Local musician Cathy Reitz was no stranger to the devastation that dementia can cause.

“My older sister Christy had an early diagnosis,” said Reitz. “She was diagnosed at 57 with frontal lobe dementia.”

There were signs that something was wrong, even years before the diagnosis. But those signs were misinterpreted as going through more general mental health issues.

“She was smart; she was a teacher and a social worker and all these things. And then, you just watch them fade away,” Reitz recalled.

Reitz felt particularly powerless as her sister faded from day to day. She recalled her sister, always proficient with numbers, found herself unable to balance a checkbook. Numbers suddenly ceased to have meaning for her.

“It was the cruelest thing,” said Reitz.

She recalled the things her sister would tell her as she continued to fade.

“One time, she said to me, ‘I feel like I’m in a nightmare that I can’t wake from,’” Reitz said. “Even in the year before she died, there was not much conversation, but all of a sudden she looked at me, just dead on, and said, ‘What is happening to me?’”

For a decade, Reitz would drive to Milwaukee to visit her sister, who would sometimes not even recognize Reitz (“I don’t know who that lady is, but she is very entertaining!”). She even recalled odd outbursts from her sister, who would yell “I hate you!” before carrying on as though nothing happened.

Once Reitz lost her sister in 2016, she didn’t immediately head towards the funeral.

“I already said goodbye to my sister,” she said. “This person who died — it was the body that my sister was in, but not my sister.”

One day after she lost her sister, she received a call from Lisa Wells, part of the Aging and Disability Resource Center of Eau Claire. Wells told her of a chorus being formed for people who were dealing with memory disorders and their loved ones called the Stand in the Light Memory Choir. She asked if Reitz wanted to offer her talents.

“And I was like, ‘No thank you. I don’t want anything to do with dementia. I hate dementia. I watched my sister die from it. I’m not doing it,’” Reitz recalled, “and [Wells] said, ‘Well, why don’t you watch this video of this other choir with memory loss?’

“Of course I was hooked, and I said, ‘Yes, Let’s do this.’”

Soon, she got a call from a stranger. It was a woman named Eileen, asking about the choir.

ENTER EILEEN

Eileen Rowell, of Altoona, was at that time taking care of her husband Denny as he battled dementia. She didn't know ahead of time how much it would wear on her body, but loved ones insisted this was something that Rowell couldn't do on her own.

"And I told them: watch me," Rowell recalled.

Having been with her husband since they were 14 years old, and had been married for decades by the time she started noticing problems, particularly after Denny's doctor swapped out some of his medication.

"He left the house in the middle of the night. I did not know he left," Rowell recalled. "He was in his underwear, with nothing else on, and walked two miles down the street. And then he came back, and was ringing everyone's doorbells. I thought, 'Who's horsing around?'

"I answered the door, and he's standing there shivering, and he says to me, 'I didn't think you'd take me back.'"

The event, where he wandered town in freezing temperatures, landed him in the hospital for weeks. While there, the Rowells were given the news that he had dementia.

Rowell's house had enough stairs to be a poor fit for her husband, and initially she opted to enter her husband into a memory care unit. However, she quickly came to realize that the costs she was paying were not justified and she found being separated from her husband after nearly 60 years unbearable. She found a home in a newly-built neighborhood for them both, where she could care for Denny until the end.

Soon, she heard of a woman who was starting a choir for those dealing with memory loss. She had to have that phone number and she had to have Denny in the choir. From there, a phone call led to eight years of participation in the choir for the Rowells.

"Music is the key — it's the bridge to memory, let me tell you," said Rowell. "And Denny loved singing. He couldn't wait to get into the choir. But it also gave him a purpose in life.

"The second concert we went to, I got him to sing 'Amazing Grace' with another gentleman. He didn't even need the book. But that's what you need; you need to find purpose for them."

Rowell remembered that the last thing Denny did when he would go home from the choir for the night was give people a piece of candy. "When he came back," recalled Rowell, "they would always remember that he had given them candy."

Denny would stay in the chorus until health caused him to enter hospice.

"When he was dying, he died in the bedroom, and he laid there, and he said, 'What's wrong with me?'"

She explained that what was wrong was like not being able to find the right parts to fix a car. And with that, Rowell said that he nodded in understanding, took her hand and said, "I'll see you in heaven."

THE MUSIC GOES ON

Rowell continues to be a part of the Stand in the Light choir. She says she is carrying on the spirit of sharing that was such a part of who Denny was.

“He would always share. He wanted to share his life, share music. He’d share his candy, his money, and he’d share the shirt off his back.” she said. “He shared his life by singing.”

She will often wear red — Denny’s favorite color that often showed up in his wardrobe — and though some in the choir will not exactly remember who Rowell is, they will know that she is a comfortable and familiar face.

“I can feel him. I can hear him,” Rowell said. “So I’m helping somebody else with dementia because I understand it.”

Reitz now helps other choirs get off the ground, as she realizes how integral music is to those battling memory disorders. Due to health issues, she has stepped back from leading the choir, but will still sing with those that have been an integral part of her life for so many years.

“I think it’s so important. When you see somebody up there singing, you see it in their eyes — you literally see magic happen,” she said. “I am so honored that I get to be with this choir.”