

# N C O U R T R H E N R T N S

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## There's no place like home

### Grantsburg man with ALS has a simple dream

Mary Stirrat | Staff writer

GRANTSBURG - Four months ago, after 31 years together, Bill Briggs' wife succumbed to metastatic breast cancer. Not only did Bill lose the love of his life, he lost his primary caregiver. He may also lose his house and other possessions, even their dog Bo, to pay for his care.

His biggest dream is simple — for him and Bo to go back and live in the home he and Michele created. A second dream is to meet Ellen DeGeneres, since he has been a fan of hers for years.

Bill suffers from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also called Lou Gehrig's disease. It is a progressive neurological disorder that affects nerve cells of the brain and spinal cord.

His journey with ALS began in the fall of 1984, when he was 24 years old. Born and raised in the Grantsburg area, Bill had been working in Minneapolis for Poole Construction, Ltd. Construction declined, and he was hired at Parker Hannifin in Grantsburg. He realized at Parker that it was getting hard to keep his grip and he was dropping things. He was also tripping a lot.

A neurologist conducted tests and suggested that Briggs get a second opinion. He did so in 1985, at the University of Minnesota, and on his 24th birthday he received the devastating news that he had ALS.

Doctors said he had a year and a half to live, and it sent him into a downward spiral.

"I was freaking out," Bill, now 57 years old, said through his caregiver. "I didn't know what to do."

What he ended up doing was turning to alcohol, pot and pills.

Life took another turn for Bill, and this time in the right direction. In 1986 he met his future wife, Michele, at the Broaster House, now Kozy Kitchen, in Grantsburg, where both of his future sisters-in-law also worked.

From that time on he had better things to do with his time. "Michele helped me quit drinking," said Briggs. "We were doing things together, like fishing, and I stopped hanging at the bar and following the wrong crowd."

Michele knew from the start that Briggs had ALS, but when he asked if she wanted to get more involved with him, "she said 100 percent."

The couple wanted to see if they could make it on their own, so they talked with Briggs' aunt and uncle and asked to rent a cabin. Briggs was on disability and Michele had gotten a new job as deli manager at the grocery store in Grantsburg, and they wanted to make sure their income would be enough.

It worked for them, and in 1988 they were able to buy the home in Trade Lake that they lived in ever since.

Michele soon got a job at the dental clinic in Nye, and Bill was still able to walk and take care of himself with Michele's help, staying home alone when she went to work.

The couple married on Sept. 23, 1995. Bill's condition gradually worsened, and within a year or two of their marriage he began to have problems walking on his own. It became necessary for him to get care at home while Michele was working. "It wasn't safe for me to be home alone," he said.

Bill and Michele took the trailer home they owned and added a bedroom, a living room and part of a basement. They planted a field of pine trees, and as the trees grew the couple made trails through them. Bill would take wheelchair walks along the road, often with their dog. He had a hunting shack in the woods and hunted deer with both gun and crossbow.

They were able to make the final payment on their home in 2014, eight months before tragedy struck again.

On Monday, Jan. 5, 2015, Michele was diagnosed with breast cancer. The dental clinic where she had worked for 27 years closed five days later.

Two years and 14 days after her diagnosis, after undergoing chemotherapy and other treatments, Michele lost her battle with cancer. It had spread to her liver, lungs and brain, and her liver eventually failed.

While coping with his loss and grief, Bill also needed to find caregivers and financial assistance. Michele had been his primary caregiver, but when she became sick she could no longer fill that role.

They were able to utilize a program that provided 40 hours a week of in-home care, but had to pay out of pocket for the rest of the time so they burned through their savings.

