

## 2017 Caregiver of the Year: 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.

When 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."

### **Nancy's Follow Up Story**

Since June, Tom's MS had progressed to the point that he needed full time care. Nancy, a full time school teacher, was scheduled to return to work after being off for summer vacation; however, Tom was in need of a full time caregiver while she worked (not just someone to come in and feed him lunch). Nancy and Tom were faced with a very difficult decision. After many prayers and shed tears, it was decided that it was in Tom's best interest for him to enter a nursing home. As Nancy expected, Tom was initially upset with her for not being able to care for him any longer, but he is now comfortable with his new home.

After his arrival at the nursing home, Nancy continued to care for Tom in other ways. It began with simple things like hanging curtains and bringing pictures from home. Then it grew into decorating for the seasons. She added a wreath to his door, air freshener for his room, sheets for his bed (flannel for cooler weather), matching blanket for his lap while in the wheelchair, snack drawer, etc. "Anything to let him feel the love of our home and my heart." A container to give out candy at Halloween was added to a shelf in his room. Fall decor on top of his wardrobe (closet) made his room feel homey. After Thanksgiving, she invited all the kids and grandkids to his room for a Christmas decoration party. "We decorated his room with lights, holly, and love."

Tom's health has continued to deteriorate. Yet, making sure he has his daily Pepsi, a sweet snack, family and friends stopping by... as well as his health needs continues to be Nancy's priority. Facebook friends have helped to decorate a wall full of cards in his room. "He is still the most wonderful man in the world to me. I want to make sure he is comfortable."

Nancy admits, "Caretaking is hard. No one has any idea how hard it is until you do it. There are days that I get cranky. I don't feel like I deserve to be the caregiver of the month or year."

When asked what advice Nancy has for anyone supporting caregivers, she says "Be there to listen and to give them encouragement. There's just not enough support for caregivers. Tell them that you like the way they are caring for you or your loved one and that you support their decisions. Be sensitive to the caregiver's feelings and know that when you offer to help the person being cared for, that it can come across as though what the caregiver does is not good enough. As a caregiver you take things personal."

When asked what advice she has for other caregivers, Nancy says, "It is important to take time for yourself, where it's just you, so you can put yourself back together. Spend time with God. Take yourself to a movie. Do what you enjoy. You will feel guilty. The person you are caring for may make you feel guilty also but you have to take care of yourself in order to take care of them. You have to be intentional about it and schedule it."