

A lesson in courage: Artist fights MS

By CONNIE RAE

"I had my first attack of MS when I met my wife," laughs Fred Mancuso jokingly. "Cupid struck with a vengeance — did I feel weak!"

Agnes was slim, beautiful, blue-eyed and blonde — all he ever dreamed about, and more. . . She was six feet high in spike heels — "like the CN tower." Fred was five foot five.

In 1953 Agnes, a graduate of the Ontario College of Art, walked into the Montreal drafting studio, where Fred, also a graduate of several art schools, worked.

Their shared love of art, fishing and hunting was enough to make him overlook her height. They were married two years later and now have a vibrant teenage daughter, Patricia, whose bedroom is a mini-museum of art, theatre and ballet.

Today, Fred Mancuso is in a wheelchair — and the height difference doesn't matter any more. He describes his wife as "an angel, a goddess — the best friend I ever had."

Something good has come out of multiple sclerosis for this couple.

"Without this happening, we probably wouldn't have returned to our first love — art — and Fred would never have found the peace he now has," says Agnes.

Agnes works as an occupational therapist at Mississauga Hospital during the week, but weekends are devoted to painting, he his beloved landscapes, and she her faces and flowers. This summer Agnes will be frequenting all the outdoor galleries such as City Hall, Carling O'Keefe, and Niagara-on-the-Lake, with their work.

While Agnes travels, Fred will stay home. He hasn't left his highrise apartment for nearly two years. (Proximity to the washroom is mandatory and but one of the nuisances of the disease, in his particular case.)

But from his highrise suite on Lakeshore Rd., he is afforded a spacious sampling of outdoors. From the north balcony the eye can sweep a magnificent panorama with the Credit River winding southward under bridges through trees and toy houses. From his east studio window, Fred is afforded a bird's eye view of the river spilling into Lake Ontario and the Port Credit harbour.

"It helps," says Fred, who spent his childhood in Lachine, Quebec, filled with

"funny joyous days of painting and big game hunting and trout fishing in the wilderness of the Laurentian forests."

"The bush held a magic, a peace and joy I could never understand," he says. "Everything to do with the forest was made by God. I was in love with it."

His art, during his working days was "stiff and commercialized" but now with his paint brush he returns to the freedom of his forest — inspired by the view and fed by a wealth of scenes that memory holds secure — wooded lakes and streams, quaint and colorful covered bridges, gay street scenes and tranquil mountains. Some of his paintings are oils. Most are painted with the gentle techniques of water colors brought to life with colorful ephemeral immediacy.

"When I started as a draftsman 36 years ago," he says, "art was something you could starve with. Drafting was survival."

When Multiple Sclerosis was diagnosed 14 years ago, he walked with a gait. He was

"at the height of his determined dreams, but Fate has a way of laughing at dreams, and decided upon another route," he says.

UNPREDICTABLE

MS is a neurological disease affecting over 25,000 Canadians — and its slow unpredictable spread can affect the ability to walk, to talk, to see, and the use of legs, hands and other motor and sensory skills.

It is difficult to diagnose. It flares up and subsides in flirting uncertainty, and the most common theory of research is that MS, predominant in the northern hemisphere, is a virus that lays dormant within the body from childhood, and begins to emerge usually in mid teens.

No two people are affected the same, says Fred who was forced into a wheelchair over a year ago.

When he first learned he had the disease, his initial reaction was, "What the hell is MS?"

In the early stages, before it was diagnosed, he suffered from "bad nerves" and took group therapy for a time in a

Montreal hospital, but "What do you do after you say, I have MS?" he asks. No one can help you, not even the doctors. You just have to learn to accept it, to live with it."

He has experienced dizziness, faintness, tiring and mental confusion.

"Sometimes you collapse like a ball of putty on the floor and are so helpless until someone untangles you, or the muscles relax. I get so furious."

"It cripples you, it defeats you, it destroys you but while the going is good, I'm going to laugh at it and play hooky from the disease as long as I can."

Fred lost his job seven years ago. He had determined not to slip, not to make a mistake, to conquer it, be above it, but at times he could feel himself a little more slow, more cautious.

With all his background as a senior draftsman, owner of his own art studio and graduate of Beaux Arts Fine Art School in Montreal, among others, he found himself unemployed and seemingly unemployable.

Now he doesn't have to worry about the funny stares from people who thought he was drunk when he couldn't walk a straight line. He doesn't worry about the pressures of a demanding job. He is doing now what he has always loved best to do — just paint. And his paintings are selling.

"The wheel of fortune plays strange tricks," he says, "but then I don't ever remember getting something the easy way."

"I have found my peace. The future? The future is years and years and centuries away."

Mancuso will be showing some watercolors at the art and craft show at First United Church, Lakeshore and Hwy. 10 this Friday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.



Agnes and Fred Mancuso have shared their love of art for more than 20 years.

Photo by CONNIE RAE