

LIFESTYLES



STAFF PHOTO BY RYAN MERCER

Registered nurse Sandie Laporte checks Jim's heartbeat during one of her weekly visits. Laporte also takes blood samples and administers various medications Jim needs and keeps a close eye on his overall health.

Below: Carol Music, Jim, Mary Daigle and Sandie Laporte in Jim's apartment.

Care for the home & heart



A nursing home wasn't right for this Portsmouth man,
but nurses at home have become the light of his life

By KIANA MINKLE
STAFF WRITER

James Merritt and his wife Betty owned a little restaurant called Betty's Kitchen in North Hampton for four years.

When Betty, his wife of 32 years, died of cancer at 62, Merritt lost the jewel of his life.

And though he still misses her very much, he maintains a happy life because he doesn't have to live in a nursing home. Instead, this energetic 65-year-old lives in the Atlantic Heights neighborhood, with help from Portsmouth Regional Hospital Home Care, which began in 1905 as the Portsmouth Visiting Nurses Association.

According to research done by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration on Aging in 1997, of

those older Americans not living in nursing homes, 31 percent or 9.9 million, live alone. That's 7.6 million women and 2.3 million men.

Thanks to the home health care program, Merritt has been able to maintain his freedom by living in a nice apartment without moving into a nursing home.

"I would not be happy in a nursing home," said Merritt, who had lived in Merrimack, Mass., with his wife.

The bond that he has formed with the three nurses who come in at various times during the week to attend to his needs is much like that of a close friend. They cook and clean for him, do his shopping, make sure he bathes and takes his medicine, and give him weekly check-ups to make sure he's doing OK.

His seven children are still what keeps him going, in addition to his 14 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Six of the children are actually step children, Betty's from a previous marriage. But

they are as important to him as if they were his blood relations.

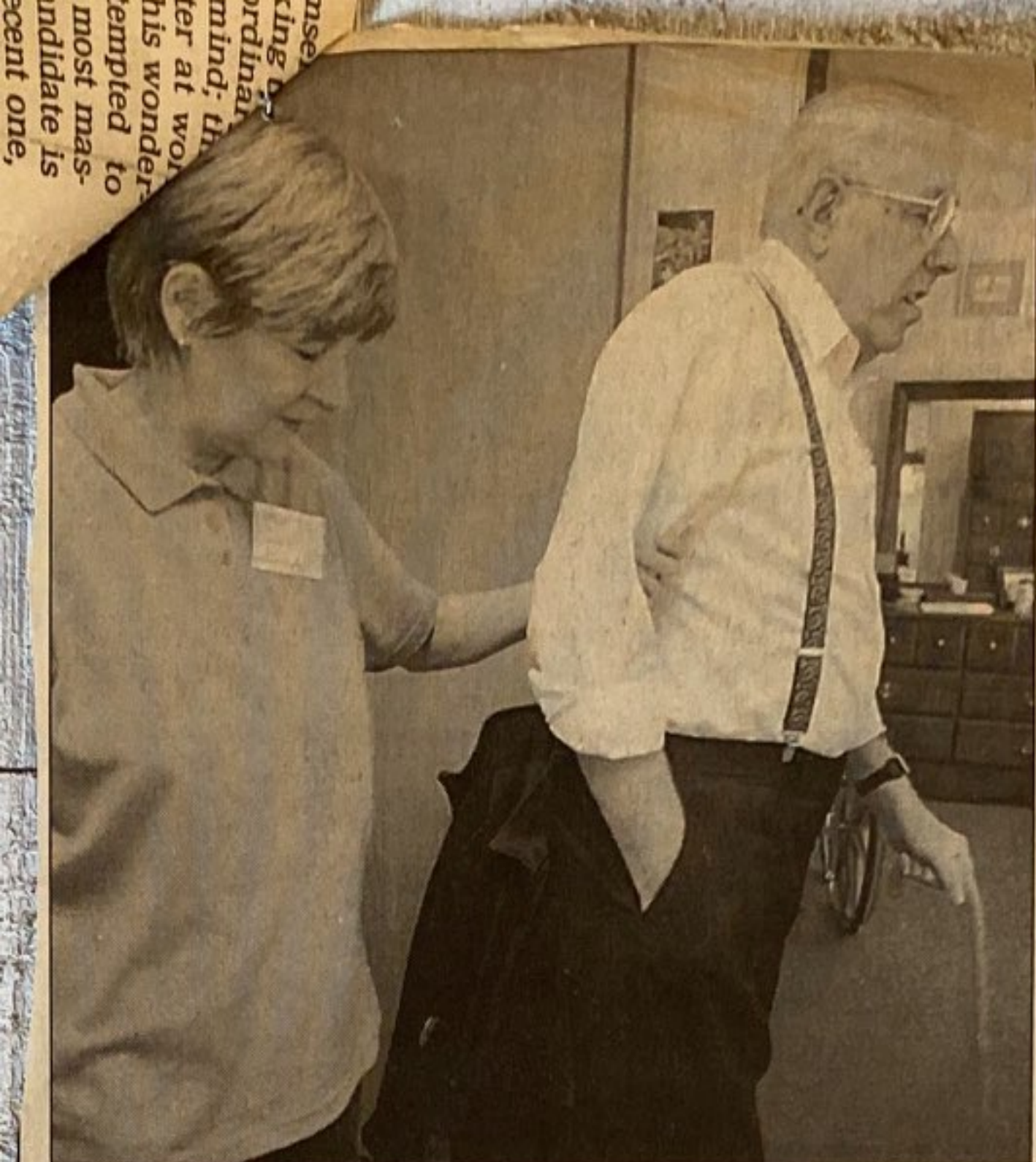
A note written on a sticky tab attached to his bathroom mirror also keeps him going each day. It reads: "I must concentrate on the best thing that happened to me today!"

