



Culver City

Neighbors

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WE ❤️ THE BUNKERS!
Kathleen & Duane

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Cover Photo by
Zsuzsi Steiner



Best Version Media

Love - Ageless and Evergreen

By Tony Garofalo | Photography By Zsuzsi Steiner



As I listen to Kathleen Bunker rhapsodize about her husband of 71 years, the classic Lorenz Hart lyric springs to mind - "...each day is Valentine's Day."

The three of us sit around the kitchen table, Duane in a wheelchair due to a recent fall, coupled with the affects of Parkinson's disease. "Duane is an amazing man and I love him so dearly," Kathleen shares

As it turns out, it wasn't love at first sight.

"It was 1947, my senior year at Dorsey High School, when one day I stood half-way up from my desk and got yanked back down," Kathleen recalls. "I couldn't imagine what the heck was going on. I turn around and this boy had tied the sash on my skirt to the back of my desk chair. I thought it was ridiculous. He didn't even untie me! I wasn't at all happy with Duane that first meeting. But I thought he was cute and after that incident, well... he charmed his way in."

During her years at Dorsey High, Kathleen was widely admired for her outstanding singing voice. Her performance at a Christmas concert caught the attention of famed choral director, Roger Wagner, and for the next ten years –along with famous peers Marilyn Horne and Marni Nixon - Kathleen performed with the world-famous Roger Wagner Chorale while at LA City College and later at Cal State LA, where she received her teaching credential. She sang on into the early years of her marriage, delighting in a glamorous decade of touring and recording, until the time to go had come. "I just couldn't do it – getting home at two a.m. and getting up at six a.m. with two small babies was just too hard."

In 1950, after Kathleen was graduated from college and Duane had completed four years with the Air National Guard, the couple married and settled in Culver City. Kathleen taught kindergarten through third grade and Duane began long-time jobs as head of a commercial painting company and as a construction contractor for many of Culver City's homes and buildings.

Three years later, the Bunkers started a family: baby Janette was first to arrive, followed in due time by brother Bradley, fraternal twins Douglas and David, and sister Susan, who for the past 25 years, has lived in Switzerland with husband, Sandy, and sons Chris and Nicholas. "In between our visits to Switzerland, there is plenty of Face Time on the computer," Kathleen shares. And every Christmas, plenty of Hug Time when Susan & Company make their annual pilgrimage to Culver City.

Recalls Janette, aka Jan, "With five kids, my parents had a lot going on, but they learned the secret for keeping their love alive," she explains. "Being the eldest, I was left in charge of my siblings at a fairly young age and my folks would make it a point to go away for the weekend – not calling or checking in, either. They were just engrossed in each other. That was their way of keeping their relationship fresh and making the marriage work."

She continues. "When I was in my early teens, my dad would come



Brad Bunker



Sandy Greensmith (son-in-law),
Chris Greensmith (grandson),
Susan Bunker Greensmith (daughter) and
Nicolas Greensmith (grandson)

home, mom would be in the kitchen cooking and dad would walk over to her and they'd start cuddling. There was a lot of whispering and giggling ...and ear nibbling.

Dad and mom were completely lost in each other. I'd wind up at the stove taking over the cooking!"

Jan is clearly in awe of her parents and their lasting love for each other. "They're still so affectionate – they sit on the couch next to each other, watching TV and holding hands. They have weathered things that would have destroyed a lot of couples."

Just off the kitchen, in the living room, 62- year-old Douglas Bunker sits quietly by. Kathleen is passionate when she talks about her "joy and blessing."

"Dougie developed a brain tumor when he was two-and-a-half. It was inoperable, so they did radiation treatments - massive doses on each side of his head. Now they know better – a little bit here, a little bit there. He was a very sick little boy. It was difficult in the beginning," Kathleen shares. "Then Dougie got stronger and stronger, bless his heart. He's a fighter. The pediatrician called him a 'miracle baby.'"

