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tevlin

Legislator's quiet battle with ALS fails to still passion

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GRANITE FALLS, MINN. - He moved slowly, awkwardly, down the hall of his simple ranch home, pushing a walker as his wife of 42 years watched anxiously. His brain, sharp as ever, knew where he wanted to go. But his arms and legs were making the short trip difficult.

Finally, he settled carefully at the kitchen table. His wife wheeled an intravenous stand next to him so she could feed him through a tube in his stomach.

"We haven't told many people about this part," she said, "but we're not trying to hide it either."



Kubly

Sen. Gary Kubly, DFL-Granite Falls, has been a Lutheran pastor for decades, leading his community in their faith, something he leans on more than ever now. For the past 15 years, as a state representative and then state senator, Kubly has been a soft, steady voice for rural Minnesota issues, a champion of agriculture and a model of civ-

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il discourse.

Now, as he struggles with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease), Kubly faces a daily battle between his mind and his body. ALS kills nerve cells in the mind and spinal cord, diminishing a person's ability to control their muscles, vocal cords and, eventually, breathing.

Sunday in Granite Falls, there will be a tribute to Kubly, who, despite his encroaching disability, has tried to keep serving the people of one of the largest legislative districts in the state. Kubly was diagnosed about 18 months ago, and has deteriorated since. His wife, Pat, and son Matt have been driving him to important meetings at the Capitol and helping him get to and from his office.

One day last week, Kubly was getting ready for another visit to the doctor. He can still speak, but the words come haltingly. If visitors can't understand him, he uses an iPad

or, more often, Pat speaks for him.

"I'm feeling pretty good most of the time," he said, forcing a small smile.

Kubly grew up on a farm just across the border in Iowa. He served in the Air Force, then met Pat while they were teaching in Texas. It didn't take long for Kubly to ask her out.

"Oh, gosh, he did kind of take me by surprise," said Pat. "He called me after he got his first paycheck. He grew on me."

The Kublys, who have three children, moved to Minnesota, where Gary attended Luther Seminary in St. Paul. He served as pastor at two churches in his rural district before he first won office in 1996.

"The original reason he ran for office was to keep rural issues on the front burner," said Pat. "His initial area of concern were the large, industrial feedlots in Renville County."

Kubly worked on legislation that involved safety and odor problems with the feedlots, as well as making sure taxes did not fall disproportionate-

ly on rural communities, she said. "He's always said his favorite part of the job is solving problems for his constituents," said Pat.

Kubly, who ended his full-time pastor job when he got into politics, hasn't been known to readily mix the two in office. Early in his career, he said that "I don't think there is a Christian position on most things. There are just Christians who hold views."

Thom Petersen of the Minnesota Farmers Union has known Kubly for more than 10 years and is a big fan.

"Even though he's not a farmer, he's very attuned to farmers because he cares deeply about rural issues," said Petersen, who has worked with Kubly on many bills to help agriculture. "He really is a man of few words, but when he speaks up, people listen. He's well-grounded."

Petersen says Kubly's disease has crept up on him in recent months. "I remember we were discussing a bill in the Agriculture Committee, and at

one point he couldn't finish his sentence," said Petersen. But Kubly hasn't wanted any pity.

"He told me to just treat him like I always treated him," Petersen said.

Sen. John Marty, DFL-Roseville, is a seatmate of Kubly's and calls him thoughtful, diligent and hard-working.

"If you asked people what traits they wanted in their legislator and put them all together, you'd get Gary," said Marty.

Kubly has a reputation as more of a coalition builder than staunch partisan, according to Marty. Kubly also used his valuable experience counseling adults who had been sexually assaulted as children to draft legislation that extended the time they had to report it, Marty said.

I asked Kubly what he was most proud of during his terms in the Legislature.

"The work I have done to reach out to both sides," he said. "You treat people with respect because you might need them later."

Kubly's term is up this year. He hopes to finish it, in part to keep his mind busy.

"I can just tell that when we go to the Capitol, it just invigorates him," said Pat.

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