"A piece of work, this one," he said in good humor, referring to Sandie Laporte, a Registered Nurse who spends an hour each week assisting him with his shots and lab work, and conducting a weekly physical assessment.

"They have to have courage and they have to take care of people like me," said Merritt, whose friendliness and sense of humor make it enjoyable for his nurses to care for him.

He was once an avid photographer, and his pictures hang in frames on his wall — shots of rivers, rocks and nature that show a keen eye for art.

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STAFF PHOTO BY RYAN MERCER

Today is a good day for Jim as he walks around the apartment on his own. Other days he relies on his home health aid Carol Music for assistance.

Mutual care

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Mary Daigle is his companion/homemaker, who cleans, cooks, does his laundry, talks with him and shops for him.

"She doesn't shut up," Merritt said with typical levity. He and the nurses are easygoing and joke with one another freely.

"The homemaker goes out shopping for me so I don't have to go to the store," he said. She also does everything "from making my bed to cleaning my apartment."

It's a job they take on lovingly.

"You make a difference in other people's lives," said Laporte.

A group of finches keep him company, chirping and fluttering around in their cages.

"They're good companions," he said.

The birds are currently sitting on eggs, which he hopes will hatch soon, because previous eggs did not yield any babies. They also give him responsibility.

The nurses are friendly and their smiles would make anyone cheer up. The impact they've made on Merritt's life is obvious.

"They're my entertainment," he said. "I've got the best health care in the world. They do everything."

Later on he adds: "Mary is the best. Everybody wants Mary."

She takes the compliment in stride: "Mr. Merritt makes this

job easy," said Daigle with a smile.

Carol Music, who visits Merritt for one hour each day, seven days a week, is his CNA (Certified Nursing Assistant) Home Health Aide. She sees to it that he is bathed, takes proper medication and generally looks out for his welfare.

"He could be in a nursing home. We keep him out of the nursing home," she said.

And that's just fine with their client: "This is a lot better than being in a nursing home and costs half as much," said Merritt.

It's obvious from their interaction that these home health professionals are much more than nurses who come in to help patients. They are people who care a lot about their patients and like spending time with them each week.

Part of the job is "caring and being with our clients that we love and adore," said Laporte.

But the fact is, Merritt lives alone and his friends from home health care can't be on hand around the clock. So he occupies himself at night listening to various types of music, from classical to country.

He's always in touch with his children by phone, or they stop by. But it helps them all to know that he is getting the attention that comes with home health care.

"My kids appreciate this too," said Merritt.

He doesn't leave his apartment much, but he doesn't have to. His nurses bring the outside world to him. Their laughter, conversation and care are often all he needs.