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50 YEARS OF LOVING

Interview with Sue

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Celia: This is messages of hope and I'm Celia Fielke. Relationships are important in our lives and none more so than with the people we choose to spend our lives with, but it's not always easy. What's the secret to a long and fulfilling relationship. Well, my guest today is Sue, who has been married for nearly 50 years, so she should know something about that. Sue what's your secret sauce?

Sue: I'm always interested when very elderly people give their secrets to a long and happy life or happy marriage and I think, I don't know what it is. I've known him since I was 18, since I first became an adult. I met him in my first job. So we've grown old together.

Celia: Yeah, you've journeyed.

Sue: Yes and we've journeyed from a sprightly young couple into what they call the twilight of our lives because we're senior Australians!

Celia: Reflecting back on that, what does that mean to you?

Sue: He's the person, the only living person who's known me for as long as he has. He's known me for most of my life. My parents have died, some of my friends have started dying, so people I went to school with are gone. So the fact that he's known me all that time and we still love each other, I think that's a big thing, particularly these days, when a lot of people don't survive. I mean, we've had our ups and downs as any couple does. We've had a lot of traumas in our lives, a lot of difficulties. We've had our arguments, but not so many since the kids have grown up.

Celia: Why do you think that is?

Sue: We have different views about how to bring up children and different buttons that get pushed. We had one child who was almost died at birth and she had a lot of health issues as a youngster. So we had a lot of fights about her and whether or not this was the right thing to do and all that sort of stuff.

But I remember years ago when one of our kids did a little bit of trying to play one off against the other and so my husband got all the kids together. We've got five kids and he got them all together and he said, "you know your mother and I love you all."

He said, "but we married because we love each other and even though we love all of you, we love each other more. You are a result of our love. When you're a parent, you'll understand. So don't ever try and come between mum and me." And that was basically the end of the discussion for him. And I think that that's it, that we've always come back to, we love each other, and no matter what we think or say or whatever, you get over that.

Celia: Have you ever had any doubts?

Sue: Sometimes I think, why do I love him? And I remember, a sermon about God's love for us, and that God's love is unconditional. As soon as you base love on conditions like whether you love me back or whether I'm a nice person or your a nice person or things like that, as soon as you do that, you make love conditional. So it has to be earned then, whereas true love, unconditional love, isn't earned.

Celia: Sue, we talked about how children can change your relationship but what about since the kids have left home, has your relationship with Les changed in other ways since then?

Sue: We've been married nearly 50 years but what I noticed was that we are talking about things that we probably never got around to when we were younger. We're actually talking about our own childhoods. We knew a fair bit about each other's childhoods, from different things you say to each other, but we started actually delving more deeply into things. There were things that he said, "I never knew that." And I thought, "well, I remember you telling me about this, but I never knew that detail or those feelings that were engendered by that event in your life." So that was a really big thing.

Celia: What's one of the things you've talked about that you didn't expect?

Sue: Les has an auto immune condition, which is degenerative. It will eventually end his life here. It suddenly struck me the other night, we were just chatting and I'd never thought about this before, and I said to him, "how do you think you will cope when you can't move anymore?"

I suppose the last many years have been about trying to boost his morale to come to terms with the fact that he's got this condition and it's never going to go away. It's only going to get worse and all of a sudden it struck me, but the end will come and the end is going to be quite painful. How is he going to cope with that when he's already struggling now? How is he going to cope emotionally with that?

So we had quite a discussion about that and how he would cope and he said, "you know, it's going to have a big impact on you as the carer." But for the first time we really talked about what the future means for him emotionally.

Celia: So that's a really big conversation and maybe one that most people, particularly men may not want to have.

Sue: It's the elephant in the room that never, ever leaves and he struggles already because he was always a very fit and active person. He's already lost a great deal of physical ability, and he knows that this is slowly destroying his body from the inside. So, really he said he has to cross that bridge when he comes to it. It's not going to be easy for him because he doesn't want to live like that. But when it comes, it comes.

Celia: Coming up, we'll talk about how Sue thinks about the future with Les, knowing what the outcome will be and what gives her hope. Living with and knowing someone for such a length of time, you would really get to know them, the good, the bad and the ugly. Is Les still the man you married?

Sue: Sometimes I look and I think, “when did he go so grey?” And then I look in the mirror and I think, “when did I start to look like this?” I suppose mentally you tend to still feel young and then you look in the mirror or you see a photo. I look absolutely awful. But then I think, “well, that’s who I am now, that’s what I look like.”

Celia: And what about you? Have you thought about how you’ll cope when Les’ disease takes over?

Sue: Sometimes I worry. I know I won’t be physically able because I’ve got some physical issues, bad back and arthritis, things like that. I suppose it worries me to think that his worst nightmare might come true, which is to end up in a nursing home. That to him, would be the worst thing for a number of reasons. Losing independence. But the other thing is that he doesn’t want us to be separated. He doesn’t want us to be parted. In fact, his ideal, his dream, as he said, would be that we just both die in our sleep at the same time, so that neither of us has to be separated.

Celia: How do you feel about that?

Sue: Pretty special, pretty special. I dread waking up and finding him not living, although the end will be much slower than that, it’s not going to come overnight. Unless something else happens it will be a very slow process.

Celia: What sustains you or helps you contemplate how you’re going to get through your husband’s illness and his final death?

Sue: The knowledge that God’s been there. He gave his son. I can’t imagine the pain of not just losing your child, I mean, I’m always blown away by the suffering that Christ went through for me. The agony, absolute agony, and I know it’s going to be tough. It’s going to be very, very difficult. But I also know that my husband is going to go to his heavenly home. We’ve talked about that many times. He’s very quiet about his faith but he’s very definite about it as well, so I know that he’s going to go somewhere good. I know he’s not going to be in pain anymore.

Celia: It’s a comfort.

Sue: Yes. And the knowledge that someday we’ll see each other again.

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