Ron Olson, all 6-1 of him, spent much of his life selling corn seed and, after that, selling insurance. Back in his school days, he recalls being the “guinea pig” approached to sell tickets and other items for various events and causes, and he soon accepted those challenges with eagerness.

“Once a salesman,” the 69-year-old Valley City man says, “always a salesman.”

Ron liked what he sold and particularly liked dealing with people, especially when he could help them.

RON OLSON
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‘Everybody should be proud we have an organization like NDAD to help’

Valley City man living with MS says promoting N.D. nonprofit is no tough sell
Ron Olson

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“I also liked the fact of making money,” he added, chuckling. “You know, you’ve got to like what you’re doing to be successful. And I liked it.”

So, Olson didn’t at all care for the circumstances in 1986 that forced him to switch careers in his early 40s. Later, it contributed to his retirement from a nearly 13-year career as a home, auto and life insurance agent.

“He misses work very much,” said Tina Olson, Ron’s daughter. “If you knew this man, you’d know he is a workaholic. He lived for people. He lived for the interaction with people…. It took him away from the time with people, which he loved.”

“It” was multiple sclerosis.

In the mid-1980s, Ron began having trouble with his eyesight—very dramatically. Working for Interstate Seed, Ron was driving a large tractor-trailer full of seed out of the deep Missouri River Valley at Chamberlain, S.D., when he suddenly and inexplicably lost much of his vision. Instinctively, he listened to highway bumps to help guide his truck, its load and himself safely to a stop along the side of the road.

His vision soon returned, but the incident signaled what would become a life-altering transformation.

In Ron’s case, his MS over the years has caused or contributed to additional problems with balance, muscle control and some other difficulties. For instance, he recently spent several weeks in Valley City’s hospital with a urinary tract infection.

Still, Olson is not about to surrender to the irreversible condition.

Before he was diagnosed with MS, Ron already had dealt with physical challenges.

He has lived with a deformed left hand since a childhood accident, during his years being raised as one of five kids on a family farm about 10 miles south of Valley City. He learned to minimize its impact, though that left hand ultimately kept him out of military service.

“I don’t know why they didn’t let me in,” he recalled, “because I was right handed.”

Olson did attend Wahpeton State School of Science, where he studied salesmanship and mechanics.

He farmed for a time with his brothers, Charles and Dennis. Ron worked with Interstate Seed for about 11 years, first in his hometown of Valley City as a farm dealer, then in Brookings, S.D., as a regional manager.

With his MS progressing, Ron decided to return to Valley City and began selling insurance for Farmers Union Insurance Co. He retired in 2000.

All the while, Ron said, he’s tried to maintain an attitude to keep him positively focused on not merely surviving, but thriving.

“Well, at that time you think the world is coming to the end,” he recalled. “It’s like someone telling you that you have cancer.”

Ron Olson, Valley City, on his new power chair provided with help from NDAD.
Ron Olson
Continued from Page 2

He’s had more to overcome than MS and his hand injury. Ron has chronic back pain and severe arthritis from a spinal cord injury, which forces him to move his entire upper body—not just his head and neck—to view things to his left or right.

Ron has faced a series of steadily increasing health issues within the past eight years, according to his daughter, who lives with her husband and their daughter in the basement residence of Ron’s rambler-style home. Tina also keeps house for Ron, does his laundry and fixes him supper, all while working at the Valley City Times-Record newspaper as its production manager.

Tina said her father “really has had a good run because he’s so incredibly stubborn and he refuses to let MS get the best of him.”

Ron uses humor in part to deflect others’ notions to feel sorry or bad for him, Tina said. “He has his famous sayings and responses,” she said. “How are you feeling, Ron?” ‘With my fingers.’

“Only if he’s really sick, he comes clean and says, ‘I don’t feel good.’”

A positive frame of mind

Ron’s MS physician specialist in Fargo has other patients who have it “a lot worse than I am,” he said. “She feels I’m doing good…. But I think it goes back to the same old theory: you only get out of life what you put into it…. It’s only as bad as you want it to be, but I’ve tried my best to keep a positive frame of mind and make it work.”

