

Resident Stories

Meet Joan and Bill Geenen

Palette of interests keeps their marriage colorful and full of life

Joan and Bill Geenen celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in October 2011.

Bill says that many people started asking them what their secret to a successful marriage was. He did some serious thinking about that question and concluded, “The secret is that when we got married, we knew it was for life, and anything else was not an option. So we just had to make it work.”

Both natives of the Appleton, Wisconsin area, their lives crossed paths just after Joan graduated from high school. Bill joined the Navy through the NROTC program after graduating from Marquette University, and it wasn’t until he returned home that they were married in the fall of 1961.

The couple raised three children. One son lives in Appleton, about three miles from them, while another lives in Baltimore, Maryland, and a daughter lives in San Jose, California. Joan and Bill agree that it’s nice having one son so close and also nice having two good excuses to take road trips from coast to coast.

Although their lives have been joined for more than half of a century, Bill and Joan have managed to remain distinct individuals with many of their own interests and activities—another secret to their successful marriage.

One thing they certainly have in common is a shared passion for the natural world and helping to preserve its beauty. Joan helps preserve it in her breathtaking artwork, while Bill preserves it through various conservation efforts.



Capturing nature through art

Joan—known as “Jo” in the art world—discovered a lifelong passion for painting when her youngest was just a few years old. With no previous background in art, she enrolled in an oil painting class with a friend at the Appleton YMCA, and was smitten.

“Over the years, I’ve worked with oils, water colors, acrylics, and finally ended up with pastels,” she says. “That’s all I work in now.”

Joan is deeply touched by the natural world and our place in it. Her artwork captures her subjects in a masterful blending of rich colors infused with motion, emotion, and brilliant highlights. She divides her paintings into at least four favorite categories: gardens, floral/botanical, landscapes, and seashores.

Today, her work is featured in private and corporate collections across the country as well as in many art galleries. Her pastels have been juried into national shows and won awards, and she has inspired many budding artists seeking to improve their technique in pastel painting.

Since 1972, she has been an active member of various organizations in the Appleton art community. (You can view her work at www.pastelpainting.com.) Several of Joan's paintings can be seen in the Meadows at Touchmark and the Grande, the main building.

Preserving nature through conservation efforts

One organization that greatly benefits from Bill's enthusiasm for the natural environment is the private, nonprofit Northeast Wisconsin Land Trust. With 22 years of experience as the CFO for a regional airline, Bill serves as treasurer for the Land Trust.

According to Bill, "The Trust's mission is to preserve lands that protect our waters, landscapes, and natural habitats in 12 counties. This is made possible primarily through conservation easements granted by landowners, who voluntarily restrict their rights to develop their property. In exchange for giving up certain development rights, owners receive tax deductions.

"It seems to be a successful program," Bill says. "We have about 40 easements right now that we manage. We also buy some properties. One purchase covered about 300 acres on the west shore of Green Bay. It's pretty significant," he says with pride.

Another great source of pride is the 27 solar panels that Bill and Joan installed on the roof of their Touchmark single-family home in fall 2009.

"They are working better than ever," Bill says. "In fact, we've set records by generating over 700 kilowatt hours of power last year."

Bill figures that on an annual basis, the panels generate about 20% more power than they use. "So we are helping the grid out fairly substantially."

Bill and Joan have hosted several Solar Open Houses (sponsored by a state solar organization) in their Touchmark home.

Living their personal philosophies

When asked if they have a philosophy of life, Joan says hers is "giving back."

"That means helping others as they have helped me," she says.

Among other things, she has volunteered one day every week for 20 years as the receptionist at LEAVEN (Limited Emergency Assistance Valley Ecumenical Network). She also gives a gift to the world every time she creates another painting.

For Bill, his philosophy is more of an attitude with which he greets each day. "I'm a pretty optimistic person," he says. "I always see the bright side of things. I look forward." For example, instead of choosing not to put such a large investment into solar panels this late in life, he tells everyone, "I'm just not leaving here until I get them paid for!" He's not the kind to let pessimism stop him from doing exactly what he wants to do.

Everything they need under one roof

The Geenens reserved a building lot almost three years before finally deciding to build their Fox Pointe home at Touchmark. They've been here since spring 2006. "We chose this site especially, because the house could be faced to have a western exposure to give me the best light for my painting studio," Joan explains.

Theirs is a three-bedroom home with one room converted into an office. And where others have an outdoor patio, they enclosed a studio for Jo. Bill enjoys the creek that runs along the back boundary. He has his own dock to fish from, and he has a neighbor with a small boat; the two of them paddle about in it.

Joan and Bill both keep very busy schedules, enjoying full lives in their own unique ways. At Touchmark, they have developed a circle of friends while never being far from their other Appleton friends and family.

Speaking for both, Bill says, "I'd say living here has changed our lives for the better."

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