"Duane was my rock. He has been the sweetest husband; so thoughtful of me," Kathleen says so profoundly, as though she hoped the whole world was listening. "He would get up at six a.m. to tend to our twins, Doug and David. He always tried to make things easier for me."

The Bunkers wanted to keep Douglas at home and give him the best quality of life they could, building the equipment he needed to thrive. "He went with us on camping trips, boat trips, bike rides – all our family outings...at the insistence of his brothers and sisters," Kathleen points out.

When David went off to college in 1977, Doug, then 21 and Susan,

20, were the last two siblings living at home. The time felt right for the long-time stay-at-home mom to resume her career as an educator. "Being a mom was a joy for me," Kathleen says. "All of my accomplishments before or since couldn't compare to the happiness they brought me."

For the next two decades, Kathleen divided her time between the Culver-Palms Family YMCA - where she was a teacher and eventually director of the organization's two pre-schools - and as a docent at the Getty Museum, Brentwood, where she is still involved as a docent emeritus.

Her talent as a gifted singer was likely passed on to her son, David. Once out of college, he began a career as a singer and traveled the world with the prestigious LA Master Chorale, also created by legendary conductor, Roger Wagner. With a Master's Degree in Educational Psychology, David eventually began working with agencies that serve those with developmental disabilities.

"I never came across a program that had that certain dynamic that I thought my brother needed," he says. "The programs were missing what I call the 'quality of life subtleties,' which I learned about growing up with Doug and my family."

Inspired by his love for his twin brother, David decided to take a leap of faith, took out a loan against his condominium, and used his retirement savings to launch My Life Foundation, Inc., in 2004 - an organization promoting the idea that everyone is enriched when people with disabilities live, work, and contribute to the community they live in.

"The closeness we felt as toddlers is still there after all these years," David says. "Though Doug is no longer able to speak, we connect in new ways - an unspoken connection so strong, I become overwhelmed with an emotion that can bring tears to my eyes. I have never spoken or written about this," he confides.

"I have always known when Doug was troubled or upset - frustrated at not being understood. I often think of the joy when we would sing together. I want to hug him just a little longer than he is comfortable with...and he starts to laugh as he tries to squirm out of my arms. Doug has taught me what love is; he gave me the gift of empathy and feeling. I am a better human being because Doug is my twin."

Meanwhile, back at the kitchen table, Kathleen returns to her favorite topic. "Duane is a self-made man if there ever was one. He's successful at everything he does," says his longtime super fan.



Jeff and David Bunker-Liu

Duane Bunker not only built go-karts for all five kids, a speedboat, and a 24-foot cabin cruiser, Kathleen tells how - with his friend and partner, Frank Bates - Duane built a plane from scratch in his garage.

"It was a two-passenger plane called a Long EZ. It took them three years to build," she recalls. "We flew it all over the United States. Those were fun...exciting times. We'd fly up to Monterrey for lunch and be back before the kids were home from school."

Back then, Duane was fond of asking the question: "What can you say about a woman who would jump into a two-passenger plane her husband built in his garage?!"

That question, asked in jest, nevertheless has an answer. One that is all too clear. In the air... or on the ground - Duane Bunker is the love of her life.

These days, the parents of five, grandparents, and great grandparents of nine, are closer than ever.

Jan tells the story of her dad's recent doctor's visit. "How long have you been married?" questions the doctor. "71 years," answers her dad. "So, no trophy wife?" asks the doctor? Replies Duane, "She IS my trophy wife!"

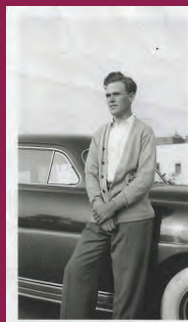


Bunker Twins, David and Doug, Sister, Janette



Message from the publisher:

This story is dedicated to Duane Bunker who passed away shortly after it was written. We are honored to be given the opportunity to share Duane and Kathleen's story with you.



Tony Garofalo is an Emmy Award-winner whose credits include *The People's Court*, *NBC's telecast of The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade*, and talk shows starring *Merv Griffin*, *Regis Philbin*, and *Cybill Shepperd*.