

When I was a little girl I would watch "The Love Boat" every Saturday night with my parents. I would fantasize and think that it would be so cool to be treated like royalty and everyone pampering me.....and now here it is years later and I am sailing on "The Love Boat." Though it is very different than the one I anticipated, it has been quite a ride.

You see, in 2001, I was diagnosed with ALS. I was 56 yrs old and filled with hopes and dreams as a wife, a mom and a grandma. Our family was devastated by the diagnosis. I would much rather be sailing in the ocean basking in the sun, running around checking out touristy things and eating all that good food; but that was not to be. Instead my ship is my disease and my captain's chair is my wheel chair. I could explain how we dealt with the devastating news when I was diagnosed or all the everyday feelings I have dealing with ALS, but I would much rather take this opportunity to tell you about my "Love Boat" staff. Only by the grace of God and the support of my "Love Boat" Staff have I been able to not only weather the storms of this devastating terminal disease but also to still enjoy the wonder and goodness of life.

My "Love Boat" staff is the best. It consists of my husband, children, grandchildren, family, friends and church. Not every day is smooth sailing, we encounter rough seas and high winds, but we also see some beautiful sunrises and sunsets. My husband Cecil is my first mate and major caregiver. He has retired early to help me with my daily care. I have my own personal attendant, personal shopper, personal trainer, personal handy man, personal chef and personal companion. He is my legs, arms, teacher, encourager and supporter physically, mentally and spiritually. He is a very, very patient person. I am not. I guess God had this all planned out when we married and I am so thankful for that. I lean on him and he is always there for me. There is no one like him. I repeat, there is no one like him. My crew is our children who also play a vital role. They encourage us and are always willing to help out.....phone calls, food, housecleaning, yard work, building ramps, praying for us and their faithful visits. My entertainers are my grandchildren ages 3 - 12 who each do their part in their own small way...pushing my wheelchair, giving us hugs, making us laugh, combing my hair, reading me books and coloring pictures for me. My deckhands are our family, friends and church who offer care and support to both me and Cecil. Our family, pastor, friends and church community support us through prayer, meals prepared and visits. Everyone is so willing to help and makes us feel so loved and blessed. It is often very humbling and hard to accept all of this help but I thank God daily for placing my "Love Boat" staff in my life.

Every day I think of this verse "This is the day that the Lord has made...Let us rejoice and be glad in it." While I do not know what each day will bring, I do know who is in control each and every day. God is my Love Boat Anchor!!! He is the one who has provided my "Love Boat" staff here on earth. As my family and I struggle with everyday situations we are learning to put our trust in God. There are many days I fall short of that trust. But I am learning to "let go" of my personal pride, my fears, my life and entrust it to my heavenly Father. Indeed, He will never leave or forsake us. We are learning to lean on and depend on Him daily and "Let it go" and give it all to God.

There will be a day when my "Love Boat" will dock. I am ready for that day. I will rejoice on the day when there will be no more sorrow, no more sickness and I will meet my Savior face to face.....what a day that will be. But, for now I keep sailing along, keeping my eyes focused on the final journey, and enjoying each and every moment that I have with my "Love Boat" staff. I treasure the song,

"You raise me up, so I can stand on Mountains.
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas.
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders.
You raise me up...to more than I can be."

Whenever I hear it I'm reminded of all my caregivers. You are the ones who God uses to raise me up. Everyday you are there for me to help me stand and walk, to keep my spirits lifted and give me strength to face the day. My God, my husband, my children, my grandchildren, my family, my friends and my church, thanks for treating me like royalty and pampering me. Thanks for being my "Love Boat" staff!!! I love you!

Barbara Harkema