

Living Life's Lessons

Carolyn Forster's walk toward rediscovering happiness

By Sherri Gardner Howell

For Carolyn DeLozier Forster, life sometimes feels like it is simply putting one foot in front of the other. For those watching her daily walk, however, her steps toward rediscovering happiness the past five years have been much more than that.

Carolyn lost her partner and best friend, her husband, retired Maj. General Fred Forster, almost five years ago. Within a six-week span, Carolyn lost her father, her husband and her mother-in-law. Six months after that, Carolyn's mother died.

Fred was, in many ways, larger than life. He was a man of influence and power, a man of compassion and vision. Carolyn was his partner, his helpmate and best friend, and, after the diagnosis of cancer, his loving caregiver and cheerleader.

But in the years since Fred's death, Carolyn has had to find a way to live without him. Although she is reluctant to step into the spotlight, Carolyn agreed to talk about her journey because she hopes it will help others who find themselves in the same place.

In many ways, this is a story rebirth. It is about finding joy in life while dealing with losses that break your heart.

Deep roots

Looking out from the house she and Fred shared on Nina DeLozier Road, Carolyn sees familiar grounds. She grew up on this land. She worked and played in the fields she sees outside her window. There was a happy continuity when she and Fred made their home there.

Carolyn, who has a business degree from the University of Tennessee, says Fred would tease her about the fact that he remembered the first time he talked to her, and she didn't remember him.

"I was working out at the air base (McGhee Tyson Air National Guard Base), where I worked for 13 years. Fred came off of active duty, and we were transitioning to the KC-135 refueling plane. When we did, we got a whole wave of these new pilots who flew those airplanes. I was working in personnel, so I was processing all these new people. Fred told the story many times that he remembers I was the first person he talked to when he called the base, but I didn't remember him because I was talking to everybody! It was awhile, though, before we became friends and then some time

after that before we started dating."

Carolyn and Fred were both divorced. Carolyn's daughter, Joy, was a toddler when they married, and daughter Rebecca was born a little over a year later. Their lives were full of "wonderful, ordinary things," says Carolyn, and they enjoyed the constant mix of family, friends and community.

When Fred was diagnosed with cancer in 2007, the couple – with that constant support of friends and family – began a good, hard fight. There were successes along the way, but the battle ended on Nov. 18, 2010. Fred was 64.

Life without Fred

"For the first year, I spent a large amount of time doing legal work, taxes and paperwork, which was a distraction of sorts," says Carolyn. Her table had stacks of mail and papers for each of the loved ones she had lost as she dealt with wills and probate.

Eventually, however, the To Do list gets shorter. "Sometimes when you are a team, a couple, you do everything together. Fred and I were a team and our activities, interests, church – all of it were things we did together.

"Then all at once you are totally by





Caroline Forster, Rebecca Forster, four-and-half-year-old Drew Carver, Joy Carver holding two-and-half-year-old Caroline Carver and Will Carver (from left) hold their hands over their heart during pledge of allegiance at flag pole dedication for Major General Fred Forster at Maryville High School just before the football game against West High School.

yourself. You have to figure out who you are, what you want to do, how you want to spend your time. Thank goodness I didn't have to do that immediately. I had all those things to do, and I had new grandchildren. God helped me through just by giving me things to do."

The grandchildren are the son and daughter of Joy and Will Carver. Carolyn is grateful that she is in the same community as Drew and Caroline, now 8 and 6.

"I can see how it might be so much easier to start over if you go somewhere new. But I have grandchildren here, and it is so wonderful to have them close," says Carolyn. "And I love this community. The extra effort – and sometimes extra tears – it takes to stay home is worth being here."

Looking around at the visual reminders in pictures and memorabilia, Carolyn also says she is glad to be in the house she and Fred shared. "I didn't want to leave this house. This was all happy. It works."

Others things already important in her life became lifelines. "I am fortunate in that I have a lot of girlfriends," says Carolyn. "I am involved with – and have been for 25 years – two lunch groups, plus a book club, and I was still playing tennis then. I have a lot of good girlfriends to rely on.

"Having grief control me just isn't how I deal with things."

