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Couple honored for their commitment to care

By **ROB SIEBERT**

rsiebert@pioneerlocal.com

A Western Springs couple was recently honored for their efforts in bringing assistance to those in need.

On Sept. 14, Michael and Mary Doepke were awarded the 2009 Franchisee of the Year award in Washington, D.C., by the Home Helpers and Direct Link organization. The Doepkes were honored for their efforts in running their Home Helpers franchise in Hinsdale, 123 Ogden Ave., for the past five years.

"It's been our dream to be able to own our own business, and have it be a business that grows, and be one that we can be proud of," Michael Doepke said.

Home Helpers provides personal, non-medical care for individuals such as seniors, new mothers, parents with sick children and patients needing recuperative care, among others. The or-



Michael and Mary Doepke of Western Springs operate Home Helpers, a local franchise in Hinsdale that provides non-medical care and companionship to people in need of assistance. (Rob Siebert/Staff Writer)

ganization has about 500 franchises across the country.

Direct Link offers customers a necklace or wristband with a button, which

signals emergency services when needed.

Michael, a corporate marketer and manager for 27 years, and Mary, a registered nurse for roughly 28

years, started their franchise in Hinsdale in Spring 2005. Mary's father had recently suffered a stroke, which prompted her to travel to her parents' home in New York to provide him with 24-hour care. She stayed for three weeks.

Not long afterward, Michael's sister had surgery to remove a malignant tumor. When the Doepkes accompanied her to chemotherapy, they noticed that many of the other patients had no one to keep them company during the often painful process.

Those instances, combined with Michael's longstanding desire to start his own business, inspired them to become involved with Home Helpers.

"If they'd had (a Home Helpers) in New York, Mary wouldn't have had to be over there for three weeks," Michael said.

Though Mary is a registered nurse, as part of a

non-medical care group she cannot legally provide medical care to customers. However, the Doepkes have an extensive library of contacts to refer customers to.

"We can't help them, but we know that somebody can," Mary said.

The Doepkes are largely in the friends-and-companions business, where matching the customer with an appropriate caregiver is just as important as the service they provide.

"It's all about human beings," Michael said. "Forget the marketing plan, it's all about people."

The Doepkes said they make a point to hire caregivers that are sincere about the work they do.

"The most important thing is their mindset," Mary said. "Do they want to make money, or do they really love giving care?"

Emma Dickison, president of Home Helpers, said the Doepkes are role mod-

els for the entire Home Helpers franchise system, adding that they have continued to grow their franchise (they started out working from their home before moving to their current office in Hinsdale), and have served as great company ambassadors by working with new caregivers and other potential franchisees.

"Mary and Mike were just the key choice (for the award) this year," Dickison said.

But for the couple, an award comes in at a distant second to the gratification they receive from helping customers. Michael pointed to a voice message they recently received from a woman whose mother had recently passed away, but was so grateful to Home Helpers for the comfort they had provided her.

"Hearing a message like that is better than being named Franchisee of the Year," Michael said.