

When Aileen Rodriguez and Tony Imperatrice first met, she was the youth leader and he the newly hired music director of St. Mary's Catholic Church in Fresno, CA. Aileen's mother Cecilia, a long-standing church board member who was instrumental in hiring Tony, introduced the two. It wasn't long after the first meeting that Aileen decided to join the choir. She and Tony hit it off from the start.

Their first date was a movie; *When Harry Met Sally*. Things went well. Dating for a while, Aileen and Tony became hesitant to announce their growing feelings for each other to the church at large. This was, after all, the church Aileen's family had been attending for decades. Her parents were heavily involved in church policy and functions. *Tony likes to joke they are "uber Catholics."* Aileen had been baptized there. They wanted to be sure things were serious between them before they made an official announcement.

Things were serious.

Three months later, during one of her Sunday school classes, Tony, with the help of her students, asked Aileen to marry him. Sixteen years later they are still happily married.

That's not to say there were not trials along the way—in fact there were many. One was a drinking habit Tony had been keeping from Aileen. Aileen knew Tony was drinking, but was not aware of the excessive amounts and frequency. As time went on, Aileen began to voice her unhappiness about the situation. Tony, in the stages of full blown alcoholism by this time, was becoming violent and unpredictable. Aileen began to question her loyalty to her husband. "Should I stay or should I pack up and leave him?" This was a question she constantly asked herself. She decided to stay, to fight, along with Tony, for their marriage and their lives together. And what a fight it turned out to be.

During a Rodriguez family event, Aileen came face to face with a wife's worst nightmare. Tony couldn't make the event. He stayed home, not feeling well. Sometime that evening Aileen received a call from Tony. He said something was wrong and felt like maybe he needed to go to the emergency room. Aileen would later admit thinking, "I wonder what it is now." Those thoughts would come back to haunt her. Unknown to anyone, including himself, Tony had been bleeding internally for three days.

A cat scan revealed Tony had a life threatening condition known as polycystic kidney disease. A cyst on Tony's kidney had ruptured and had caused the bleeding. Aileen was taken aside by doctors and told Tony was going to die. Later that night, Tony, losing consciousness and beginning to black out, said to Aileen, "I'm not going to make it."

For ten excruciating days, Aileen sat by the bedside of her husband as he lay in a morphine induced daze. She was forced to make life and death medical decisions, sometimes in the middle of the night, oftentimes without the benefit of sleep or a clear mind. It was enough to push anybody to the limit.

Eventually, slowly, and with the support of his wife, Tony regained his strength and recovered from the ordeal. He threw himself back into his music and has been alcohol free ever since.

Aileen recovered as well. And then she used the experience, like other experiences from her life, as inspiration for her art.

You can glimpse that particular struggle in *Visiting Hours Do Not Apply*.