There are grief triggers that are still hard. "A lot of what I do with others is primarily daytime stuff. When it gets to nighttime, that's a whole different story. It is really hard for me, for example, to go out to eat by myself. Fred and I loved to eat out. He loved to meet new people and see who was out and about. I can't go and sit. Some people have no problem with that, but it's just one thing I can't do."

Carolyn also discovered that one of her biggest sources of support also became very difficult.

"I think the hardest change I have made since Fred died is changing churches."

Carolyn was sixth generation at Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church. Fred, an Episcopalian, joined her there when they got married. They sang in the choir together, attended couples Sunday School.

"My parents did everything there was to do at the church. Fred and I were so intertwined there. I found I could not sit where we sat, so I would go to the balcony. I couldn't go back to the choir. I couldn't make myself sing.

"Eventually I found that it was the only place where I still always cried. It was overwhelming and confusing because I so truly love the people. It

was just too hard."

So for a year, Carolyn started visiting other churches. "I can tell you that the faith community in Blount is alive and well," she says with a laugh. "I didn't know what I was looking for, but I knew I would know when I found it."

She is now at home at Fairview United Methodist. "I think part of it was trying to find a group that didn't look at

me and miss Fred. That's part of what I've been coming to terms with. I think a lot of people feel sad about what happened to Fred, but I don't want always to remind people of the loss."

It's a dichotomy, of sorts because Carolyn also shares one of her worries. "I think one thing that really weighs on me now is that I don't want people to forget Fred. I am now at the point where I rejoice when someone calls and says, 'This happened, and I thought of Fred today.' Or they will have Fred stories, and I love to hear them. Sometimes it's hard, but I have learned to look at those memories and say, 'That was a great time. Thank you for that good memory.' I just don't want people to forget him."

'Wired differently'

When it comes to handling life's adversities, Carolyn says she doesn't have a roadmap and isn't sure there is one. "I don't know that you are ever completely healed when you lose your loved ones. There will always be that loss. However, we are all wired differently. I handle things one way, and someone else will handle it differently. I don't know if it's genetic or my farm upbringing. Our family motto on the farm was 'This too shall pass,' so I have that deep in my roots."

Her faith is also in her roots and in



Carolyn Forster and Patti Clevenger talk at the Law Enforcement Lunch Wednesday at the Maryville Municipal Building.

her daily life. "My faith is the whole backbone of my life. Fred and I prayed together every day. I saw him when I knew he had to have been in such pain, and he never, ever complained. God proved himself so much during that time that I can now have no doubts. Whatever is coming, I have someone beside me."

Carolyn found her best role model for how to handle life without Fred in the very person she was losing.

"Fred never flinched. I remember when Craig Jarvis and I stood by his bed to tell him what Craig had just seen in his scope. Craig had tears brimming in his eyes, and I was struggling so hard not to cry. And Fred never flinched. He looked at both of us and said, 'So, what's the next step. What do we do?'"

"That was the way he approached the next three and a half years. We sat and talked about things, and it was always: What's next. How do we do this? And he trusted. He had a faith that was so deep. He believed we would never be alone in the fight. We never were."

A 'new' life?

There is a pep in Carolyn's steps most days. She says every day is different, but there is so much happiness still in front of her.

"I don't really feel like I have remade my life and don't know that that will ever happen. I have learned to enjoy

new things – hiking, traveling. I guess 'unfolding' is a good word for how I see my life today.

"My daughters and the family are so wonderful. The grandchildren are such a delight. Rebecca, who has now been in New York City for four years, is thriving and living in the most fun place ever, and I get to visit her often. Here at home, it is fun watching Joy as a businesswoman, wife and a mother."

At 67, Carolyn says she is still a work in progress. "I think we all are! I look at my life today, and my prayer is: How can I still be of help?"

Early mornings will find Carolyn alone with her thoughts. "I sit here every morning as I look to these mountains and have this quiet time. I ask for guidance. I ask: What do I do with my life? Every day is different, but I know it's going to be Ok."

And her simple message, forged through putting one foot in front of the other and getting on with life is this: Nothing lasts forever.

"My message to those who feel weighted down with grief is that the hurt will get better. Nothing lasts forever – not the bad or the good – so hold on and move ahead. As long as God gives you a new day, as long as you wake up in the morning and there is a new day ahead of you, there is the choice to grab it and fill it with good things."