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A Second Chance to Help

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A few months ago, Kathy Keating was at death's door. Now she and her husband are back on pace to feed thousands of hungry people in Ashland County through their grassroots food distribution program, Feed My Sheep.

"Alive matters. It helps a lot," said Keating on a recent afternoon as she struggled up the stairs at Ashland Assembly of God church, where she and her husband, Craig, run their nonprofit food pantry.

Kathy, who still uses a cane to walk and portable oxygen tank to help her breath, was revived from sedation similar to a coma in July after being hospitalized for months with non-specific interstitial pneumonitis, or NSIP. A non-infectious inflammation of the lungs, NSIP is a rare disease that can lead to death if left untreated, according to Dr. Marie Budev, Kathy's pulmonary critical care doctor. "Out of the lung diseases, pneumonitis is the more common one, but it's pretty rare overall," said Budev.

Kathy first became ill shortly before Thanksgiving last year. She was able to come home around Easter after emerging from nine weeks of sedation at Grant Medical Center in Columbus, but come May she was back in the hospital — this time the Cleveland Clinic.

With Kathy maxed out on the ventilator and experiencing multiple organ failure, doctors told her family to be prepared for the worst. According to Budev, she was hooked up to so many machines her family couldn't even reach her bed.

"We're talking severe," said Craig, who refused to accept the possibility of Kathy's death. It wasn't the first time the Keatings dealt with severe illness. Craig underwent brain surgery eight years ago to remove scar tissue caused by a lifetime of seizures. "First I went through it with him, then he went through it with me," said Kathy.

If she did survive, Kathy was likely to have a limited level of functioning and may never walk again, doctors told her family. Because doctors induced paralysis to take over her body's breathing function, Kathy experienced extreme muscle deterioration and could not move her limbs.

"She was not expected to make it all, let alone come back as far as she has," said Kathy's daughter, Debbie McCormick of Cincinnati. Not only did she learn to walk, breathe and function on her own again, it was just a couple months before Kathy was back in her office at Ashland Assembly of God making calls to secure a food supply for "Feed My Sheep."

The Keatings, both of whom are pastoral counselors at the church, launched the program in 2003 to supply food for anyone who came knocking. The couple found thousands of people throughout Ashland County were looking for a food supply where they were welcomed openly, and the only documents required were identification to prove they live in the county. "I don't think people should have to beg for food," said Kathy. "When they come in here, we treat them with respect and we give them what they need." The Keatings said it's important to them to meet people "where they are." "If people need food, they need food," said Kathy.

Both social workers, the Keatings have spent their lives feeding people, first in the Cleveland area, then North Carolina, then Las Vegas, Nev., where they distributed 250,000 pounds of food throughout the inner-city in a single day.

Not only have they helped drug addicts and the homeless, but once-affluent people who have fallen on hard times. "A lot of people are one paycheck away from total hunger," said Kathy.

In a way, helping others was Kathy's reason for living, according to her daughter. "The entire time she was so critical, I knew that even though she was unconscious and couldn't speak and couldn't move, she was fighting mainly because she knew she had more to do," said McCormick. "That to me is pretty incredible."

Despite their ordeal, the Keatings remain zany and lighthearted, laughing often and interrupting one another when telling stories. Kathy jokes with Craig often, telling him her illness was "just a plea for attention." "We're wild," said Craig. "You learn to be that way when you've been through hell and back."

The Keatings plan to operate Feed My Sheep at its previous level, feeding as many as 4,000 people per month. According to Ashland Assembly of God Pastor Brenton Page, the need has increased since the Keatings shut down last Christmas as job losses continue throughout the Ashland area. Page, who works closely with the Keatings, credited the previous success of their program to the couple's ability to connect with people who've received a cool reception from other similar programs. "They kind of reach the people that nobody else wants to reach," said Page, "and they have a compassion for those people and those people are drawn to them."

The Keatings spent \$8,000 in private donations last year to purchase food from the Cleveland Food Bank, which has since increased its prices substantially. The couple said they'd like to see more area businesses or corporations contribute locally rather than channel their donations through outside food banks. "We need to give back to ourselves," said Craig. "We have needy people here."

Craig and Kathy recently hooked up with the national organization Feed the Children, an Oklahoma City-based nonprofit that's willing to provide them a tractor-trailer full of non-perishable food items every four months — if they can transport it.

The pair is looking for someone who would be willing to lend them the use of a truck and driver to pick the food up from the Michigan-Indiana border three times a year. So far they've been able to transport smaller amounts with a truck from RE/MAX Towne and Country Realty.

In addition to food distribution, the couple has founded a counseling service at the church called "Because We Care Counseling of Ashland." The organization provides a range of counseling — "whatever they require," said Kathy — and payment is based on clients' income.

Self-proclaimed "missionaries in their own country," the Keatings hope to expand their efforts to provide people with other much-needed services, such as assistance with utility payments.

According to Pastor Page, the Keatings seemed to have redoubled their efforts in serving others since Kathy's illness. "It's kind of like on a new lease on life kind of thing," he said. It's a lease they can't wait to share with the community — and with family.

"Our family's going to have a Christmas like we never had before," said Kathy. Last year, while Kathy lay in a hospital bed, Craig set up the Christmas tree "out of faith." "This year when we set it up, she'll be with me," he said.



Kathy and Craig Keating organize a shipment of food from the national organization Feed the Children. Times-Gazette photo/Tom E. Puskar

HELP FEED MY SHEEP

The Keatings will be distributing food to those in need 10:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. each Saturday from an outdoor storage garage at Ashland Assembly of God 1489 State Rt. 511 Ashland, 44805. They also will be serving hot meals 11:30 a.m. in the downstairs of the church.

There is a fund set up at Sutton Bank in Ashland for anyone who would like to make a donation to Feed My Sheep. For more information call Ashland Assembly of God at 419-289-0107.