

June Caregiver of the Month: Nancy Wray!



This Farmer's Life

Nancy Wray, a teacher and caregiver for her husband with multiple sclerosis, recalls fondly the day they met. Her handsome future husband, Tom, was drinking soda and yacking it up with his fellow cattle farmers at the local gas station in tiny Theodosia, Missouri, in Ozark County. Tom relished the early-morning camaraderie before he began his solitary work day.

Since then, life has changed dramatically for Nancy and Tom, who was diagnosed with a progressive form of multiple sclerosis (MS) nine years ago. Now a quadriplegic, Tom, 51, is unable to move the switch on his motorized wheelchair. Nancy, 53, is his primary

caregiver.

Their typical day begins at 5 a.m.

“I get up, and then I get Tom up with a hydraulic lift,” says Nancy. “Tom has a catheter, and I empty and flush it. I get him dressed, brush his teeth, wash his face, make breakfast and feed him, turn on the TV remote because he likes to watch the news, give him his medicine, and ensure his Life Alert® button is on and that his wheelchair seat belt is fastened because he’s fallen out before. I generally have to leave the house by 7 a.m. to get to work.”

“Work” is teaching sixth-graders full time at Cedar Ridge Intermediate School in the Branson metropolitan area.

While Nancy teaches, a young woman comes to their home to feed Tom lunch and give him his meds.

“We don’t have any other caregiving help because we can’t afford it,” Nancy says.

After work, Nancy comes back home for a second round of caregiving that lasts until bedtime.

Years ago, Nancy and Tom sold the family farm they inherited from his parents—one they doubled in size to 1,000 acres and 200 head of cattle—and moved 50 miles from Theodosia to Forsyth, so they could be closer to her job and have a custom-built home that could accommodate Tom’s disability.

One of Nancy’s former students insisted on building it. “Please let me help,” he said.

Among other things, the home has concrete floors, a lipless shower, super-wide hallways, and no cabinets under bathroom sinks so that Tom's wheelchair can maneuver easily.

How does Nancy manage?

"You just do it," Nancy says. "I don't know how. Sometimes I cry and call my sister, Joyce. She was a caregiver for her husband, who had a major stroke during surgery. I apologize to her because I had no idea what she was going through, what a caregiver goes through. She has been my greatest support, along with my best friend, whose mom also had MS."

That support, faith and nature sustain Nancy. One of her and Tom's favorite pastimes these days is watching the birds from the feeders on the covered patio off their dining room.

"We were never people to sit and watch birds before. There was always so much to do on the farm. But now we name the hummingbirds, cardinals, woodpeckers and finches. We love to go out in the morning when they're just waking up."