During warm months, Ron spends much time mowing neighbors’ yards on an all-wheel-steering riding mower. “That keeps me busy and keeps my mind occupied,” Olson said. He doesn’t charge anything for the service, but his neighbors remember his kindness in many other helpful ways, he added.

Ron mostly uses a walker to get around his home. In 2015, when he needed a working power chair and his request to Medicare was denied, Ron knew he faced a daunting mobility challenge that might force even bigger unwanted lifestyle changes.

Daughter Tina contacted NDAD to inquire whether help might be available for her father. Working with his daughter and Lora Machart, NDAD’s eastern North Dakota client services representative, Ron applied for assistance to obtain a power chair. NDAD’s application paperwork is not at all intimidating, Ron said, adding that applicants will only get as much as they put into the process. He said Machart helped to make the process more manageable. Lora has a “heart of gold” and is “willing to go through the work to help you find help,” he said.

After Ron qualified through the application process, NDAD approved the purchase of a power chair.

Later, Ron qualified for additional help: a power chair lift for his van.

“That lift makes it so anyone can take him” in his van now, Tina Olson said.

Fun makes it better

Ron Olson encourages individuals with disabilities or major health needs to contact NDAD if they feel they’ve run out of options or are looking for some direction: “I would tell them to definitely get a hold of (NDAD) and put an application in, because if you qualify, you’ll never be unhappy with that organization. . . .

“Everybody should be proud that we have an organization like NDAD to help.”

Meanwhile, a network of friends helps Ron keep mobile and as active as possible. He doesn’t drive that much himself any more, but with his van’s new power chair lift, or even if he’s only bringing his walker, good neighbor and friend Richard Roberg often serves as Ron’s driver.

His improved mobility helps Olson get to medical appointments, run other life errands and fulfill his strong need to maintain a social lifestyle, Tina said. Her father is personable and a good listener, too, she said; he likes to hear people’s stories and strives to help others feel as comfortable as he can.

Plus, he loves to tease waitresses during coffee hour at Valley City’s VFW or Vicky’s Viking Room whenever he can, Tina added. “When you have fun, it makes whatever you’re doing better,” Ron said. “When you laugh, people laugh with you.” He paused a moment. “Laughing is the best thing anybody can do.”

A little laughter. More mobility and independence. Timely help from NDAD. Ron Olson will be glad to sell you on their benefits.

Get Dealin’

Wheelin’ & Dealin’ advertisements, courtesy of NDAD, provide a forum for people to buy or sell new or used equipment. Ads are listed online at NDAD.org in the Client Services section. Call (800) 532-NDAD for more details.
Andrew Fromherz loves to play his rural Park River family’s living room console piano. Perhaps it’s an Irish ditty or a Christmas tune, nothing too complex but something that he enjoys.

Sometimes he’ll just sing -- perhaps a bit of opera that he remembers, or maybe to accompany a compact disc recording of late country music legend Marty Robbins.

For Andrew’s mom, Patsy Fromherz, the best part of all her 28-year-old son’s music-making is that he can hear it.

“He can feel like a normal human being again,” she said.

That is his family’s hope.

Life has handed Andrew atypical and unusual challenges by way of an array of physical and mental health issues since he was born two months premature, back when his young parents lived in eastern Washington State.

The oldest of Patsy and Louis Martin “Louie” Fromherz’s four offspring from nearly 30 years of marriage, Andrew lives with the effects of goldenhar syndrome. It’s a rare congenital birth defect that causes varied cranial-facial deformities resulting from incomplete development of some facial features.

Andrew has a missing bone in his jaw, so he sometimes tends to drool. Some of his teeth formed insufficiently, making it more challenging to eat. Because a defect of his palate made it difficult for his tongue to reach the roof of his mouth, he spoke with difficulty until school teachers helped him adjust.

He needed surgery to remove a benign tumor from his right eye, and another surgery to remove skin tags from one of his ears. His vertebrae are more fragile. One of his ears is deformed. Andrew also has 50-percent hearing loss and permanent nerve damage in both ears, according to his mother.

