



BEV HORNE/bhorne@dailyherald.com

Long-term amnesia separated Wheaton residents Charles and Cindy Hyzy for 12 years.

True love meant to be

War, car crash, amnesia — nothing keeps Wheaton couple from finding each other

By KATHRYN GRONDIN
kgrondin@dailyherald.com

Neither a war, a fiery car crash or a 12-year separation caused by amnesia could extinguish Cindy and Charles Hyzy's love for each other.

"It's quite a love story. It's like a Nicholas Sparks novel," said Cindy's friend, Debbie Douglas. "It's a pretty unbelievable story. I told her she needs to write a book."

The book jacket would summarize how Charles "Chuck" Hyzy disappeared in 1968 on his way to report for duty at an East Coast U.S. Army base. Cindy Hyzy long believed a mix up occurred at the base and he shipped out to Vietnam.

Unbeknownst to his young bride in Itasca, Chuck Hyzy was in a car accident roughly 800 miles from home and suffered what one area doctor calls a "very rare" case of long-term amnesia.

The young mother of twin boys believed he'd contact her. But days turned into weeks that turned into months and then years.

Eventually she moved on, but she could never find the true happiness she had with



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CINDY AND CHARLES HYZY
At left, Charles and Cindy Hyzy during their first wedding April 1, 1967. At right, the couple remarried on the same date in 1982. Now they celebrate both anniversaries.

her high school beau. Then, unexpectedly, they crossed paths at a Chicago car repair shop 12 years later — almost to the day he disappeared.

Falling in love

Cindy (Burton) and Chuck Hyzy met on a blind date as teenagers. She lived in Itasca and knew some of his cousins. He was a shy guy from an all-male Catholic high school who'd never been on a date.

He was a man of few words, but his character showed

through. He was polite. Ever the gentlemen, he visited the drive-in theater's snack bar a few times to buy her popcorn and candy.

"He was a sweetheart. He didn't get fresh or smart," she said. "He didn't try anything."

Within months, they were in love. After Hyzy was drafted into the Army to serve in Vietnam, she followed him as he trained at different bases across the country. During one of his fur-loughs, they married on April 1, 1967.

Sixteen months later, she

had twin boys named Richard and Raymond. They had nearly two weeks together as a family before he had to report to a New Jersey base for deployment overseas. He had only six months left on his tour so they hoped he might not go to Vietnam and time would pass quickly until they reunited.

But their reunion would not occur so soon.

On his way to Fort Dix, N.J., that September, Chuck was in a car crash that left him unconscious for days and

with long-term amnesia once he'd awakened.

He later learned from a witness report that he had been trying to avoid another vehicle and went over a cliff.

He was thrown from the car, which burst into flames and was destroyed — including the license plates that would have led authorities to Cindy back in Illinois. Even his dog tags hanging from the rearview mirror and his wallet in the glove box were lost in the blaze.

So police released his story and photo to local media, but no one in New Jersey or New York knew him. His Army unit had already shipped out, and his entire family lived in the Midwest.

Separate lives

Once he recuperated, Hyzy needed a name before he could move on. Some hospital employees ironically chose Chuck Smith since John Smith

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was cliché.

With no idea where home was, Chuck found a job and stayed in New Jersey until one day in 1973 a friend invited him to take a vacation and tour the states.

When they arrived in Chicago, something in Chuck's gut made him stay.

"The city just felt right. It felt good ... almost like you belong," he said.

That was a welcome sensation after years of feeling adrift, wondering who he was and whether he had family somewhere, he said. So he got a job in a garage just west of the lake and went about his life. He had a few serious girlfriends but never married any of them.

"It just didn't feel right," he says.

Back in Itasca, Cindy was nagged by her own doubts and unanswered questions.

The thought that Chuck went AWOL and headed for Canada entered her mind at times, even though it was out of character for her husband. But even if that were the case, she believes he would call to say he was safe and invite her and the boys to join him.

"We were so in love," she says. "We never ever fought."

More than anything, she believed wires had crossed at the Army base and he shipped out to Vietnam, in part, because he had taken some papers with him relating to the newborns.

Once he arrived at the base, he was going to register their twins as dependents with the Army so they could qualify for military benefits.

Cindy can't explain it now but the thought that Chuck might've been in a car accident was fleeting. After all, an accident would've triggered a phone call from a police department or hospital, and the military would know, she said.

She even hired a private detective who didn't turn up anything.

Eventually, she filed for divorce so she could qualify for public aid. She later married another man and they had a daughter, Sheri, together. The five of them had a nice life in Wheaton, she said. But Cindy was never truly happy and eventually called it quits with her second husband.

About a month later, Cindy found Chuck.

Surprise reunion

One day in September 1980, Cindy joined her sister and young nephew on a trip into Chicago.

They went to watch sailboats make their final return to the harbor for the season. The group was enjoying the excursion so much they decided to do some shopping before heading home. But they got lost.

They eventually spotted a garage and decided to stop to use the restroom and get directions.

As Cindy walked through the building, she saw a man sitting at the desk who looked a lot like her long-lost Chuck, but he showed no sign of recognition so she figured it was just an uncanny resemblance.

When she asked for the directions, he answered using her name.



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Wheaton residents Charles and Cindy Hyzy took walks around Herrick Lake Forest Preserve to become reacquainted.

"It's like when you're out at a bar and you see someone and you recognize the face but you can't place it," he said. "After she spoke to me, something clicked."

He didn't know why he knew her name — he figured he heard her sister say it — he just knew Cindy sounded right.

Cindy took this as total recognition and confirmation of his identity so she questioned him: "How long have you been here? ... Why didn't you get in touch with me?"

A bewildered Chuck responded, "Why would I? I don't even know you." He recalls thinking: "Oh my God, am I in trouble? Do I walk away? Do I want to know this lady?"

His baffling reaction only upset Cindy.

When she was too distressed to speak, her sister took over the interrogation.

"I couldn't speak. I wanted to scratch his eyes out," Cindy says.

Seeing the commotion, some of Chuck's coworkers and their boss came over and explained the amnesia. His fingerprints on file with the military later confirmed his identity and Cindy's claims.

According to Dr. Kathy Borchardt, director of neuropsychology at Central DuPage Hospital's Neurosciences Institute in Winfield, retrograde amnesia is unusual. A case that lasts for several years is "extremely rare," she said.

An individual who suffers amnesia due to a head injury typically loses the memories immediately after the trauma, said Borchardt, who has never treated Hyzy. And most cases of memory loss are resolved in three to six

months, she said. But many mysteries still surround the brain.

"Memory is not a simple process," she said. "There's a lot we still don't know about head injuries and amnesia."

Different memories involve different areas of the brain and separate pathways between those areas. Name recognition, for example, is processed differently than relational memory, such as knowing who your wife is.

"You can remember a face and not a name," Borchardt said. "That happens to me all the time."

Second chances

A second courtship ensued involving long talks during walks along Lake Michigan in Chicago and Herrick Lake in Wheaton. They used those walks to update each other on the prior 12 years. Chuck also met his sons and step-daughter, and reunited with his parents and other relatives.

For Cindy, the love came flooding back immediately. She finally understood why her second marriage didn't work. For Chuck, the love grew over the weeks and months that followed as they got reacquainted and some sporadic memories returned.

"It took a while for the feelings to really come back," he said. "Destiny — I guess it was just meant to be."

They remarried on what should've been their 15th anniversary: April 1, 1982. They've been married ever since, celebrating their 25th/40th this past spring.

"We celebrate them both because we both feel we never would've gotten divorced," she says. "It was meant to be."