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Lasting love story

October 01, 2009 ¦ Mitzi Bible

The Rev. Bill Stevens, 88, and his wife Sylvia, 84, are part of this country's active senior population. They volunteer in their Pompano Beach, Fla., retirement community and faithfully attend Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church (founded by Dr. D. James Kennedy), where they still sing in the choir and serve with various ministries.

"We used to do more music, but now Bill says we just make a joyful noise," Sylvia says jokingly.

Bill, an evangelist who worked with Youth for Christ for many years, married Sylvia on June 24, 1945. On the 24th of every month since, they have celebrated their "monthiversary," as they call it. They started out giving gifts at first ("That lasted about three months; we had no money and it was too expensive," Sylvia says.) Now they play a game to see who can tell each other "Happy Monthiversary" first and they eat a special meal together. In August, they celebrated 66 years — "That's 770 monthiversaries," Sylvia says.

Their commitment to each other is obvious — and so is their commitment to the Lord's work.

"We have worked together practically all of our married life," Bill says. "First, in evangelism we travelled a good part of the Eastern United States, and then in our work for Youth for Christ. Then, as the Lord opened the door and led us, we spent 24 years in the Christian bookstore business and that in itself was a fantastic ministry."

The Stevenses owned and operated three Bible Bookshops in the Charleston, W.Va., area.

They never had children of their own, but their work with teenagers and young adults over the years has given them “a lot of spiritual children,” as Sylvia puts it.

And that love for young people and the desire to see them grow up to serve the Lord themselves was what made them decide to include Liberty University in their estate plans.

“It’s not only because we believe in Liberty, but our work with Youth for Christ has made us interested in young people … that’s why we wanted to support Liberty, and maybe our support will give them a scholarship to help them,” Sylvia says.

The couple first contacted Liberty’s Planned Giving Department after seeing an advertisement for charitable gift annuities. That’s when they met Earl Sargeant, the planned giving officer who has travelled to their home several times and eventually helped them update their estate plans to include Liberty in their living trust.

“Our first connection was we bought an annuity, then we knew we needed to update our estate plans; we weren’t happy with the way it was,” Sylvia says.

After working with other organizations in the past, the Stevenses say Sargeant made the process “so much easier.”

“He has made it so it’s been an enjoyable thing and a blessing,” Sylvia says.

Bill adds: “The thing that impressed me so much is his spirituality; he wasn’t just interested in seeing how much money he could get out of us; it was the touch of the Lord upon his life … he’s a great man of God; he’s enjoyable … we’ve had wonderful fellowship.”

On his visits, Sargeant gives the Stevenses updates on Liberty, which they have visited only once; in the early 1970s, they became members of Dr. Jerry Falwell’s Founders Club and were invited for a visit to the newly organized school. They still cherish a photo they had taken with Falwell on that trip.

Now, through the living trust, the couple is excited about the way God will use their contributions in the future to help train more Champions for Christ at Liberty. That’s what their lives are all about, they say.

With many “monthiversaries” behind them and looking forward to more to come, Sylvia says they have learned two things about themselves that can sum up their lives: “Number one, we love the Lord, and number two, we love people.”