

Bob & Connie



*The Wordchipper*SM

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Theirs is an amazing love story that's been going on for over 33 years. Bob Nestoss and his wife Connie may be handicapped, but don't try to tell them they're disabled—no sir! You'll get a strong reaction from both of them because, throughout their lives, they've been showing people how *able* they are and what they *can* do. What one has difficulty with, the other can help with, and what they've accomplished *together* is an inspiration for all of us.



Bob, 66, was born with cerebral palsy, a lifelong condition that, in his case, reduces muscular coordination and affects speech, but that hasn't stopped him from being a very interesting conversationalist! Connie, 58, has apert syndrome, a congenital condition which caused her hands and feet to be deformed. As serious as these handicaps are, they were a small part of our conversation when I visited with them recently in their south Fargo home. What they talked about was the surprises they've given so many people by demonstrating what they can do, have done, and are continuing to do today.

Bob was born in Valley City, N. Dak., and I've known him since our school days in that community. I first encountered Connie's warm smiles and laughter when they were married in 1977. Also a native North Dakotan, she was born in Rugby and raised in Towner with three sisters and two brothers, none of whom have the condition that affects Connie. Both Bob and Connie spent some time at the Anne Carlson Center in Jamestown, then called the "Crippled Children's School"; however, for the most part, they received their educations in the public school system and, later, through North Dakota's vocational rehabilitation system.

As a result of education and their own determination, both became very productive, contributing members of our community. Bob just retired in 2009 from an almost 32-year career with the Veterans Administration in Fargo. He was a medical records file clerk and says he enjoyed his job, along with the friendship and support of his co-workers at the V.A. Connie worked for a while at Bethany Homes and Villa Maria both in Fargo, but, for the most part became a full-time mom when their son Andy was born.

Andy and his spouse, Elizabeth, have two daughters, Laila (2 years) and Lainie (4 months), who are, of course, Grandpa's and Grandma's pride and joy. Andy graduated from North Dakota State University with a degree in construction engineering and is employed in Minneapolis, where he and his family make their home. Bob and Connie had a second child, Heather Ray, who inherited apert syndrome and lived only six months. "She went to be with Jesus," Connie says.

There were plenty of amusing anecdotes in my conversation with the two about their life together. For example, when they were courting and Connie visited Bob's parents' home for the first time, Bob's mother prepared some cookies and lemonade. The latter was being served in Mrs. Nestoss's finest glassware. Connie went into the kitchen to help and came out carrying not one or two but *three* glasses of lemonade in her severely deformed hands. Bob laughs when he says how shocked his mother was, but, after that, she was never surprised again by Connie's abilities.

Bob spent over three decades in a job he loved while he and Connie raised their son, all the while continuing to work together to meet the challenges their handicaps presented. Currently, they both do volunteer work on a regular basis at Hospice of the Red River Valley, and Connie provides volunteer services in the dialysis unit at Sanford Hospital (formerly MeritCare) in Fargo. Recently, Bob was hospitalized and needed his wife's help with the recovery process. He said in an interview recorded by StoryCorps (a national archiving project at www.storycorps.org): "I've always loved Connie dearly, but this past spring when I was ill, I loved her all the more. She was there." And, to that, Connie replied: "And so were you. We've stuck by each other, through thick and thin, and ups and downs...and everything else. It's been an interesting life, an interesting marriage, and you just have to keep on going."

Bob and Connie: you are each an inspiration to all of us and, together, you're an amazing couple. God bless you both.