

# The SAIL Messenger

*Special Insert*

## Home "Sweet" Home

by Steve Busalacchi



*Charlie and Jean Sweet*

Supporting Active Independent Lives (SAIL) member Charlie Sweet of Madison is a survivor, as he managed to live through the Battle of Okinawa in World War II. And now at 88, he's fighting another kind of battle, but he's proving that he still has the mettle to overcome an array of major health problems.

In the past year, the retired State of Wisconsin fiscal agent suffered a stroke, a broken hip, serious hospital-acquired infections and a hernia. But with determination, a loving spouse and SAIL's assistance, Charlie is back at home, where he and his wife Jean have lived since 1953. When they moved in nearly six decades ago, Midvale Boulevard was a dirt road.

"The first goal is to walk without a walker," says Charlie, from a chair in his remodeled screened porch, which the Sweets refer to as the "Garage Mahal." Grandchildren's art adorn the walls, the concrete floor has a shiny epoxy over it and except for the door rails along the ceiling, it looks pretty much like another colorful room in their comfortable, well-kept home.

"It's a wonderful neighborhood," says Jean. "I have been active in the neighborhood and so has Charlie. It means a lot to have a place that is special."

"As long as we can stay here, we're going to stay," agrees Charlie.

Both Charlie and Jean acknowledge that it would not be possible to remain independent at home without significant help from others, including the four and a half months Charlie spent at Oakwood University Woods Skilled Nursing Facility. This was all new to him, having never had a surgery before his hernia operation. What normally is a relatively routine procedure turned into something much more complicated, especially for an octogenarian. The surgery led to complications from an overdose of a narcotic pain killer and a series of new health problems which then led to a lengthy rehab stay at Oakwood.

"Charlie came home March first and I knew it was going to be tough, and I knew I couldn't do it myself," explains Jean, 87, who appears to be in remarkable physical and mental shape. Nevertheless, Charlie suffered such devastating medical problems, he would need more assistance than she herself could offer. "He's not the tough guy he appears to be," notes Jean without a hint of humor. A nutritionist, Jean attributes their relatively stable health later in life to an emphasis on healthy eating and living.

She says SAIL was also integral to finding qualified, trustworthy maintenance help, and providing various home care services referrals. "Our caregiver today feels like family to us," says Jean.

Equally important was establishing a link with the Veterans Administration. Although Charlie's a veteran, he had chosen not to receive care from the VA until SAIL's staff explained the many associated benefits he could enjoy. Once the Sweets realized the advantages, they decided to pursue the VA's help. SAIL assisted Charlie in enrolling in the program. Jean says they are thrilled with the medical care Charlie is receiving, and they especially appreciate the dedication of his gerontologist.



*Jean Sweet with SAIL Service Provider  
Mike Edlinger*

"He's making progress," says Jean. "He's come so far for his age, it's amazing." For Charlie's part, he's less impressed with his pace of recovery and is anxious to get back to his old self again.

"I still don't have good balance," says Charlie. "I need energy. Did you bring any with you?" he jokes. "I just want to get better. That's all I care about."

To get there, Charlie has a series of goals he is committed to achieving. The first is to walk across the room without assistance, and the others involve more extended travel. The Sweets plan to head for Door County twice this summer. For the latter trip, Charlie will work on his World War II memoirs, a topic he hadn't talked about until 50 years after the war.

In light of all that has happened in Charlie's life over the past year, it couldn't be easy playing the loving spouse. When asked how she is managing as a caregiver, Jean displays no sign of weariness and in fact, lives up to their last name. "I am committed to him. He's my best friend."

The Sweets are an optimistic pair and believe they can get over the latest healthcare hurdles. But they realize there may well come a time when home sweet home may be a different place.

"You know, [assisted living] may be inevitable but you also know you are not ready for it yet," says Jean.

***SAIL thanks Charlie and Jean for volunteering their time and for sharing their story!***