

After nearly 59 years of marriage, Joe and Jean Subers die together

By [Cindy Swirko](#)

Staff writer

Published: Sunday, June 5, 2016 at 4:04 p.m.

The decision by Joe and Jean Subers to end their lives in a final act of togetherness was meticulously planned down to the three notes they left — one for the deputies who would find them, the others for their sons.

In them, the couple who had been married nearly 59 years — a “Camelot couple,” a friend said — explained how Jean’s constant physical agony had led them to this moment.



Courtesy photo

After retirement, Jean and Joe Subers moved back to Gainesville about 10 years ago.

They asked for understanding.

Experts in suicide prevention, and survivors of suicides, emphasize that in most cases there are other options.

Once Jim, John and Jay Subers came to terms with their parents’ double suicide and after wondering if they could have done anything to prevent it, the deeply Christian family arrived at two essential truths: Their mother was in such horrific pain that she didn’t want to live anymore, and their father couldn’t live without her.

When it came time to prepare an obituary, the sons decided they would not try to hide what their parents had done. Their result appeared in The Sun on May 17.

“After enduring great physical pain for several years, Jean lost the strength to keep on living ... And, Joe, watching his beloved Jean suffer, was unable to imagine life without her; so they both chose to end their lives together,” it read.

Suicide carries so much stigma that talk of it is often avoided. And rarely is it mentioned in such a public forum. Yet it was freely discussed by dozens of friends and family members who came to Gainesville for the funeral, remembering them through a slideshow that chronicled the couple’s lengthy marriage.

“Mom and Dad indicated in their note that it was totally our decision what to disclose,” Jim Subers said in an email.

“We knew that when two people die together it is either an accident, a violent crime, or suicide. There would be no reason not to disclose it if it was an accident or a violent crime, so we knew by not disclosing the ‘mutual suicide’ most people would arrive at that conclusion anyway.

“We didn’t think the speculation served any purpose, and our hope is that by being open and honest, this may cause some families to openly discuss these issues together.”

Pain and reflection

Because of a return of thyroid cancer and osteoporosis, it became increasingly difficult and unsafe for Jean, 80, to move. Joe, 81, spent much of his time at her side.

"There was cancer and there were repeated falls from osteoporosis. She had a compound fracture in an arm. She had a broken hip that actually shortened one of her legs," Jim Subers said.

"Most of the cartilage was gone in her shoulders and her knees, so every step hurt. She had 25 different doctors. Basically, she was just miserable."

Family members said they are grateful to the medical community for saving Jean's life a number of times, adding that the advancement of medicine gave the family another 10 years with Jean.

But that is a double-edged sword, Jim Subers said. The advances kept her alive but could not address her increasing pain and declining quality of life.

Jim Subers said his parents had never discussed issues such as death with dignity or the right to die on one's own terms as philosophical matters. But the couple said that if one of them died, the other would die, too.

"Dad had told me three or four years ago that they had talked and that if things ever got so bad for one of them, that they were going to go together. I tried to talk him out of it," he said. "But I said, Dad, I do not believe that suicide is unforgivable. When I read scripture there is only one sin that is not forgivable, and that is not receiving Jesus."

Subers said the family is still coming to terms with the loss of their parents.

"I cannot speak for my entire family regarding specific views on the morality of the actions that mom and dad took to end their lives together. However, the sons and our wives are consistent in our conviction that for mom, this was motivated primarily by the desire to end her suffering, and for Dad, this was motivated primarily by love.

"Mom's decision was also motivated by love as well, for she never wanted to be a burden on anyone, and felt that her life was a burden not only on Dad, but also on the whole family."

Subers said that he hopes the family's decision to be so open about his parents' death does not prompt others to take their own lives.

"We would be deeply disappointed if this story led others to end their lives prematurely," he said.

Death, dignity, options

End-of-life issues such as death with dignity and assisted suicide are increasingly becoming part of the national discussion as America's population ages.

Data from the American Association of Suicidology indicate that in 2012, an elderly person took his or her own life every 80 minutes in the U.S.

The U.S. Administration on Aging reports risk factors include medical conditions that significantly limit functioning or life expectancy, pain and a loss of independence or a sense of purpose. Other factors are the fear of a prolonged illness and the recent death of a loved one.

Firearms were the most common means of suicide at about 72 percent, the agency reports. Men used a gun more than women.

Meanwhile, the death with dignity movement is spreading nationwide. The organization Death with Dignity has a petition drive in Florida urging legislators to pass a bill that would allow terminally ill patients who meet certain qualifications to get medicine to end their own life on their own terms. The organization states that seven in 10 Americans believe that option should be available.

Oregon, Vermont, Washington and Montana currently allow physician-assisted suicide and several others are considering it.

And the battle in Florida over the fate of Terri Schiavo forced people to question whether they would want to live if they were in her condition. Schiavo was diagnosed as brain dead and in a persistent vegetative state. She was being nourished through a feeding tube. Her husband, Michael Schiavo, fought her parents to win court approval to have the tube removed, saying his wife would not want to remain alive in that condition. The case became a major political issue when then-Gov. Jeb Bush signed into law a measure that would allow him to intervene, and then ordered the tube reinstated. After more legal action, the tube was removed and Schiavo died March 31, 2005.

Judy Broward, vice chair of the Florida Suicide Prevention Coalition in Gainesville, emphasizes that the vast majority of people who die by suicide are suffering from a mental illness. Her own son, Brett, killed himself at the age of 27, seemingly healthy but likely suffering from depression. "Our family was left wondering what we could have done, what we should have done," she said.

