

NEIGHBORS

THURSDAY
FEBRUARY 14, 1991

The Miami Herald

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Helping others drew pair together

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Michael and Camille Geraldi met 18 years ago in Room 238 at Miami Children's Hospital. It was then the gastroenteritis ward. They talked over the sickbed of a terminally ill infant, as Camille cradled the baby in her arms. He was a pediatrician, she a nurse. The infant later died.

"He tells the story to his patients," says Camille, who dreamed since childhood of caring for ill and unwanted children. "It was not romantic."

But their shared interest in needy children grew into romance.

"She would take the children out and go out on the grounds and be with them, and I used to meet her for lunch," said Michael Geraldi, now 47. "We both had such a tremendous fondness with the children. Being able to help them, that's what drew us together."

Camille Geraldi, 42, added: "He'd meet me out there all the time. Our relationship built up around kids no one else cared

'Our relationship built up around kids no one else cared about.'

CAMILLE GERALDI

about."

Now married 15 years, they live near The Falls with their two daughters. They also have 17 adopted and parentless children who suffer from Down's syndrome and other critical illnesses.

Next door, Camille Geraldi has created the Up With Down's Syndrome Foundation. The nonprofit agency places unwanted Down's syndrome children with families and provides respite care for them.

"This was Camille's dream from when she was a child," says foundation board member Ruth Ann Kaner. "He met her,

fell in love with her and wanted to do this."

As a young woman, Camille decided not to marry, to stick to her mission. When Michael first grew close, she backed off, fleeing to New York.

"I would call her. I knew eventually she'd come back," Michael said. "She figured she would never get married in her life. She thought she'd never meet anyone who would be as devoted as she would be."

The couple's devotion to what they do persists, but it is a life that has never gotten easy. As she did when she first met Michael, Camille spent much of the last several months at the hospital, caring this time for Joelle, an infant with Down's syndrome, heart problems and natural parents who didn't want her.

Joelle was to be the newest addition to the Geraldi family, but the 7-month-old baby died Saturday morning.

"Death is something that happens when you do our kind of work," Camille Geraldi said. "It is the life we chose. I'm just lucky to find someone to do it with me."



ALBERT COYA / Miami Herald Staff

LOVING OTHERS: Michael and Camille Geraldi outside Miami Children's Hospital.