

From the “Grand Rapids Press”,
by Tom Rademacher

Couple’s faith, love know no handicap

Kim Vredeveld and Bob VerBurg find in each other a life “full of possibilities!”

Saturday afternoon, a proud father and mother took their only child’s quivering hands and walked her wobbly legs down more than just an aisle.

They escorted her into a world that might have seemed improbable, even impossible, if not for a groom who refused to marry for perfectly sculpted features, a lilting voice, and flawless powers of reason.

Saturday afternoon, Bob VerBurg and Kim Vredeveld married for the sort of love most of us spend a lifetime pursuing, the sort of love that transcends beauty, perhaps the only sort of love that ought to be allowed.

Nine years ago, Kim Vredeveld lay on what doctors predicted might be her deathbed, comatose and severely injured as the result of a one-car accident.

The Holland native, then a junior at Ottawa Hills High School, had rounded a corner in her automobile and crashed into a utility pole. Though she didn’t suffer spinal cord damage, a closed head injury contributed to severe problems with speech, balance and coordination.

Today, she is largely dependent on a wheelchair, and only recently has developed the ability to walk with assistance. But on Saturday, she abandoned her wheelchair, and in a white

flowing gown adorned with pearls, struggled down an aisle in her parents’ arms to a promise of a lifetime with Bob.

In doing so, she demonstrated a world hungry for inspiration not only that she’d beaten the odds, but how true love is rooted in an appreciation for whom and what we are, not the cosmetic veneer we see in the mirror.

Bob and Kim met five years ago. Skimming through the pages of a monthly West Michigan publication called “Single File” magazine, he came across an ad placed by Kim.

It didn’t rhapsodize about long walks on the beach, something she can only do on wheels. Instead, it blared forth from the page with brutal honesty. “I have”, the ad announced, “a disability.”

“I thought to myself, ‘That takes a lot of guts,’” Bob recalls.

Moxie is something Bob has had to develop as well. From the time he began speaking, he stuttered, and endured taunts and teasing from schoolmates. “I got picked on terrible,” he recalls. “In a way, I can identify with disabilities myself.” Ten years ago, he conquered stuttering for the most part.

Kim, who’s 26 now, answered Bob’s response to her ad, but was hesitant at first, if only because he was 14 years older. Their friendship and eventual love towered over that factor, however, and after dating for

three years, they were married in a civil ceremony.

That occurred nearly two years ago, and marked the beginning of a roller coaster ride that pitted them against everyone from insurance companies to federal bureaucrats.

Because Bob’s own home wasn’t equipped to handle Kim’s special needs, she couldn’t move in. And because Bob earned too much as a truck driver, he couldn’t legally share her dwelling, which was being subsidized by Housing and Urban Development funds.

So they embarked on a plan to build a house in Gaines Township that boasts oversize doors and other touches to assist Kim. It was finished a month ago. “Finally,” says Bob, “we’re living together.”

To cement their relationship in a sacred way, they married Saturday at First Cutlerville Christian Reformed Church, providing the opportunity for Kim and her parents, Gary and Betty, to walk the aisle with their daughter.

If there was anyone among the 200 attending wondering why an able-bodied man would choose to take a woman with handicaps as his wife, the answer is partly rooted in something Bob’s father told him when he was 6.

“We used to collect coins together,” said Bob, “and one day, he said that he had a sure-fire way of building up a lot of

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wealth. He told me that you have to invest in people – and the in the Bible”

Seated at the kitchen table, he reads from the Book of Isaiah.

Tears stream from her eyes as she kisses him.

“I admire him so much,” she tells a visitor, with a voice that fairly creaks as she labors through audible breaths to speak. “He’s loyal. He’s committed. And on days I’m feeling bad, he makes me laugh.”

When Kim lay on the brink of death nearly a decade ago, all her parents could do was pray. “They told us to be prepared that if she did make it, she could spend the rest of her life in a vegetative state,” remembers Betty. “In any case, we knew we’d have a different Kim than we had before.

But Bob VerBurg would only come to know one version of his wife, and Betty and Gary find comfort in knowing that their daughter was chosen for her intrinsic gifts.

Kim and Bob’s storybook romance has affected virtually everyone who’s aided in Kim’s recovery. “She visualizes her life as being full of possibilities,” says Kim’s physical therapist, Shirley Kleiman.

“She talks of goals and dreams, as a wife and possibly a mother.

Of Bob, Shirley observes, “He didn’t marry her thinking that she would evolve into the traditional wife... that she would fill all those roles society expects of you.

Together, they’ll define her role, and his.

Saturday’s tender service took but 30 minutes, and Kim spent two minutes of it just getting down the 45-foot-long aisle to Bob, who was waiting in a white tux. At the close of the ceremony, after the exchange of vows and after Bob had wiped tears of his from his right cheek, he swept his bride up in his arms and carried her down the aisle.

He carried her away from a life that could have been one of regret, of unknowing and lost opportunity; he carried her into a future that included two as one.

To thunderous applause he hugged her to his chest and carried her into the light.

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