"They call it complicated grief. It never goes away but you learn to live with it," Broward said.

Since his death, she has become a leading advocate in the community for helping people find alternatives to suicide or deal with the devastating aftermath. "Often people don't want to die. They want to end the pain. There are other options," she said.

About every two weeks in Florida, an elderly man kills his wife and then himself. Research shows it is almost always the man, and almost always involves a serious illness such as Alzheimer's afflicting the wife and overwhelming a husband who is also a caregiver but unable to figure out a way to make things better.

"It's a killing out of depression and desperation, which is usually why the killer kills themselves as well," Donna Cohen, a professor at the University of South Florida who has studied aging for about 40 years. She is also a co-founder of the National Alzheimer's Association.

"Men, when they are caregivers, often feel they have to do something," Cohen said.

Cohen's research produced the alarming time frame of an elderly murder-suicide about every two weeks in Florida, which has one of the nation's highest percentages of seniors in its population. And although there is no national database on murder-suicides among seniors, experts on aging say couples dying this way is becoming more common as the population ages.

But those same experts say it doesn't have to end this way — there are resources such as caregiver support groups, and doctors can help elderly patients confront the diagnosis of serious illness head on and prepare the couple for the difficult times ahead.

"I believe people should have the right to make decisions about the end of life for themselves," said Cohen. She said one argument for legislation allowing physicians to assist, like a bill that is being decided this week in California, is that it may encourage people to seek a therapeutic setting for discussing options.

"Often these are cases of untreated depression," Cohen said.

She advised family members, faith leaders and health professionals to take the initiative when a couple is in an extended patient-caregiver situation. "You won't be putting thoughts into their head if you raise a concern. Suicide will already have come to mind," Cohen said.

A life together

Jean Subers was born and raised in Miami. Joe was born in Orlando and attended Jacksonville Bolles Academy.

One of Joe's UF fraternity brothers was Bob Graham, who would go on to be Florida's governor and senator. Graham and his wife, Adele, wrote condolences under an obituary on the Sun's website.

After marriage and graduation, the Subers settled in Miami where Subers joined his father's insurance agency, Burritt, Subers and Worley.

Both immersed themselves in civic and charitable organizations. Joe, an avid golfer who a few months ago shot his age of 80, served as general chairman of the Doral Eastern Open PGA tournament. He was also on the Orange Bowl committee and was president of the University Club.

Jean, who painted and sculpted, was a member of the Junior League and Beaux Arts.

"I belonged to a ladies group in Miami that worked with the University of Miami art museum and Jean was president," said Suzie Matthews, a Miami friend of the couple. "She was chairman of our annual costume ball, which was a big fundraiser for the university. Joe had the same leadership capabilities."

Hayes Worley, whose father was a founder of the insurance agency and who worked there with Joe, also spoke of his leadership.

"He was charismatic. He was a great teacher. He was the best of mentors. He taught me how to prepare like nobody else and to expect a lot of myself," Worley said. "He was a big reason I waited until I was 34 to get married; I needed to find someone was special as Jean. Joe and Jean were a Camelot couple to the nth degree."

In 1982, the Subers left Miami for a farm near Monticello in Jefferson County. They raised cattle, and fallow and axis deer. It was a dream they always had, Jim Subers said. And it was a place to indulge Jean's love for animals.

"Mom had a menagerie. She had llamas and ostriches and goats and pot-bellied pigs and chickens. It was just an unbelievable place for the grandkids to visit," he said. "They did that for 22 years until their health got to a place where managing that was too difficult."

They returned to Gainesville — the place where they met and fell in love while at the University of Florida — about 10 years ago. They lived in UF-affiliated Oak Hammock and, fully retired, focused on their volunteer work.

They were members of First Presbyterian Church and were active in the Gainesville Country Club, the Gator Booster Scholarship Club, and the football and basketball booster clubs. They also served Meals on Wheels.

Jean volunteered at UF Health Shands Hospital, at church and at the Boys and Girls Club. Her art was displayed at Oak Hammock.

"She painted with the children in Shands hospital. She had spent a lot of time at the hospital and she saw how they were suffering," said Jean's sister, Betty Pope.

But with time, her health began to diminish and so, too, did the couple's activities.

The end comes

The end came the evening of May 12.

Joe and Jean Subers drove to a cemetery, parked and said their final goodbyes.

A cemetery caretaker called authorities about a suspicious vehicle. Alachua County

sheriff's deputies responded and found the bodies.

They also discovered this note:

"What you have found probably looks like a homicide, but not really. Jean and Joe Subers have consciously and jointly elected to take their own lives, and what you have come upon is the final result of that decision.

"We apologize for the problem, and possible trauma, that our action has caused, but the method we chose reduced the risk of failure or injury to a third party. We have no problems that we are running away from other than, that is, the continuous health related pain and suffering for the past several years caused by many falls, hospital stays and constant doctor visits, with no relief or prospect of improvement. Our 3 sons are most aware, concerned and have been supportive of us for all our lives, and we feel will be understanding of why we took this action, but saddened...

"When whoever contacts our sons, please make sure that they are made aware of the fact that no one knew in advance of this plan to end our lives at this time, and to be as tactful and sympathetic as possible when talking to them.

"Thank you for your help and service in the handling of this matter.

"Sincerely,

Joe and Jean Subers."

Copyright © 2016 Gainesville.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.