

Look for the Helpers

by Donna Vande Kieft

Mr. Rogers said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping'"

Whenever March arrives, all too soon after a short 28-day month of February, I get nervous about tax preparation and the looming due date of April 15th. It was stressful for both me and my husband, Bill. We were good at our jobs helping people, serving in ministry. But we were not strong in understanding and organizing finances and taxes. Bill would spend hours itemizing expenses and I would just hope and pray our financial planner and tax preparer knew what they were doing. Our 2022 taxes was a "first" for me to file a joint return by myself. Also, a "last," since I will have to file single for 2023 and beyond.

Bill died at the end of June '22, so his income for his last six months was still taxable. Since we had become full-time residents of Arizona in the last few years, it seemed like a good idea to have someone local prepare our return. But who? A friend was visiting in March and related that she had used the AARP tax service in her state and it had gone well, so I made an appointment with the AARP volunteer tax service in Casa Grande. I brought in the documents to the AARP tax site, a Baptist Church, where several volunteers gathered each day to help people with their returns.

A wonderful gentleman, Tom, assisted me with preparing our return that was a bit more complicated than he anticipated. We made another appointment for April 14th, the eleventh hour with the possibility of having to file an extension.

With fear and trembling I went back on Friday to meet with Tom who explained the options he saw for me in moving forward with the return. We agreed on the best one and his supervisor had to review the return and sign off on it. Coincidentally, his name is also Bill, and as he went through checking everything Tom had done, we made a nice connection around caregiving, and my nervousness abated. It doesn't take long to understand that everyone is caring for someone. In this Bill's case, it was his mother-in-law.

In the past several years my husband, Bill, and I needed a lot of help as we lost him little by little to Posterior Cortical Atrophy—a rare form of Alzheimer's that begins with significant vision loss. There is no cure. Only care. We found many helpers for both of us as we went from diagnosis, caregiving, Covid, moving, selling our home in Oregon, placing Bill in long-term care and eventually hospice care. And now, as a widow I'm finding my way on the path of what's next when a spouse dies. "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping"

Mr. Rogers obviously became a great helper, and his work continues to help others. Bill had hoped to be a volunteer tutor when he retired. As a beloved youth pastor, he mentored many young people throughout his life, including four grandchildren who continue to benefit from his pure Bill-ness as they remember him. When you know people like Mr. Rogers, my husband, Bill, Tom and Bill with AARP, you feel a little safer, and want to do what you can to help make the world a safer, better place for others. As Ram Dass said, "We're all just walking each other home."