

My Strength – My Rock!

August 2022 Caregiver of the Month, Melissa Comstock
Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services



Chuck Comstock grew up on a farm in Downing, MO. After high school, Chuck joined the Air Force and was stationed at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, NV for about two years before receiving an early deferment to return to the farm. Not long after returning to his small town at the age of 20, a tree fell on him resulting in a spinal cord injury. Chuck had an amazing community that helped him out of an area where the ambulance could not reach (in the middle of a field). The nearby farmers held him up with a sheet in the back of a truck bed while traveling over a low water bridge to avoid any further movement or injuries. Chuck was then transported to Bloomfield, IA where he was airlifted to Iowa City to receive care. He was then transferred to Rusk Rehabilitation in Columbia, MO before returning home to live with his parents.

Chuck's mother cared for him for several years before he moved to Kirksville to gain more independence. Chuck attended Truman State University where he received his BA in English in December of 2006.

In 2010, Chuck met Melissa while he was working as an advocacy specialist for the MO Department of Mental Health (Kirksville Regional Office). At the time, Melissa was a new service coordinator employed by the Adair County Senate Bill (SB) 40 Board. On that momentous day, Chuck was conducting person-centered training to a group of new service coordinators. Melissa stated, "He came in with his yellow shirt and tie to conduct the training." As the final assignment, Chuck asked the group to explain how they would build him a house to see if they were listening. Melissa remarked, "We could build a house with all of the luxurious items like a pool but this would not be accessible and Chuck would not want such a thing." Melissa sat next to Chuck and asked lots of questions on what he would want so she "could build him an accessible house that would meet his needs."

Melissa and Chuck were married in 2011 and Melissa has been Chuck's caregiver ever since. Melissa provides routine care to Chuck on a daily basis, who has physical disabilities and uses a motorized wheelchair. Although Chuck has daily staff from Rural Advocates for Independent Living (RAIL) in Kirksville and self-directed services (MO Department of Mental Health), Melissa steps in to provide support whenever needed. Melissa states, "I am their back-up since it has been a challenge to find

stable help for anyone with disabilities in this area.” Fortunately, Chuck has employed the same caregiver, Karen, for 16 years. Melissa complimented, “She is part of our family.”

Turnover and a shortage of caregivers require Melissa to take off time from her full-time job to perform tasks such as bathing and range of motion therapy to keep Chuck healthy. Melissa works in Research Support at A.T. Still University (ATSU) of Health Sciences. Melissa and Chuck live on a farm and have two daughters, Arianna and Bianca. Melissa balances her time to make sure her family has what they need. Chuck expressed, “My wife deserves recognition for her hard work. She is the rock of our family.”

Chuck exercises daily to improve his strength. Every day, Melissa transfers Chuck to his wheelchair and provides routine personal care such as helping with washing his hair, shaving and brushing his teeth.

Currently, Chuck is a stay-at-home dad and working on his autobiography. With motivation and support from his family and caregivers, Chuck continues to be healthy and independent in his community. Chuck serves on the Governor’s Council for Disability as well as an advisor and standardized patient for the Developmental Disabilities elective at A.T. Still University of Health Sciences in Kirksville, MO.

Chuck has formed strong relationships with neighbors and others at Truman State University and ATSU (local Osteopathic Medical School). He is pursuing a position with Kirksville Public Schools as a substitute teacher. Chuck enjoys woodworking, mowing the yard, cleaning the house, and even shoveling snow during the winter months. Melissa has been working remotely since March of 2022 to spend more time at home with Chuck and their daughters.

Family time is especially important for the Comstocks as they host many activities and events throughout the year. Melissa expressed, “Our house is always full of good food and fun for everyone! We really enjoy hosting impromptu barbeques since we now have an extended deck and a fire pit for everyone to enjoy some good laughs and smores!”

The Comstocks enjoy attending activities with their church. Melissa and Chuck enjoy home improvement projects and have even built two barn doors to make their home more accessible. Melissa shared, “Our future plan is to build a house but we are pretty happy with our current home as we have made MANY changes that we worked together to create.” She calls these projects “husband and wife therapy.”

Melissa believes caregivers should be considerate and patient at all times. She encourages caregivers to put themselves in the other person’s position to try to understand that our bodies don’t work in the same manner (i.e. spasticity, bladder/bowel control, movements). Melissa has learned to treat everyone the same if they have a disability and allows Chuck to do things differently and be creative. Melissa remarks, “I have learned that my husband may have a physical disability but when we work together then we can accomplish anything.”