

The Shirley Kienast Memorial Scholarship



Valentines Day is the most romantic day of the year. Gestures of love, flowers, and candlelit dinners are conjured up at the thought. But the occasion holds a different meaning now for one Devils Lake man.

While the holiday still holds memories full of love and companionship for Jim Kienast, it's just not the same without his wife Shirley who passed away on February 13, 1994. Theirs is a love story that ended too soon.

It began with a chance meeting. Jim, originally from Luverne, Minnesota, was in the Navy and stationed in Beeville, Texas. A Devils Lake girl herself, Shirley had a friend, Katy Garske, stationed in Beeville. It was during a visit to Katy that the two met.

"Things just went from there," Jim recalls. It was a whirlwind romance with a marriage proposal only five months after they first met.

"I'll never forget," Jim laughs. "I asked for her hand in marriage from a phone booth in Texas at two in the morning!"

He was still stationed at the naval base, and Shirley was back in Devils Lake. Their phone conversations had to be squeezed around both their busy schedules, so it was usually late at night when they talked.

"She was so excited, she woke her parents up. But they told her to tell them again in the morning," because they weren't comprehending the news from their deep sleep.

The two were married on September 14, 1974. Daughter Kristi Lynne was born in July of 1980, and they settled into a happy life in Devils Lake.

Valentines Day and other holidays are so hard to look forward to now without Shirley, Jim says. *"Valentines Day has changed. All the holidays have changed. Before, it used to be you'd look forward to a holiday. Now, you get to the holiday, and you just wish it was over so you could go back to work,"* he tries to explain.

"She was just a fantastic woman," he said. *"I like talking about it. It's good to get it out, and I like talking about her,"* he smiles.

While they valued time spent together,



they also valued their independence from each other. They grew as a couple and individually, as well, he says.

He still thinks about her often and recalls all the memories the two shared, both good and bad. Like her love for shopping.

“Some of her favorite phrases were ‘born to shop’ and ‘shop ‘til you drop,’” Jim laughs. *“And she loved shoes! I remember when she would buy a new pair, she’d put one by the rest of the shoes, and put one away. A little while later, she’d bring it out like it was an old pair of shoes!”*

“Christmas shopping for her was always easy, too,” he continued. *“She’d always wait for things to go on sale. She’d browse around in some of her favorite stores. All I’d have to do is go in and ask the gals what Shirley had been looking at. They always knew, because she was always in there because she liked to shop!”*

“And she was a giver. You’ve got givers, and you’ve got takers. She was a giver,” Jim says, leaning back in his chair as he conjures up more memories of Shirley. She did not demand attention toward her work, but could be found behind the scenes in many youth-related groups—Sunday School, PTO at their daughter’s school.

She worked hard to launch the ‘Caught You’ concept that’s been in place at public schools throughout the district. That program recognizes students for thoughtful or good behavior exhibited at school. She was also quite active in church activities and the Elkettes.

“And she had a unique laugh,” her husband says with a brief distant look, as if he could see her laughing at that very moment. *“When you heard her, you knew it was her, and it was contagious!”*

There are still the couple’s favorite songs that remain with him. *Time in a Bottle* and *Annie’s Song* bring back thoughts of her

instantly, he says.

And then there’s Whitney Houston’s *I Will Always Love You* from the movie *Bodyguard*. That was ‘their song,’ and they loved listening to it. While Shirley was lying unconscious in a Minnesota hospital bed, toward the end of her struggle with cancer, they were watching the movie. As the credits rolled at the end of the movie, the song began to play loudly.

“And I remember—I don’t know if it was real or if it was my imagination—but I remember she squeezed my hand, and she went like this (as he demonstrates eye movement) like she was trying to open her eyes.”

Shirley fought as hard as she could as long as she could, but it finally got to the point where there was no hope left. Toward the end, doctors asked Jim on a few occasions if he wanted medical assistance to keep her alive. As long as doctors said there was hope, Jim approved, but the day finally came when there was no hope left.

“Making that decision doesn’t bother me, because Shirley always said she didn’t want to be kept alive by machines. And she was suffering.”

Since Shirley’s death, Jim has gotten on with his life, however difficult it is.

“There are still ups and downs,” Jim admits. *“As time goes on, the ups and downs don’t occur as often, and they don’t last as long.”*

Jim and daughter Kristi purchased long-lasting candles for the family’s church and established this endowment as tributes to a wife and mother, their valentine, whom they loved very much. The Shirley Kienast Memorial Scholarship is awarded annually to an exemplary Lake Region State College student.

“I just wanted to do something that was lasting,” he said, *“and it goes back to what she believed in and practiced.”* ♥