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“Generosity Without Borders”
Approx. 1,100 Words

Generosity Without Borders

When Rodger Logan describes his wife, Mabel, he’s characteristically straightforward. “She was big hearted,” he says simply. “Especially when it came to kids.”

With that in mind, one can’t help but imagine her being especially pleased about the impact of her decision to donate her corneas through the Rocky Mountain Lions Eye Bank. That donation made it possible for two men half a world away...

But we’re getting ahead of our story.

Beginnings and Endings

The story begins in Montana on April 22, 1935, when Mabel was born in Joliet, then a small outpost about halfway between Billings and the northern border of Wyoming (Yellowstone National Park bubbled and steamed some 80 miles to the south and west). Maybe it was growing up in Big Sky country that nudged Mabel toward big-heartedness, or maybe having three younger sisters and two younger brothers had something to do with it. In any case, she came at life with a special kind of openness.

Mabel’s compassionate character attracted Rodger from the first time they met at a dance in Billings, and as they spent more time together, they discovered more things they had in common. Like Mabel, Rodger had been born in Montana, on a homestead east of the town of Cottonwood, and his family had been a big one—nine children, of which he’d been the youngest. They each already had two children, and both loved to camp and fish.

You could say it was a match made in heaven—which is what Montanans call their part of the world anyway.

When Mabel and Rodger were married in 1969, they settled into a rich routine of long-weekend camping trips, flower-planting in the spring, and family get-togethers. According to Rodger, Mabel was especially glad when the grandkids—five of them, ultimately—came along, because she loved having children around.

“Our home used to be not far from the Yellowstone Boys and Girls Ranch,” Rodger explains. “Now and then a kid would run away, and they’d always come to Mabel first. It was well known that as far as she was concerned, our home was their home.”

Of course, few lives are entirely idyllic. Rodger put in long days at Western Sugar, and for many years Mabel worked as a receptionist and bookkeeper for Yellowstone County. But through it all they found their way into the vast outdoors. Wherever they went, Mabel had her favorite fishing holes, and when they returned it was always to a home brightened by flowers.

“We were sure looking forward to retirement,” Rodger says. “But life had other plans. Turned out the first year I was retired was our last good year together.”

It was 1997.

The next year, Mabel began having strange pains whose cause was at first misdiagnosed. Finally, she was found to have a massive ovarian tumor, and while it was successfully removed, that illness proved to be the beginning of a long decline. Mabel developed an autoimmune condition that steadily worsened until her liver simply couldn't manufacture enough protein to sustain her. Toward the end of January 2005, Mabel passed away from liver failure.

The End is Not the End

“Until you're confronted with mortality, you don't give it much thought,” Rodger says. “At least I didn't. Mabel was ahead of me on that score. She'd always talked about being an organ donor—how important it was—so even though she never got around to putting it in writing, I made sure her wishes were honored.”

It was then that Rodger entered what he calls “the vast and complex world of donors.”

“Mabel's disease had made most of her organs unsuitable for transplant,” he says.

“Thank goodness her eyes hadn't been affected.”

Mabel's corneas were made available for transplant through the Rocky Mountain Lions Eye Bank. But, as sometimes happens, the tissue wasn't a match for anyone on the waiting list in the Western region, so the Eye Bank cast its net wider and wider until matching recipients were found—not in the United States, but in Ireland.

“One cornea went to a fellow about Mabel's age,” Rodger explains, “and the other to a somewhat younger man. All I knew was that they both lived in Dublin.”

At first, Rodger considered that the end of the matter. But then he was told that both recipients were open to hearing from him if he wanted to find out about the outcome of their transplants. He hesitated for some time, but finally decided to write to them through the Eye Bank. He had no idea if he'd hear back, of course, but he wanted them to know what was on his mind. “Although I miss her terribly,” he wrote of Mabel, “I am so glad that she is still able to do a lot of good.”

It wasn't long before Rodger received replies from both recipients, John (the younger of the two) and Gerard.

John, it turned out, had suffered deteriorating vision from a very young age, and by the time he'd reached his fifties he was in danger of losing his job as an installer of security cameras. “I am thrilled with Mabel's cornea,” he wrote. “Where I used to see just blurred roofs of houses, I now see slates and all the other roof coverings. I'm looking forward to reading a book: I have not read one since *Jaws* first came on sale!” The success of his transplant gave John the confidence he needed to go forward with a similar operation on his other eye.

Like John, Gerard had been slowly going blind for many years—and like Rodger, he'd lost his wife, although 15 years earlier. “She was just 39,” he wrote, “and I still miss her every day, as she was also my best friend.” Gerard also had children—“one son ... and one daughter,” he wrote, “and 5 grandchildren. And thanks to your loving wife, I can see their little smiles for the first time.”

“That brought a tear to my eye, I can tell you,” Rodger admits.

In the end, Rodger argues, it’s important for everyone to understand that organ and tissue donation is a way to continue the good we do in the world.

“None of us gets out of this alive,” he says with a quick, dry laugh. “That’s just the way it is. But think what it means to give somebody—anywhere in the world—a gift of that magnitude. To see your grandchildren for the first time like Gerard, or to keep putting food on the table for your family like John. *That* matters. So the question isn’t why. It’s *why not?*”