Passau-Buck said. "Even in nursing homes, if some little man goes traipsing down the hall...horrors, horrors... but that's a perfectly normal thing to do. What's wrong with the touching and the hugging? Those are perfectly wonderful things. We're sexual human beings from the time we're born to the time we die and it won't go away."

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Merna and John Johannessen at their home in Shell Point Retirement Community. They met in 2004 and were married in 2006.

FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

tients, she found that sexual issues in late life aren't so different from any other age.

"Every woman is orgasmic and no man can give a woman an orgasm," she said. "A woman has to permit herself to become orgasmic. And if we all know those facts and communicate those, then a man can stop trying so hard to give a woman an orgasm."

Not that he shouldn't put in a little effort, though. Passau-Buck, an old fashioned romantic, said her favorite things about Valentine's Day are candlelit dinners, picnics on the beach and boxes of chocolates.

"It's a surprise," she said of her own Valentine's Day plans. "I don't wanna tell."

The Johannessens will be spending their Valentine's Day evening at a hotel in St. Augustine. They have traveled extensively, to high school reunions, even to Hawaii. They met in a "grief share" program at a local church. There they learned, among other things, that both of their spouses had heart trouble and bladder cancer. Over two years, their relationship progressed from casual walks to once a week dinners.

"It was meant to be," she said.

"She wanted me to marry her very quickly," he teased.

She slapped his arm and mumbled something about sleeping on the couch.

"Don't encourage him," she said, a faint blush rising in her cheeks.

"She has become more like the mom I remember before my dad was sick," her daughter Carol Cooper said. "They are both just so in love that it's...wonderful. It's really cute."

A change in demeanor is one of the measurable ways an intimate relationship may impact health, said Dr. John Burton, director of the John Hopkins Geriatric Education Center.

"The effect can be strong, moderate or mild and age is not a factor there," he said. In 40 plus years caring for elderly patients, he has "seen tremendously powerful, intimate relationships develop in older age, and when positive have been very nurturing."

He said blood pressure may improve. Or couples may find fewer problems with an aching back or a head, and more willingness to participate in therapies.

After Mrs. Johannessens husband died though, it never occurred to her that she should start a new relationship for the sake of health.

"(Intimate relationships) are not something you can prescribe," Dr. Burton said. "It's something that just kind of happens."

Someone posed the question: would she ever consider remarrying? She had not, she said. But then she thought she would, if she could make him a good home. "When this one appeared I thought, 'Ya, I could make him a good home.'"

She had never been with anyone other than her first husband, and they met as teenagers. Getting married had been "sort of an automatic thing. In this case, we were strangers."

Because a lifetime and its accumulated responsibilities don't go away, the Johannessens said they will be buried with their respective families.

"When you're 22, you don't think about where you're going to be buried," she said. "Now it's a major thought."

While many differences between old and young love are superficial — less hair, more wrinkles — that depth of thoughtfulness, of heightened sensitivity to the past, impermanence and time, are qualities that tend to bloom late.

"Love matures," said the Rev. Herman Bips, 86. "And there's never any level where your love stops maturing."

Bips and his wife Alma, 83, live in Shell Point near the Johannessens, and will be celebrating a 65th Anniversary in April.

They were married in 1943 for \$30 by a judge in Hoboken, N.J. After spending one night together, he left to serve in the Army. Because he was blind in one eye, he was home in six months. They started careers, saved money and bought a two-story fixer upper on Glen Lake in New Jersey. A painting by Mrs. Bips which hangs in their living room depicts it.

"It was a wonderful life, living on that lake, with ice skating in the winter, and fishing," Mr. Bips remembered.

Later they sold that first house. He became a minister; she taught Kindergarten students. His six month stint in the Army is the longest they've ever been apart.

"We discuss everything," Mr. Bips said. "We discuss about the end of life. Like what should happen to our bod-

ies. We're both going to donate our organs."

The most significant result of their love has been a sense of peace, he said.

"I have Alzheimer's, you know, which is a degrading business," Mrs. Bips said. "But he's been there. And I know that he still loves me."

As the concept of love matures with time, so does sex, said Walter Bortz, Clinical Associate Professor of Medicine at Stanford University and past president of the American Geriatrics Society. Bortz is 77, and has been married for 55 years.

"Old sex is different because of clear biologic differences between 20 and 80 year olds," he responded via e-mail. "Some of these are negatively coded in our aging process: vaginal thinning, and erectile poverty. Fortunately, these are newly susceptible to technology."

"More importantly, aging confers new, more mature competence to sex. Immediate gratification is deferred to mutual understanding and caring. Companionship trumps passion as an enduring trait.

"So yes, sex is for life."

But so are memories, and the past and what happened before the Johannessens met each other.

"We still want to retain our relationships as we viewed them," Mr. Johannessen said.

This year he lost a daughter, and she had a son who was very ill. It was two more reasons they feel lucky to be together, she said.

"Companionship is probably one of the major things you wind up with that is a great experience," he said. "You've got great company and can do things together and talk about great old times and hopefully new good times."

For them, a new history and a new love story just began.

"An unexpected brownie point," as Mr. Johannessen called it.

In their modest, well-kept bedroom, bottles of perfume are carefully arranged on a dresser. A fourth floor window overlooks the rooftops of Shell Point and beyond them the Caloosahatchee River. Adjacent to the window is a bed, so white and smooth it might have never been slept in. Even after the Johannessens are gone, this is the image that remains. ■