

When an Ex-Spouse Returns as Caregiver

Adapted from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/19/fashion/thursdaystyles/when-an-exspouse-returns-as-caregiver.html>

Just because Karl Decker Hayes was a cruel husband doesn't mean he should die alone. So concluded his ex-wife, Millie Hayes, 67, an antiques shop owner in Monroe, La., who recalled living with a man so controlling he picked out her car and her clothes, and checked the walls for smudges after she cleaned house. They divorced in 1998.

"I despised what he had done to me," said Ms. Hayes, who, despite it all, became her ex-husband's caregiver when he developed Alzheimer's three years ago. "There is nobody else."

Her efforts are part of an emerging theme as the country ages.

In scenes exhibiting a vivid range of feelings -- acrimony, compassion, rekindled love, abiding friendship -- sick and dying Americans are being cared for by former spouses.

Hospice workers, academics and doctors say they are seeing more such cases, a development that is not surprising given the nation's changing demographics in the last 30 years.

The number of older Americans who have divorced and are not remarried has risen more than 60 percent in the last decade, according to the census bureau.

In 2003, the most recent year for which the census reports statistics, there were 2,726,000 divorced Americans older than 65 compared with 1,718,000 in 1994.

Bitterness, like that felt by Ms. Hayes, often is not the prevailing emotion. Often a person feels deep ties to a former husband or wife, or feels a responsibility borne of common experience and child-rearing.

"They are acting more like a brother or sister, or cousin or extended family member, or sometimes they have the joy of being grandparents together," said J. Donald Schumacher, chief executive of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, a public policy group representing hospices. He said the presence of former spouses at the hospital or deathbed, isn't uncommon anymore.

SOME social workers said that most typically a woman cares for her former husband. That may be explained by cultural norms but also by women outliving men. In 2003 there were 1,704,000 divorced and unmarried woman older than 65, compared with 1,082,000 men, according to the census.

The reunions of divorced people in the late stages of life can lead to complicated emotions, hospice workers said. Sometimes old wounds are still raw.

But Bethany Schroeder, clinical manager at the Sutter VNA and Hospice in San Francisco, said that in her experience former spouses, drawn together as one is dying, wind up getting past any initial recrimination. "They realize there's nothing left to fret over."

Often it is children that bind former spouses. But that was not the case for Olga Voskresensky and Selim Khatibi, who were married in 1986 and divorced three years later. Over the years, however, Ms. Voskresensky, a software engineer, and Mr. Khatibi, who had been an actor on Russian television, remained friends. Then, eight years ago, he contracted Parkinson's. His condition has worsened to the point where he now requires full-time care.

Ms. Voskresensky moved into his one-bedroom apartment in San Francisco, taking nursing classes and helping him with basic daily tasks, like standing and walking. She massages him, drives him to medical appointments and prepares food. (He likes vegetable soup, chicken and fish.) She gets something out of it, too.

"You want to be with somebody who knows you and who you have a history with, someone who is interesting to talk to," she said. "People need each other."

Such a need arose last November for Robert Carr, 57, an apartment manager in Los Altos, Calif., 14 miles northwest of San Jose. A stroke left him briefly paralyzed on his left side.

He wound up getting help from his ex-wife, Nancy, who lives nearby and stopped by daily to clean and cook, making casseroles and spaghetti and other things that were easy for him to heat up.

"We remained close over the years because of our daughter," said Mr. Carr, a soft-spoken man who declined to discuss the details of his marriage or divorce, citing privacy. He expects to recover from his stroke. He added of his ex-wife, "She jumped in and helped wherever she could."

When ex-spouses are reunited toward the end of life, there can be a practical side to the situation.

Three years ago Mary Haskell, a divorce lawyer in Boston, got a call from a former client who hired her to settle a divorce 15 years earlier from his wife of more than 20 years. When he called again, he was in his early 70's and dying of cancer.

The man, whose name and profession Ms. Haskell declined to reveal, citing attorney-client privilege, was being cared for by his ex-wife. They decided to remarry, largely for estate-planning purposes, so they could preserve the wealth and property for their two children, both young adults. The man died last year.

THE role of an ex-spouse by a bedside can be, perhaps perversely, a kind of comfort, said Anita Wyzanski Robboy, a divorce lawyer in Boston and the author of "Aftermarriage: The Myth of

Divorce" (2001). She said former spouses, given the intensity and length of their marriages, have seen each other in their most vulnerable states.

A sick or dying person "doesn't want friends to see them looking like this," she said. "Ex-spouses know each other intimately and they know each others' underbellies intimately."

Sometimes the prevailing sentiment is simply a sense of duty. Such is the case for Ms. Hayes, who met the man she would marry at a dance in 1956. They wed eight months later, and three months after that, she was pregnant with the first of their two daughters.

She said she sensed she'd made a mistake as early as the honeymoon, on which Mr. Hayes spent a large chunk of time gambling and playing pool.

Ms. Hayes stuck with him, she said, because she was committed to her children and to the institution of marriage.

When Mr. Hayes got sick, his ex-wife wanted to spare her daughters the full-time responsibilities and the heartache of watching their father in this condition.

So he moved into a cottage on her property. She cooked for him, and he sometimes would wait on the porch for her to get home at night.

His condition steadily declined to the point that he would wander from home, and even try to visit her at her shop.

One Saturday the police found him at a nearby gas station, complaining he'd been abandoned by his wife. She gained power of attorney and then moved him into the 156-bed Northeast Louisiana War Veterans Home, where she still visits him on weekends. He is 75.

"You can't throw a human being away," Ms. Hayes said.

"When you see someone you have lived with, and you are so angry with them, you have to come to terms with yourself and get rid of the bitterness," Ms. Hayes said. "Not for their sake, but for your own."

Ms. Hayes is the fourth woman to care for her former husband at the veterans home since 1999, said Linda Washington, a social services counselor there. In the case of one, Jack Steele, who died last year, the relationship with his ex-wife ended in rekindled romance.

Mr. Steele, a gregarious World War II veteran and avid reader with a severe weight problem and heart disease, started receiving periodic visits six years ago from his ex-wife, Elaine.

First they read together and went on day activities, but not long before he died last year, they started taking out overnight passes.

"It ended in a loving relationship," Ms. Washington said. "He was happy. He was always introducing her to everyone."

Judge Edward M. Ginsburg, who spent 25 years on the Middlesex Probate Court in Massachusetts before retiring in 2002, recalled an elderly couple whose divorce proceedings he oversaw in 2000.

The couple, in their 70's, had been married for 50 years, but the woman was pressing for divorce because, the judge said, she was tired of her husband's "snoring and snorting."

Judge Ginsburg, trying to press them to consider the gravity of divorce, said that he asked them to consider who would care for them if one or both happened to get sick. The woman came with an immediate reply.

"She said: 'If he gets sick, I'll take care of him. I just can't live with him anymore,'" Judge Ginsburg recalled.