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Therapist to be honored among state's '50 Best'

Mariah Fenton Gladis is clinical director at Pa. Gestalt Center

By SARAH E. MORAN, Special to the Local News

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MALVERN -- Among the business owners recently named by Pennsylvania Governor Edward G. Rendell to his list of the "50 Best Women in Business," Mariah Fenton Gladis' story is certainly among the most interesting.

She is a full-time Gestalt therapist and trainer at the Pennsylvania Gestalt Center for Psychotherapy, where she is also the clinical director.

And she has had amyotrophic lateral sclerosis for 28 years.

A disease that erodes the central nervous system, ALS, or Lou Gehrig's Disease, as it's commonly known, usually strikes quickly.

When Gladis was diagnosed in 1981, she explained, "My doctor

told me I had a 10 percent chance of surviving more than six months to two years, the normal life expectancy of a person diagnosed with ALS."

Instead, Gladis has survived nearly three decades and married Ron Gladis, then her fiancée, soon after her diagnosis. Together, they have two sons, Luke and Cole.

Which is not to say that Gladis' life is easy.

It's not.

Her speech is slurred and her husband often acts as her interpreter. She needs assistance getting in and out of chairs. She uses a wheelchair most of the time and walks only with assistance, using a specially designed walker with forearm rests.

Yet she works out three times a week, is always impeccably groomed and dressed, and "works more than full-time," she said during a recent interview.

She also sees about 16 psychotherapy clients each week, in addition to conducting weekly group therapy sessions and additional training courses with therapists studying Gestalt, which Gladis defines as a "lively and holistic experiential approach to healing and personal growth. It emphasizes the development of awareness -- emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual, and the capacity to make healthy contact with one's self, others, and the environment."

Of the award, whose reception and dinner will be held in Harrisburg on May 11, Gladis said, "It's a great honor, and I will be there. The reception and dinner are a great opportunity to meet other women in business." Gladis is one of four Chester County businesswomen picked by Rendell for the 14th annual list of the 50 best women in business across the state.

Wednesday through Saturday this week, the Daily Local News is featuring a story on one of them.

"I have the privilege of working with many executives in the Chester County business sector," Gladis said. "I see as so important the power to positively affect and improve individuals in the workplace. These changes ripple out to families and communities."

Husband Ron Gladis helps his wife run the Gestalt Center, whose training sessions last three years. He is also

a video and film producer and director.

Asked about the effects of her illness on her professional and personal lives, Gladis responded, "I'm not going to be cavalier about ALS; it's a tough script for anyone. Ironically, though, I've come to regard it as a grace. After my diagnosis, I embarked on an intense healing quest that continues today ... this literal fight for my life has pushed me to the very depths of my mind, body and spirit. I've journeyed to places within myself where I may never have gone had it not been for deadline pressure.

"My personal healing odyssey has (given) me a wealth of intuitive wisdom, love and compassion that not only has made me a better person, but also has deeply sensitized me to the healing needs of others. As I tell my clients, I may have physical limitations, but I am totally present with you in this room."

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