

A happy beginning for parents of 5 muscular dystrophy victims

BY MARIE MCGEE

Something nice is going to happen to Dorothy and Tom Cencer this weekend. The Livonia couple, who lost five of their seven sons to muscular dystrophy, will get the chance to meet Jerry Lewis — the man their sons idolized as a symbol of hope for the future.

The opportunity came as the result of the efforts of Alice Stothers, a Livonia 7-Eleven store manager, who was touched by the Observer's Sept. 15 story of Ken Cencer, the last of the Cencers' five sons to die.

AS A RESULT, the Cencers will leave tonight by plane for Las Vegas where they will later meet Jerry Lewis at a reception and dinner. The couple will also be special guests at a Jerry Lewis Dinner Show Friday night where 7-Eleven's incentive contest winners will be honored. They will return home Sunday.

The Cencers will be the personal guests of John P. Thompson, chairman of the Southland Corp., 7-Eleven parent company. They'll be staying at the Sahara Hotel.

"We are very excited," said Dorothy Cencer. "Particularly my husband. This is like a dream come true."

The Cencers are hoping there will be an opportunity for a private chat with Lewis.

"THE FIRST thing I'll do is plant a kiss on his cheek and ask him about his dog, Checkers. The boys always watched the television and laughed when Jerry would bring the dog on. Then I'm going to tell him we were thinking pink for him where he and his wife Patty were hoping for a girl at the time of their sixth child."

"And I'm also going to share with him the fact that he now has a new granddaughter and so do we," she smiled. "I'm going to talk to him just like I would talk to you or anyone else."

Lewis' recent marital problems will get a "we're-praying-for-you" aside from the couple, she said. "His private life has nothing to do with the Jerry Lewis who works for muscular dystrophy. We want him to know that."

IN HER LETTER to Thompson, Mrs. Stothers said: "Having four boys of my own, I wondered what it would be like to lose them at the age of 16 or 17 to muscular dystrophy. My heart and prayers went out to them."

"I feel the hand of the Lord in this," said Mrs. Cencer, a devout Roman Catholic. "I've been told that it is next to impossible to reach Mr. Thompson — but somehow Mrs. Stothers got through to him."

Although she's known about the trip for over a week, she didn't go out and get anything "too fancy" in the way of clothes. "They'll have to take us as we are," she added in her quiet, unassuming way. In fact, one of the dresses she's taking is one she had planned to wear for Ken's funeral, but didn't get a chance to because the weather turned hot.

THIS WILL BE the second trip the couple have taken since Ken's death on Aug. 25. They recently returned from a one-week trip to North Carolina where Cencer played golf and she just loafed — wary of further aggravating a long-time back ailment that has flared up and may require medical attention soon.

"But I never want anyone to think that we waited for the boys' passing so we could go off and enjoy ourselves. That just isn't so. First of all, we considered it a compliment from God that he would entrust the care of these beautiful children to us."

"True, it was heartbreaking at times, but this pain was much eased as we observed the super courage of our sons. Their hopes were high. They knew that each day, as they struggled with their burden, there were persons out there — like Jerry Lewis — working so very hard toward a cure."

For Jerry Lewis, meeting the Cencers this weekend will underscore again how important his MDA mission is. For the Cencers, it is another opportunity to show to the power of faith, love and hope.

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