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TOP STORY

90-year-old's world rocked

Retired BGSU prof lifted up by vehicle parade on his birthday

Apr 9, 2020



Bill Rock stands alongside his wife, Sue, while waving at passing cars, wishing him a happy birthday, Wednesday afternoon in Bowling Green.

Photo by J.D. Pooley/Sentinel-Tribune

A month ago, Bill Rock was taking 2-mile walks with his wife, Sue, counseling his young charges at church, and looking forward to celebrating his 90th birthday.

Just a few weeks later, the retired Bowling Green State University history professor's life was

upended.

Rock, who turned 90 on Wednesday, was diagnosed with lung cancer — wiping out his walks. And then coronavirus hit, canceling a birthday bash.

Madi Schroeder, who knows Rock from the youth group at St. Mark's Lutheran Church, knew she had to do something.

The Elmwood High School senior organized a drive-by birthday event for Rock.

Over 20 cars, decorated with signs, balloons and streamers, gathered at City Park then moved to his neighborhood off Rosalind Drive. They made two passes, waving and telling Rock happy birthday, and that they missed him. One family inside a mini-van stopped and dropped off flowers, left them a safe distance away as Rock and his wife waved.

"We wanted to give something back to him," Schroeder said. "Obviously, nobody can go out. We're all in quarantine with COVID-19. I talked to my youth pastor and we decided to drive by ... and include the whole church and the community and anybody that knows him.

"We're going to just send him a happy birthday wish," she said.

Cassie Yeager said that Rock has been involved with the youth group and Wednesday Night Live at the church.

"I am new in my position and Bill was one of the first people to reach out to me and welcome me," Yeager said. "He is just positive and really cares about young people and his faith and his wife. You can just see the love they have for each other."

Rock has written a history book about St. Mark's, she said. He and Sue have been members of the Bowling Green church for 61 years.

Rock was emotional about the birthday parade.

"I'm much surprised. And elated. And saddened because these are all dear folks who mean so much to me," he said. "I'm very gratified and deeply appreciative."

The cancer diagnosis has been devastating, Rock said. Four weeks ago, he was active with his family and faith.

“My wife and I were walking 2 miles, three days a week at the community rec center,” he said. “And whatever it was that hit me, hit me hard. And, well, what hit me was lung cancer. It’s tough to take when it hits that hard.”

Rock’s daughter, Anne Elliott, along with her brother and his wife, stood with him as the cars cruised by on Wednesday.

“It’s just amazing to have his good friends turn out and wish him well,” she said, her voice breaking. “My mom and dad have been in this community for 62 years and very active.

“When the COVID-19 started and they had to quarantine a little bit here at home, then coincidentally at the same time, my father seemed to be experiencing some health decline. Just last week, he was diagnosed with lung cancer. We’re just trying to move forward with trying to hold him up the best way we can.”



2:05

VIDEO: Happy birthday, Bill! Elmwood student organizes birthday party for beloved church member
Video by J.D. Pooley/Sentinel-Tribune Apr 8, 2020

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