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# New memory care option keeps spouses together

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NORTH OAKS, Minn. -- It is hard for Bill Penney to remember a time when he and his wife Mabel were not a couple.

Even now, looking at wedding photos from 56 years ago, Bill can't help but smile at his beautiful bride. "Oh, was she ever," he says. "She still is."

Life dealt the Penneys more than a few blows, but none more difficult than Mabel's diagnosis 12 years ago with Alzheimer's disease. "I didn't want it to end," said Bill, his voice cracking with emotion.

That Bill's and Penny's years as a couple haven't ended, can be credited to a groundbreaking residential option at [Waverly Gardens](#) senior community in North Oaks.

Dubbed [Caring Companions](#), the program is designed to keep memory care patients together with their healthy spouses. The Pennys share one of 12 apartments in the Caring Companions community.

"This is my half," says Bill as he walks through the door of his bedroom, "the same as Mabel's half."

A kitchen and living room make up the center of the apartment, with bedrooms on each side. The Pennys can still share their morning routines and watch TV together in the evenings. But a separate access door into Mabel's bedroom allows her care staff to tend to her needs through the night without disturbing Bill.

"It extends the opportunity to stay together as a couple," explained John Mehrkens, vice president of project development for Presbyterian Homes, which owns Waverly Gardens.

Mehrkens brought the idea for Caring Companions to his development staff after experiencing the painful separation of his own parents in the final stages of his father's battle with Alzheimer's.

"The last year of their life was not the way they would have chosen it," said Mehrkens. "If they had scripted it themselves they would have stayed together and had the services available to them to do that."

To that end, each day Mabel goes from her apartment into the memory care area at Waverly Gardens for patient programming.

Meantime Bill can still pursue his active lifestyle outside the community. He keeps a trike, a three-wheeled motorcycle, in the parking garage and knows that even during a trip of day or two Mabel's needs will be tended by her care staff.

"That's why we're here," he said. "I could live my life and I could enjoy being close to Mabel."

It's the way Bill and Mabel Penney always envisioned it: a couple till the end.

"If I could roll the clock back I'd marry her again," smiles Bill.

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