



AMH United Way Campaign Could Honor Late Co-Worker

September 19 2012 11:18 AM

Denise Heil, left, caring for Carol Kasting Laird before Carol passed away earlier this year from the effects of Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease.

ALTON, IL – Denise Heil, lead registrar at Alton Memorial Hospital, is challenging her co-workers to give to a United Way agency that's near and dear to her heart.

For 12 of the past 14 years at AMH, Heil worked with Carol Kasting Laird, who retired from AMH in 2008 after more than 30 years of service. Last November, one day before her 66th birthday, Laird was diagnosed with Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or Lou Gehrig's disease.

“Carol fought a brave battle, but lost that battle on May 1 of this year,” Heil says. “Without the help of the ALS Association, Carol’s comfort level toward the end of her life would have been very difficult for her and her caregivers — of which I was one — to manage.

“There were three of us who helped her primary caregiver, Carol’s husband, Fred,” Heil says. “That was myself, Carol’s goddaughter and another longtime friend. ALS is a very demanding, frustrating disease and you feel helpless most of the time. When we started learning about how to care for Carol, I was so happy to learn that the ALS Association was able to lend her much of the equipment she needed because of funding from the United Way.”

Heil says that representatives from the ALS Association visited Laird in her home to evaluate her surroundings and make accommodations for her condition.

“They offered a wheelchair ramp, checked whether an electric wheelchair could work, tried various equipment for the bath, gave her a speech machine and breathing machines, and arranged for oxygen, instructions on feeding and her medication,” Heil says. “This was all possible because of assistance from the United Way.”

Fred Laird says that he’s grateful to the United Way and the ALS Association, as well as to Heil.

“Denise worked with me through all of this,” Fred Laird says. “She’s a true friend, and I’m thankful for all of her support.”

ALS is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. Motor neurons reach from the brain to the spinal cord and from the spinal cord to the muscles throughout the body. The progressive degeneration of the motor neurons in ALS eventually leads to their death. When the motor neurons die, the ability of the brain to initiate and control muscle movement is lost.

“There is no cure nor conventional treatment for ALS, just comfort measures,” Heil says. “And the United Way helps the ALS Association provide that for patients who cannot afford the equipment and the guidance needed to understand and deal with the effects of this disease. There are still many at Alton Memorial who remember Carol -- and I know she did not and would not want anyone to suffer with this devastating disease.”

So Heil’s challenge to her co-workers – or anyone else – is very simple:

“If you or your co-workers are unsure of what organization to select or don’t know of anyone who benefits from United Way donations -- in Carol’s honor, let’s choose ALS for this year.”