Restoring civility: The legacy of an unlikely friendship

“I will be forever grateful that Donna invited me for coffee,” recalls The FAMIly LEADER President and CEO Bob Vander Plaats.

Bob and Donna Red Wing were often quoted in the news media on opposite sides of contentious issues. Bob leads a Christian organization that advocates for public policy consistent with biblical values. Donna was a longtime LGBTQ activist and, in her own words, “a sometimes agitator.” They were natural “enemies” who became the most unlikely of friends.

Watch the moving video made by Mutual of Omaha about Bob and Donna’s “unlikely friendship” below:

Though Donna Red Wing has since passed away, Bob continues to tell others of how her simple, but counter-cultural act of reaching out changed him and began a friendship that leaves behind a legacy of restoring civility.

“Donna often told the story of how a friend inspired her to reach out to the one person she was most naturally inclined to dislike. I’m not sure it’s really an honor, but she chose me,” Bob recalls. “She invited me to meet for coffee, and to both of our surprise, we both showed up! Then, over a number of coffee meetings, something even more surprising happened: We became honest, real, and true friends.

“Donna’s friendship did not change my convictions about God’s design for marriage or biblical sexuality, and neither did my friendship change her position,” Bob continues. “But that was never the point. We met to get to know one another as real people beyond the headlines.”
“We were often opponents on policy, but instead of lobbing rhetorical grenades at one another from the relative safety of our own echo chambers, we met face to face,” Bob recalls. “It changed us both. I know it changed the language and the tone we employ at The FAMILY LEADER. Getting to know Donna taught our whole staff to stop and think, ‘How can we advocate for our position while still being conscious of and honoring the real people (like Donna) who disagree with us?’”

The answer, The FAMILY LEADER has learned, was spelled out for us years ago in Scripture, an answer summed up in one phrase: “Speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

Bob and Donna’s unlikely friendship became the subject of astonished columns and articles in both local and national newspapers. Colleges and civic groups invited Bob and Donna to speak to students and communities about relearning how to speak to one another. In an age where deep cultural and partisan divides are the norm, their example of civility inspired many:

- Read the Des Moines Register column that first brought attention to Bob and Donna’s unique friendship.
- Watch video from Bob and Donna’s civility presentation to students at Drake University.
- Read the Washington Post’s astonished coverage of Bob and Donna discussing civility at The Wallace Centers of Iowa.
- Watch video of Bob and Donna discussing civility on stage at Des Moines Area Community College in Ankeny, Iowa.

Bob tells others the love he and Donna shared as friends was real. He could imagine one day attending her funeral or she attending his. But never did he anticipate that day would come so soon.

Nor did he anticipate the honor he would receive from Donna’s
partner, Sumitra. After Donna’s passing in 2018, Sumitra asked Bob – considered by many in Donna’s circles to be an “enemy” to the cause – if he would speak at Donna’s funeral.

“The request was one of the greatest honors of my life,” Bob says.

Watch video from Donna Red Wing’s memorial service in which Bob spoke of their friendship and Donna’s legacy of civility:

“I’m deeply grieved that my friend is now gone from this world,” Bob says, “but I hope her example of reaching out will challenge others to do the same. I hope it challenges me. I want our commitment to restoring civil dialogue in America to continue as the lasting legacy of the day Donna Red Wing invited me for coffee.”

Photo credit: Des Moines Register