

When Christmas Comes to the Convention

by Jon Caswell



Vivian and Charles Christmas

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– *Charles Christmas*

Christmas means gifts. And when you are talking about two Christmases, well, it’s giving times two. That’s the case with the Christmases we’re talking about here, Vivian and Charles Christmas, of Louisville, Kentucky. They have given generously to their church, their local chapter and the whole of Mended Hearts.

If you’ve been to a national convention in the past three decades, you’ve likely met one or both of them.

Vivian got involved with MHI in 1974 when she became a charter member of the Kentuckiana Chapter 11 in Louisville. But her heart odyssey had started many years earlier, when she was a young child in rural Tennessee during the Depression and her mitral valve was damaged as a result of undiagnosed rheumatic fever. She married Charles when she was 18, and their family doctor assured her that her shortness of breath was “a touch of asthma.”

While Charles was in the Marines, she couldn’t get her breath after skating with friends and visited a cardiologist. Soon she had surgery to clean out her mitral valve. That was 1961. As Charles explained, the surgeon went in through her rib cage and, with the heart beating, opened the valve with a scalpel on the end of his index finger. It took 26 units of blood, and she was in the hospital for 23 days. “I was only 31 years old and I didn’t have anyone to talk to,” she said. “I was terrified.”

Since that operation there have been three more valve surgeries – in 1975, 1993 (valve replacement) and 2002 (tricuspid valve) – and five pacemakers since 1985, a heart attack in 1995 and two strokes. So, in addition to being a MHI visitor for more than 30 years, she has had plenty of occasions to be visited. “I didn’t want anyone to feel the way I had before that first surgery, so I joined Chapter 11 at the first organizational meeting, March 1974.”

When Charles saw how much good it did Vivian to be involved in MHI, he joined too. Soon after that they began an annual pilgrimage when they attended their first convention, in Long Beach, Calif. That was 1976, and they haven’t missed a convention since – that’s 34, if you’re counting. “We’ve driven to most of them and gotten to see a lot of the states that way,” Charles said. “We love the convention because of the support you get – meeting old friends, making new ones, learning new things. We’ve gotten to see a lot of new places. We’ve been to every state except Alaska and Oregon.”

Of course, they’ll be at the Mall of America Convention this year.

Charles was an insurance salesman for a dozen years, then went on the road selling tires. “Sometimes it was more than a thousand miles in a week,” he said. “I got tired of all the traveling because Vivian often didn’t feel well, and I hated to leave her.” After that company closed, he took over his cousin’s construction business at age 55.

The Christmases may have perfect attendance at conventions, but that is not their only contribution to MHI. They have been active year-round for many years. Between them they’ve occupied most of the offices in their local chapter. Charles was president, as well as secretary and vice president. Vivian ran a fundraising flea market for 17 years. Charles is currently visiting chairman for Ch. 11, which visits three hospitals. He and Vivian still visit.

At the national level, Charles has served as Central RD for three terms. In 1989, he was named Mended Heart of the Year – that convention was in New York City. “I’ve prized that award more than any other one I’ve received,” he said. Between 1993 and 1997, he served

in both national vice president positions. In 1997, at the Seattle convention, he was elected national president. He is currently chairman of the Past Presidents Council and, as such, still sits on the Board of Directors of MHI.

Although the Christmases don’t have children, that hasn’t kept them from becoming grandparents. “Through a program at our church, we have been grandparents to two teenagers and a young single man,” Charles said. “We take them to lunch, remember their birthdays, give them an ear when they need someone to listen. We’ve always been connected to the young people in our church. I think it keeps you young.” They are still much involved in their Ninth & O Baptist Church, where they still serve as greeters on Sundays. Vivian teaches young women how to crochet and quilt and volunteers at a hospital thrift shop every Tuesday. “But there’s nothing I like more than visiting heart patients,” she said. “We’ve visited over 6,000 patients in the past 36 years.”

There have been several memorable experiences at the convention. There was an earthquake at the 1992 convention in San Diego. There was also a storm on an outing in Chesapeake Bay that the Coast Guard warned the cruise ship not to make – “but the owners didn’t want to refund our money, so they took us out anyway,” Charles said. “The Coast Guard was right; you couldn’t see ten feet. Everybody was terrified. That’s something you don’t forget.”

Charles and Vivian feel that they have had a blessed life and that MHI is a big part of that. “We have loved working with new groups, getting new chapters started and seeing them grow as well as seeing the organization grow,” Charles said. “It’s been satisfying to know that we have been a part of the growth that has allowed MHI to reach more patients through the visiting program.”

“When I found out at age 31 that I had a serious heart problem, I thought I would never live to be 40,” Vivian said. “Here I am at age 80 and I’m still active and enjoying life. I give my thanks to a loving God, my wonderful husband and the great doctors and nurses who have taken care of me through the years.” ❤️



LEFT TO RIGHT: Vivian and Charles Christmas in New York accepting the Mended Heart of the Year award in 1989; Vivian and Charles at the Charleston convention in 2005; Vivian and Charles at the 2002 Boston convention with their name tags since 1976