



'They were holding hands': Hamilton couple of 60 years dies days apart, has emotional service together
The thing that struck many people about Tom and Mary Strodbeck was how devoted they were to each other.

That was especially surprising because their marriage was at least "doubly mixed."

He, after all, was from Middletown. She was raised in Hamilton. He grew up a Methodist, while she was a lifelong Catholic. But he met her more than halfway. They raised their children in Hamilton, and after he converted to Catholicism, he even became a deacon in the church, going on to baptize dozens of babies, marry dozens of couples and deliver Holy Communion many times to the hospice where they spent their last days.

The two were so close, they shared a visitation and funeral at their longtime church, St. Julie Billiart, with large turnouts at each ceremony.

"It was one of those tearful allelujahs, for sure," said one of their priests, the Rev. Michael Pucke. "At the funeral, we had one casket. It was Tom's body, and Mary's remains. After 60 years, still together."

Thomas McNeal Strodbeck, 87, died Jan. 11, 2018. Mary Frances (Puma) Strodbeck died at age 83 on Jan. 15, 2018. The parents of five also were survived by 13 grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren.

“They were holding hands when my Dad died,” in adjoining beds at Hospice of Hamilton, daughter Nancy Riggs of Hamilton said.

The couple married Feb. 9, 1957. After Mary’s mother died during the mid-1970s, Tom promised he would start regularly attending church with his wife. He converted a few years later and then attended seminary to become a deacon.

“The word that most people used to describe them was ‘devotion,’” Riggs said. After Mary had the first of several strokes in late 2016, Tom fell two weeks afterward. He also suffered congestive heart failure. He was not expected to live long.

He went to visit his physician, a friend of his, who told him, “You know, Tom, you just never cease to amaze me. You’re still going along,” Riggs said. Her father answered: “‘I’ve got to stay alive for my wife.’”

“And that really summed up their life — they really were devoted to each other,” Riggs said.

“They did everything together. They loved each other’s company. They loved being around each other,” Riggs said. “My mother, she was so handicapped by all those strokes, and she kept trying to take care of him.”

For the visitation and funeral, her urn was in his casket, but he later was cremated. Their ashes will be at St. Stephen’s Cemetery.

Tom was head of bookkeeping at First National Bank before becoming, in 1966, a senior systems analyst at NCR. Mary was a homemaker before working for a pharmacy and other retailers before retiring from Mercy Hospital.

In sharing a funeral, the couple accomplished a personal goal of Tom’s mother, who used to occasionally read about couples sharing a funeral, and say, “That’s the most romantic thing. I hope your grandfather and I do that.”

“Well, they didn’t,” Riggs said. “But her son and her daughter-in-law did.”

Many people he tended to through his volunteer work “knew Tom and certainly cared deeply about Tom, and like myself were quite affected by his death,” Pucke said. “Mary was just a really loving person. She was 100 percent Italian — maybe 110 percent Italian — and just a very, very loving person. Even during their declining months of illness, I fairly often would stop over to their home and bring them Holy Communion, and there were just really good visits with the two of them.”

While Mary was sick this past summer, Tom told Nancy he planned to stop dialysis after she passed. Nancy told him: “Dad, they’re going to do two for the price of one on funerals.” And, “he cracked up, laughing. He said, ‘You might as well.’”