He’s relied heavily on hearing aids since he was a child. “You guys got him the ones he uses now,” she told NDAD recently, “and he absolutely loves them.”

That welcomed help came in the fall of 2015 via NDAD’s general assistance program, and not too soon, Patsy said.

Her son’s former hearing aids were obtained in 2012 – one of them through Medicaid, and the second with a physican’s help after the federal program declined to replace both.

Twice since, Patsy said, those replacement aids broke down – and the timing was far from good.

In latter 2011 and early 2012, Andrew was living in Fargo studying voice performance at North Dakota State University.

He started experiencing depression. His condition became so severe he eventually couldn’t leave his bed, and he missed all of his January classes. That’s when a university counselor called the Fromherzes to tell them they needed to come get their son.

“He’d had a nervous breakdown,” Patsy said, recalling the frightening news. “His mind went haywire, basically. He wasn’t able to talk with people, and he couldn’t distinguish what was reality and what wasn’t.”

After months of examinations and tests with several clinical specialists, a Grand Forks psychiatrist determined Andrew’s condition was the result of bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

Patsy said it took until the early part of 2013 to adjust the medications used to help treat Andrew.

His recovery since had been slower than she’d hoped, though, and he struggled further when his hearing aids weren’t working properly. When the hearing devices failed again last summer, she recalled, “it was like he was bumbling around in darkness. He couldn’t function at all.”

ANDREW FROMHERZ: Continued on Page 5
Getting him hearing aids that work properly – that right there has gone a long way toward his recovery. Those hearing aids are very important. Two of the most important things in his life.

These days, she said, Andrew cannot work or return to college, but he’s happy at home surrounded by family members who love him dearly. The youngest of three Fromherz daughters, who’s 16, is homeschooled. The oldest daughter, Mary, lives near home and commutes to certified nursing assistant job in Grafton with her father. The family also get visits from Fargo by middle sister Bernadette, an NDSU master’s program graduate who teaches piano.

“I’m hoping and praying that in five years maybe he’ll be back to where he was,” Patsy said about her son.

Meanwhile, Andrew continues making music to her ears – and, most importantly, his own.

Learn more about NDAD’s Financial Assistance Program by calling (800) 532-NDAD or by visiting NDAD.org.
worsening back pain had been caused by a fracture in likely weakened vertebrae, but it already had started to heal. A CT scan and new colonoscopy conducted before the April benefit revealed his colon was healing, too, and signs of cancer and infection were gone.

When his benefit arrived, Terry was optimistic he’d be back to work once his back healed. Instead, there were more problems.

New colon- and bladder-related complications surfaced, caused not by a return of cancer but by scarring, infections and lingering radiation effects. He required multiple hospital stays and several surgeries, two of them at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis. After months of living with an ileostomy, an opening to collect intestinal waste into a pouching system that adheres to his skin, Terry had surgery that enabled use of a colostomy bag. He’ll meet with a surgeon this spring to determine whether more surgery is needed.

After very sporadic part-time work since early 2013, Terry finally returned to work full time Sept. 1, 2015. “It was wonderful. It was like getting back to normal life,” he said.

He had exhausted the NDAD fund created for him the previous June, but said he’d be buried in bills and stress had it not been there. And, he said, working with NDAD gave him “a nice feeling, I felt like I was part of a group of people who really cared about me. They genuinely asked always how I was doing, and listened.”

The father of three keeps mementos of his 2014 benefit, including a poster with supporters’ signatures and well-wishes, which hangs above his home recliner. It’s from his daughter, Meaghan, 29, who chaired that benefit.

“It takes me back to that day and how I felt with everyone being there for me,” Terry said. “I felt very, very fortunate. . . . I was overwhelmed with the love and care there. And I was grateful for NDAD’s involvement.”

Those are memories Terry Harmon intends to keep close at hand for the rest of his life.

Learn more about NDAD’s free Community Fundraisers Program by calling (800) 532-NDAD or visiting NDAD.org.