

A Vietnam Veteran and his Devoted Wife!

January 2023 Caregiver of the Month, Connie Kempf
Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services



Connie Kempf has been caring for her husband, Larry, in some capacity since he returned from Vietnam in the late 1960's. Larry has health problems resulting from exposure to Agent Orange during his military service and has experienced a range of issues related to PTSD. Also, Larry was diagnosed with Hereditary Spastic Paraplegia (HSP) in his 40's characterized by weakness, spasticity and mobility issues. His symptoms have worsened over time.

Over the years, Larry has been diagnosed with and treated for a range of health conditions: Type 2 Diabetes, had four heart bypass surgeries, two heart stent and carotid artery stent, both knees replaced, shoulder replaced, a vein bypass in his leg and a tumor removed from his stomach. Larry has recovered from acute health problems and surgeries in a local rehabilitation center on three separate occasions. As a trained caregiver, Connie has managed wounds and antibiotic infusions after Larry developed a MRSA infection. Currently, Larry needs assistance with mobility, bathing, physical care, meals and managing his medications. He uses a power chair to navigate his surroundings.

Connie has received caregiver support from programs available through the Veteran's Administration. She praises the Annie Caregiver Text Program. Annie, the VA's text messaging service, sends caregivers messages to help them manage stress, take better care of themselves, manage dementia behaviors, and cope with bereavement. Messages are both educational and motivational in nature. Connie explained, "The daily words of advice and encouragement I get via text are a big lift!"

Married in November of 1969, Connie and Larry have been together for 53 years. They have two children that live nearby, seven grandchildren and one great-grand son. Connie receives assistance from her family for breaks and relief from caregiving. "I have to give my daughter, Lori, and son, Kris, and their families' kudos. I call and they are right here."

Larry likes to work on tractors and cars in conjunction with watching YouTube repair videos. A couple of his prized possessions include a 560 International Tractor and 1967 Chevelle Super Sport. Connie remembers a time when they worked on the Chevelle's power steering together. Quite often, they tackle repair projects, and at least twice a year, they attend classic car shows and auctions.

Connie explains that Larry has many goals and aspirations. "He has so much he wants to do. He wants to tinker with the motor on a lawnmower which means I have to be there. I have to get the tools together and help take the parts off. I have to run after everything he needs that he doesn't have. Being a caregiver isn't just taking care of medical issues. It's helping him live his life as normal as possible. When you get married, it is a life commitment – no matter what."

Connie worked for Toastmaster for 25 years until it closed and then worked for Indeeco for 15 years until they closed in 2012. In 2013 at the age of 62, Connie retired and moved into full-time caregiving. She juggled tasks to help both Larry and her mother for a number of years. Connie stated, "Being a caregiver has been something I do and have done for many years. I looked after my mom before she went into a nursing home. At that same time, Larry's health was failing and I was needed at home. One or the other was always having doctor's appointments and hospital stays." In 2014, Connie's mother passed at the age of 99.

Connie enjoys watching her grandchildren play baseball and basketball. Connie joyfully remembers a time when she and Larry rode horses. "We did everything together."

Connie says she is prepared for anything, "Things can be fine one day and you may have to go to the ER tomorrow." She expresses gratitude for the 911 first responders in the community. Larry uses a life alert system for emergencies.

Connie has dealt with tragedy as her brother and sister-in-law were both killed in car accidents on separate occasions. She explains, "There are days when you feel like throwing in the towel, but the next day will be better. You'll have a good day, and the next one will be worse, and that day will not be as good as the day before. You will get down and depressed."

Despite the ups and down, Connie has found ways to remain calm, balanced and present for the people in her life. Above it all, she affirms, "'I can tell you being a caregiver can be a full-time job but it's a job of love and honor. Do I get cranky? Just ask my husband (LOL)! I plan on doing it as long as I can and I hope it's a long time. We've had a good life!"