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## QUALITIES OF LIFE

# A father, a son, a friend and a promise

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It started as a deathbed promise, months before the death. A promise to a dying friend from a man who felt he had a debt to pay. Although the debt was of the heart.

Raul Recinas, 48, is the man who made the promise. Back in September, he tiptoed into the hospital room where Ed Ciucci, 52, had just gotten bad news.

"I felt like he wanted to talk to me," said Recinas, putting a knife to a fudge-wrapped caramel apple in the Morton Grove kitchen he now shares with Ciucci's father, Tom. "I made a point of getting there early. The doctors had just told him, half of his heart was not working. It was dead.

"The doctors told him he had about a year. So he asked me if something happened to him in a year, what would I do, because he didn't want to have his dad be alone."

Recinas, a stocky man who hauls explosives and hazardous materials in 18-wheeler rigs for two, three weeks at a time, paused to catch his breath, to take a sip of Diet Coke.

"I told him nothing was going to happen to him, but if something was going to happen, I'd make sure his dad was not alone. I made a promise I'd do something about it."

Fact is, when Recinas made the promise, he was based in Utah, making a good wage, not two years after finding himself, after a divorce, penniless and living for two months in the back seat of the limo he used to drive.

But it was Tom Ciucci, now 83, who had been the man who opened his home to Recinas and given him a chance to get back on his feet. Recinas says he'll never forget the gift.

"When you come from the streets and someone opens their doors, you don't take advantage. You pay in appreciation."

And sometimes, you pay by keeping a promise. Even if it means you give up your job, your apartment and whatever else it takes to uproot yourself from Utah and plant yourself back in the five-bedroom, blond-brick split-level at the end of a cul-de-sac, where you once spent a very good year.

Tom Ciucci was a widower with a disabled son, the son with the history of heart attacks and serious cardiac troubles. Ciucci's wife of 55 years, Mary, a dressmaker, died in the fall of 2002 after what Ciucci called "the longest goodbye," a dementia that led slowly to her death. Another son had died unexpectedly at age 23, years before.

The only way Ciucci, who retired as general manager of a car dealership in 1983, could afford to stay in the house, he figured, was to rent out bedrooms through a joint effort of the Center of Concern in Park Ridge and the Winnetka-based Interfaith Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs' Homesharing program. The program's twofold aim: allowing seniors to age in place and finding affordable housing for people on tight incomes. Often, lasting relationships come out of the deal.

A housing matchmaker

"I'm like a matchmaker," said Jacqueline Grossmann, Interfaith Council's Homesharing coordinator for the last 10 years. "I try to make it win-win. It's not like a handout list of addresses. I sit down and listen and figure out what's best." She makes some 40 matches a year.

In May 2005, she matched Recinas and the Ciuccis. At the time, two men were renting the fourth and fifth bedrooms.

Recinas and Ed Ciucci became quiet friends. They didn't talk much about really private matters, but they took to watching "The Sopranos" every week, text-messaging jokes back and forth. Ed made a mean lasagna. Recinas led them to great Mexican cafes. Tom, who had really sunk after his wife's death, started to brighten.

"I kinda found myself," he said, then ticked through his litany of activities: Monday night ballroom dancing, every-other-Friday-night fish fries over at the Moose Lodge, once-a-month veterans of the round table at a Des Plaines senior center, every morning coffee at the Super Cup diner in town. Family dinners whenever Recinas and Ed pulled up to the table.

Recinas moved to Utah after a year with the Ciuccis. But he came back once a month to stay for a weekend. He was there when Ed had the heart attack last September, and he was there for Valentine's Day this year.

Tom Ciucci will never forget that Valentine's Day.

"He went to bed that night, Ed did. And next morning, I noticed in the kitchen. There was no glass. He always had trouble sleeping so he'd be up during the night, and there was always a glass he left by the sink. I went down to his room. There he was. On his knees. His head over the mattress.

"Can you imagine what I went through" I tried to lift his arms. But I couldn't move 'em." He called for one of the boarders who happened to be upstairs. Ed had died; the other half of his heart had stopped working too.

That night Tom, still shaken, dialed Recinas on his cell phone. Recinas, at dinner with a friend, rushed over.

"That's when I had to tell him," said Recinas, of the promise. "I never wanted to have to tell him. He was devastated. I told him I wasn't going to leave him alone. I said it would take some time. I'd stay here whenever I got my two weeks off."

First thing Recinas did, before he even gave up the Utah job and found another one in Chicago, was haul out everything from Ed's bedroom, to wipe out the reminder of where he died.

"I wanted him not to remember," said Recinas, showing off the two-color walls of the basement room where he now sleeps.

'My adopted son'

These days, Recinas and Ciucci bop around like, well, father and son. Just the night before this kitchen-table conversation, they had sat side by side at a school band concert where Recinas' 10-year-old son played trumpet. (Recinas' son and 6-year-old daughter live with their mother in the northwest suburbs.)

On weekends, Ciucci, who has no grandchildren, takes to the soccer field to sit through not one but two soccer games, or however many are on the calendar for Recinas' kids.

"I tell my friends at the coffee shop he's my adopted son," said Ciucci. "If I didn't have anybody in this house with me, it would be two or three times harder than it is." Besides Recinas, Ciucci still fills his extra rooms with three other boarders: an archeologist, a salesman and a limo driver.

Said Recinas: "I always tell my kids: This world belongs to the nicest people. That's why I would never turn my back on Tom. In life you need someone to lean on. I found Tom. ... He doesn't have to ask [for anything]. I've had two houses. I know everything. Except how to cut the grass."

Both men crack up at this.

"I'm the only Mexican guy who doesn't know how to cut the grass."

Ciucci let on that Recinas did a passable job just that afternoon. "He's learning," said Ciucci. "There's a whole summer for him to learn."

And a whole summer for a man who lost a son to teach the man who's filling in quite fine.

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For more information on the Homesharing program, call the Interfaith Housing Center of the Northern Suburbs, 847-501-5732, or the Center of Concern, 847-823-0453.

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