

'I MUST STAY STRONG'

Patricia de Lille opens up about the heartache of losing her husband, Edwin, and looks back on the happy life they shared

BY JANE VORSTER PICTURES: MISHA JORDAAN



IT'S the first thing that catches your eye as you walk into her lounge at home – the framed portrait of the man who for 49 years was Patricia de Lille's husband, soulmate and most loyal supporter.

"I put him there so he can smile at me whenever I come into the room and then I can smile back," the politician says with an affectionate chuckle as she gazes at the picture of Edwin de Lille (72).

Then she turns serious.

"You know, I still can't believe he's gone. It's been a month and I don't think it's yet dawned on me," Patricia (70) says.

After taking time off to mourn Edwin's passing, she now finally feels ready to talk about what they went through over the past year as his health steadily declined.

Unbeknown to many of her colleagues, while Patricia was juggling her responsibilities as minister of public works and infrastructure in President Cyril Ramaphosa's cabinet and leader of the Good Party, she was also her husband's carer.

Since 2012 his health had been up and down as a result of a series of small strokes. Yet somehow Eddie, as she calls

him, always managed to rally and was back doing what he loved best – looking after his wife and their household in Pinelands, Cape Town. But in February last year, after having his gall bladder removed, he suffered another major blow when he caught a hospital bug and developed pneumonia.

For Patricia it was all hugely stressful – and what made it even worse was that because of Covid and lockdown she wasn't allowed to visit him. Eventually medical staff at Life Vincent Pallotti Hospital reluctantly agreed she could take Eddie, a retired bus driver, home.

"The doctor told me I need to prepare myself as he might have just a month or two. And I just looked at him and I smiled and put my husband in the ambulance and brought him home."

She bought a hospital bed, which she set up in their bedroom, and hired a nurse. For Patricia it was a case of many sleepless nights as she lay listening to her

husband's erratic breathing, wondering if he'd still be alive in the morning.

And yet over the months Eddie steadily started regaining his strength. Even though he couldn't speak much he still enjoyed having his family around him.

Patricia says with the help of their son, Alistair (48), who lives on the property with his wife, she was able to get Eddie into his wheelchair and take him into the garden to spend time with their four Huskies.

"He loved those dogs – you should have seen the smile on his face when he saw them."

It's these moments she treasures.

"The only positive thing I can take from Covid is that I could work from home."

But late one Sunday night, after months of defying the doctor's grim predictions, Eddie took a turn for the worse and this time, somehow Patricia just knew.

"He looked at me and I've never seen his eyes so big – they almost looked like glass," she recalls.

'If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have been able to achieve what I have achieved'