After Michele's death Bill tried to stay in the home they had made together, but two main issues forced him to move to Burnett Medical Center at the end of April. First, he re-



Bill and Michele Briggs were together for 31 years, until her death in January. She was his primary caregiver and his best friend. — Photo submitted

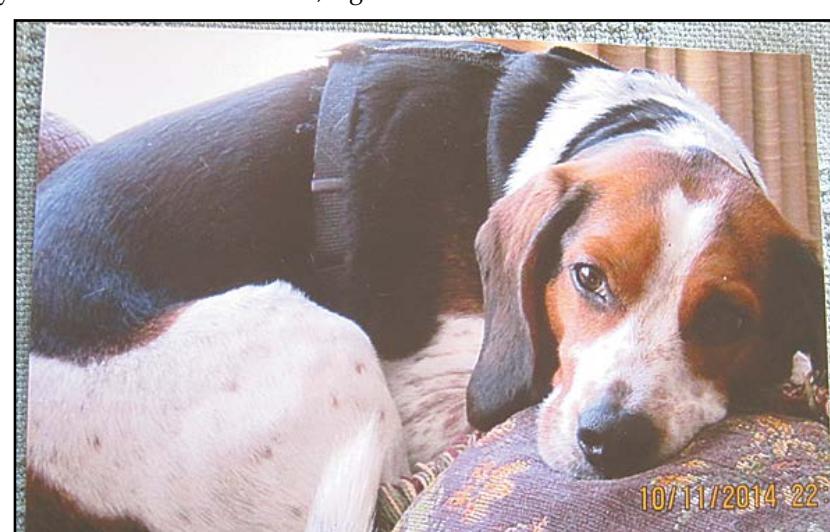
quires 24-hour a day care but the agency that is available is short-staffed. The company that took over his care, he said, sent out people who could not communicate with him and who would leave him for 15 minutes at a time. Secondly, he is ineligible for most government programs until Michele's life insurance is spent. That time is drawing near, but the lack of available help makes it impossible to consider moving back home.

If adequate help is not found, Bill faces losing his home and possessions to pay for his room and care at Burnett Medical Center or another facility.

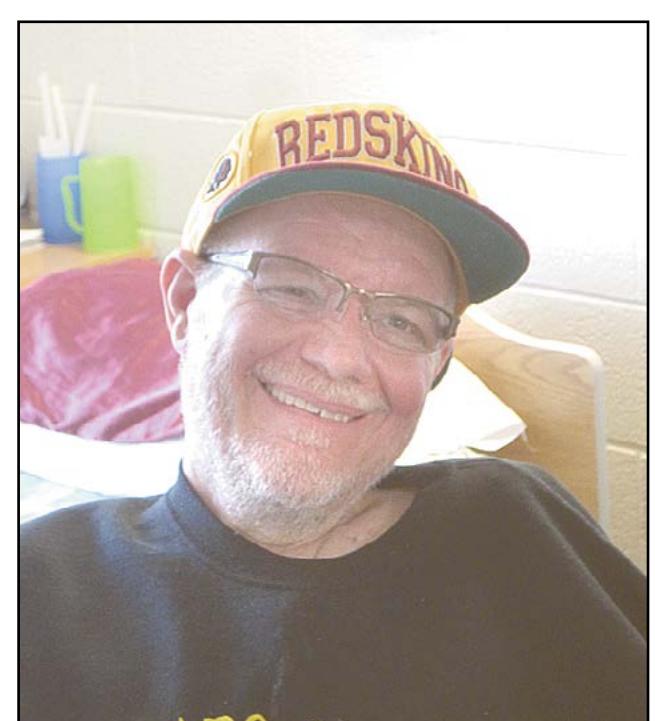
Meanwhile, the patient/staff ratio does not allow him one-on-one care, and Bill is losing the muscle he had been able to retain. He has lost more than 25 pounds since Michele died, which means loss of muscle mass. This leads to less independence and more pain.

More than anything, Bill wants to return home, living as independently as possible in the place he and Michele created and which is now fully paid off. To do that, he will need round-the-clock caregivers and access to government programs.

Time is ticking away, though. Michele's insurance is dwindling, and the time for selling their home and other possessions to pay for his care is nearing. He is looking for any help that anyone (including Ellen DeGeneres) can give. "I'm even open to it if someone wants to adopt me and Bo," he joked.



Bill and Michele Briggs' dog, Bo, has been staying with Bill's brother, George, since Bill went into Burnett Medical Center. If he can't find enough help to live back in his own home, said Bill, all his possessions including his home and Bo will need to be sold to pay for his care. — Photo submitted



RIGHT: Bill Briggs, in his room at Burnett Medical Center, was diagnosed with ALS 33 years ago, on his 24th birthday. — Photo by Mary Stirrat



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