

HOLDING ON TO HOPE

Family, friends surround Villager with encouragement, love after tragic crash

The Villages Daily Sun
Sunday, June 9, 2013
By Kayla Stirzel



George Horsford, Daily Sun

Ernie Battee and Lisa LaJoie

Ernie Battee spends time with his daughter, Lisa LaJoie, on a dock behind Lake Harris Health Care Center in Leesburg. Six months ago, Battee, of the Village of Largo, was paralyzed after a traffic crash. LaJoie, of Charlotte, N.C., travels to The Villages three weeks out of each month to visit her father.

Prior to the accident, Battee would meet with his friends from The Villages Motor Racing Fan Club each Thursday morning at Bob Evans restaurant to eat breakfast and talk about racing.

Now, on Thursdays, his friends from the club visit him in Leesburg to carry on the tradition.

"His attitude is so great," said Jerry Conkle, of the Village of Rio Ponderosa and fellow club member. "A lot of people would be depressed."

Battee is fortunate to have family members who live in The Villages as well. His brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, James and Donna Zegrar, of the Village of Duval, and John and Mary Anne MacPhee, of the Village of Mallory Square, visit Battee multiple times a week.

Lisa LaJoie, Battee's daughter, has been by her father's side since the accident. She spends three weeks out of each month away from her husband and two sons who live in Charlotte, N.C., to be here with her dad.

LaJoie stays at her father's home in The Villages and travels to Leesburg each day to visit him.

"It's really hard (to see him like this). He was very independent before," LaJoie said. "He's the same man inside, he just doesn't have the body to match that anymore."

When Ernie Battee's nose starts to run, his arms can't reach for a tissue. His food has to be fed to him. When it's time to go to sleep, a hydraulic lift has to put him into bed. And to get from one side of a room to another, he uses his electric wheelchair.

His life changed six months ago when a traffic crash left him a quadriplegic. But the Village of Largo resident gets by with a lot of help from his family and friends.

He is a patient at Lake Harris Health Care Center in Leesburg, where he receives around-the-clock care. Battee's family and friends in The Villages have stayed by his side throughout his journey.

Don Phelps sits beside Battee and takes the cards from his hands so they can continue playing the game they've played together for four years.

"His spirit is just amazing. He's such a nice guy," said Phelps, of the Village of Hemingway. "(Seeing him) makes you appreciate things."



George Horsford / Daily Sun
Ernie Battee is surrounded by family members including brother-in-law and sister-in-law, John and Mary Anne MacPhee, left, of the Village of Malory Square, his daughter, Lisa LaJoie, center, and sister-in-law and brother-in-law Donna and James Zegray, of the Village of Duval, while the family spends time together at Lake Harris Health Care Center.

Battee may be confined to an electric wheelchair, but that doesn't stop him from participating in daily activities. Instead of stepping onto the golf course, he entertains himself by playing bingo, blackjack and bridge, with the help of an assistant.

If he and LaJoie need some fresh air, they enjoy the grounds of the health care center. When the weather is nice, they travel down a pedestrian path that leads them toward a newly built wooden pier overlooking Lake Harris.

They have spent many hours there, with Battee's electric wheelchair parked next to his daughter's seat on the pier.

Sometimes they talk. Sometimes they just gaze out into the water.

LaJoie believes her father has become more hopeful, despite his situation.

"At first he thought he was being punished, but I said to him, 'Maybe it's not your lesson. Maybe it's somebody's lesson to learn from you, not you to learn from it.' So he started thinking about it that way," LaJoie said.

Although Battee doesn't understand why the accident happened and left him paralyzed, he said he trusts in the Lord.

"My daughter and my sisters-in-law have done all the work for me," Ernie whispered, with tears in his eyes. "That helps me cope."