

## 'Keeping Love Alive' helps families deal with Alzheimer's

By Kathy Norcross Watts Special Correspondent Nov 27, 2016



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Authors of "Keeping Love Alive as Memories Fade" (from left): Edward Shaw, Debbie Barr and Gary Chapman.

### Want to go?

**What:** "Keeping Love Alive as Memories Fade: The 5 Love Languages and the Alzheimer's Journey" authors Deborah Barr, Edward G. Shaw and Gary Chapman.

**When:** 7 p.m. Monday

**Where:** Salemtowne Retirement Community, Smith Saal-Community, 1000 Salemtowne Dr.

**Cost:** Free

**Information:** (336) 714-2147, [www.salemtowne.org](http://www.salemtowne.org)

**Book:** \$15.99, published by Moody Publishers, available at Barnes & Noble, Amazon and other places.

During her nine-year decline resulting from early onset Alzheimer's disease, Rebecca "Becky" Shaw still enjoyed an ice-cream cone.

"It gave me incredible joy just to see her get joy just from an ice-cream cone," said her husband, Ed Shaw. "Her smile — getting an ice-cream cone — those seconds of joy for her could last days for me."

Shaw demonstrated to Rebecca that he loved her in a way that was meaningful to her, despite her cognitive decline.

When his wife was diagnosed, Shaw was a professor and chair of radiation oncology at the Wake Forest School of Medicine. He had practiced medicine for 21 years and was an internationally recognized brain-tumor specialist, according to the hospital website. Inspired by his wife's diagnosis, Shaw stepped down from the chairmanship position. He continued his clinical practice part-time between 2008 and 2010 while he obtained a master's degree in counseling. He received joint faculty appointments with the department of counseling on the Reynolda campus and the section on gerontology and geriatric medicine at the medical center, according to the hospital website.

Shaw had read “The Five Love Languages” by Gary Chapman, The New York Times best-selling author and senior associate pastor at Calvary Baptist Church. The approach benefited Shaw as he cared for his wife and patients who he counseled at the Memory Counseling Program he founded, which is now part of Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center.

“I really liked the ‘5 Love Language’ framework,” Shaw said. “I started using it in couples’ therapy. I was using this in therapy, but applying it to Rebecca’s and my relationship.”

He joined Chapman and Deborah Barr, an author and health educator, to write the book, “Keeping Love Alive as Memories Fade: The 5 Love Languages and the Alzheimer’s Journey,” which was published in October.

The ice-cream cone enabled Shaw to show his wife of 40 years — a trained speech pathologist, the mother of their three daughters and grandmother to two grandsons — that he loved her in a way that she could feel his love. Rebecca, 62, died Aug. 20.

“What was important to me was to keep our love as her cognitive memory was fading,” Shaw said. “Just that whisper of a response, sharing the touch and the time.”

## Showing love

“The Five Love Languages,” published in 1992, evolved from Chapman’s counseling. He saw that people experience love in five ways: through words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, acts of service and physical touch. Spouses often don’t share the same love language, he said, and they naturally reach out with their own language instead of what the spouse needs to feel loved.

His original book has been tailored for other subgroups, including teens, parents, men, singles, military and more. The books are published in 50 languages around the world.

“The need to feel loved or appreciated is fundamental to life,” Chapman said. “I would hope it’s going to help family caregivers learn that the emotional life of the patient is alive, and that we can still touch them.”

The collaboration on the book evolved serendipitously. Barr had worked with Chapman, and she was working with Shaw when she learned that he was applying Chapman’s love language approach to help Alzheimer’s patients’ spouses and family members. Barr wrote the book using Chapman’s framework and Shaw’s personal experiences and those of others who he counseled. The names of the patients in the book have been changed.

“Our focus is different because we’re focusing not on the disease but on the relationships that are affected by the disease,” Barr said. “At its heart, it is a book about love. It’s a book about relationships and not losing the relationship you have when a person develops dementia.”

Shaw said that much of the counseling that he did was with couples. Once an Alzheimer’s diagnosis is made, it begins to affect the relationship.

“We saw this in hundreds of the couples we’ve seen: Despite a declining cognitive function, their ability to receive love is never lost through the journey,” Shaw said. “Their ability to express love becomes more difficult.”

Understanding what’s happening to their loved one’s brain and being able to love the person in the way that she feels loved provides some comfort to care partners.

The book includes a questionnaire to help identify an individual’s love language, and if dementia has progressed too far for the survey, there are other ways to determine it.

“If you can think back: In earlier years what did they complain about? What did they ask for? How did they express love to others?” Chapman said.

“If you love others it’s satisfying. The happiest people in the world are those who serve others.”

## **A message of hope**

Chapman said that care partners also need to let their friends know their love languages. If the care partner feels like his “love tank” is full, he will have more energy to provide care.

The term “care partner” is important, Shaw said, because it’s necessary to have a team to support both the individual with Alzheimer’s and family members.

“It’s physically, mentally and spiritually exhausting to be a care partner,” Shaw said. “The primary care partner has to be intentional about keeping the emotional love tank full. There are times as a care partner the journey will break you. For me, this book is ostensibly about hope, the hope that I can love that person until they take their last breath.”

“Hoping is coping. I think you also gain an appreciation for softly spoken love languages so that even just sitting together holding hands would be quality time and physical touch — just to watch a movie — that can have so much more meaning.”

## A love story

Shirley Lunsford, 65, was the 2008 Teacher of the Year for Holy Cross Child Development Center and a Hospice volunteer for eight years. She and her husband, Doug, have three children and six grandchildren. She was diagnosed with Alzheimer's when she was 58. The couple's story is included in the book with fictional names.

After the diagnosis, "the grieving starts; there's no closure," Lunsford said. "Seven years into this I've learned a lot from Dr. Shaw, not only his knowledge of the disease and brain, but his compassion. He's walked in my shoes."

"It's a terrible journey, a lot of heartbreak, a lot of second-guessing your decisions. The more information you have, the more peace inside you can have."

Lunsford cared for his wife at home for six years, and when he could no longer provide the care she needed, the decision to have his wife moved to a care facility was heartbreaking.

He struggled with, "How can I move her out of this house knowing she'll never come back. That's hard after 43 years together."

He knows that she is receiving the care she needs, and he sees her every day. Fridays he picks her up to get a milkshake, and they take a walk at Kernersville Lake Park. They've always enjoyed the outdoors together.

"The time that she and I spend together every day is quality," Lunsford said. "We touch, we look in each other's eyes, we go for walks."

"Shirley hasn't called my name in over two years. As soon as I walk in, she smiles and we hug. She knows me. When this journey is over, I want to feel in my heart that I have done everything I can possibly do."



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