

Hansen: The Orrs work on a game plan for Alzheimer's

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One of Johnny and Romie Orr's neighbors in West Des Moines relayed the news.

The Orrs are thinking about selling their Glen Oaks condo. The neighbor was afraid it had something to do with Romie's battle with Alzheimer's disease, and her fears were justified.

The Orrs were at their winter home in Florida last week when Romie broke her hip. Surgery went well and she's doing much better.

"She does physical therapy twice a day," Johnny Orr said from Florida. "She sits up in her wheelchair and recognizes me."

Romie Orr took 15 steps Thursday. The family hopes to have her home by Thanksgiving.

But Alzheimer's doesn't break for the holidays. The next move, Johnny Orr said, could be an assisted-living facility.

Johnny and Romie, who was diagnosed eight years ago, are in their early 80s. Can it be 15 years since Johnny retired as the winningest coach in Iowa State basketball history?

Orr was a personality, a quote machine who made whacky TV commercials and called everyone "Coach." He still does.

And the pep band played a special "Here's Johnny" song when he strolled onto the court before the opening tip. Opposing coaches would make sure they were out of the locker room in time to get the full experience.

Organized and active, Romie was always the cool, level-headed one - the spouse who ultimately would show everybody how it was possible to handle Alzheimer's with courage and good cheer.

Becky Orr Montgomery didn't ask for this front-row seat. Alzheimer's assault on her mother, she said, has been tragic and amazing and sad and heartening all at once.

"This has been her mission, making people understand life doesn't end with Alzheimer's. She's been awesome, very much Romie."

A happy warrior. Romie Orr, the neighbor said, will greet you with a smile and tell you upfront she has Alzheimer's. Your face might be familiar, but when the name escapes her, she'll ask you not to take it personally and warns you she'll probably greet you the same way next time.

"Heroic," is Robert Bender's word. He's one of Romie Orr's doctors. "Rather than curl up, Romie said let's do something about this for other people."

Eight years ago, Romie "Romie" Orr was doing tai chi when she couldn't remember the next movement. The diagnosis came as no surprise. Alzheimer's runs in the family. She decided right there that she wouldn't keep it a secret. She stopped driving. She gave up alcohol, leaving it to her husband to lighten the mood with a wisecrack.

"I'm damn glad I didn't get it," he said.

That was Johnny Orr's public response. That and going to Washington with Romie and asking a U.S. Senate subcommittee to sink more money into Alzheimer's research.

The incurable, degenerative disease was growing then. It's creating even more victims now.

Just this week, the Iowa Department of Public Health said Alzheimer's ranks fifth among the causes of death in Iowa, moving ahead of motor vehicle crashes and other accidental injuries.

Bender is the medical director of the Johnny & Romie Orr Center for Healthy Aging and Memory Loss in West Des Moines. When Romie was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, the Orrs approached Bender about setting up a clinic. The conversation, he said, "was quite moving."

The coach said his whole life had been about being Johnny Orr, the basketball coach. Whenever he got a new job, Romie and the girls packed up again and went with him. Johnny took care of the coaching. Romie took care of everything else.

"Coach Orr wanted to do something for Romie that would impact other people," Bender said. "He said he owed her and he owed the girls. And he wanted to help establish a memory center, the best in the world."

The operation has been up and running for a few years now. The latest exciting venture is a "brain gymnasium cognitive training center, unique to the Midwest."

Seeing a loved one taken down by Alzheimer's is a bad deal. But not so bad that Johnny Orr can't tell a funny story on himself.

So, he walks into the hospital room after Romie has returned from the operating room, looks at the bed and can't believe his eyes.

Surgery is tough on a body, but usually not this tough. Romie looks 10 years older.

Orr is fretting, wondering how he's going to tell the girls he hardly recognized their mother in the hospital and she failed to recognize him.

He checks with the hospital staff. How could this happen? His wife of 60 years looks like a different person.

There's a reason for this, and it isn't surgery. This *is* a different person. Mrs. Orr, it turns out, has been moved to another room.

Coach Orr might want to mention this to Dr. Bender on his next trip to the memory center.