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*..and more!*

Sharing God's *Love* with People who have Intellectual Disabilities

## A PATHWAY OF FAITH TO FOLLOW

Gwen Vryhof Bultema

I threw on a t-shirt, shorts, and some running shoes this morning to run. It was a last minute decision, one brought on by the urging of a friend who was participating in a race and desired a running mate.

I obliged and joined her at the start line, waiting for the race to begin.

For some, the shotgun start incites an intoxicating rush of adrenaline, a blur of energy and release. For others, a distinct pang of nervousness, a muddled mess of awkward limbs.

Regardless, eventually – hopefully – we begin to find our stride.

Maybe it's because the nerves subside.  
Maybe it's because the limbs straighten out.

Or maybe it's because those we know – and those we have never met before – begin to cheer us forward.

I thought about our executive director, Nella, this morning as I ran, weaving through streets lined with red, pink, purple, and orange tulips, just beginning to come alive.

I thought about her unexpected passing.  
I thought about her life.  
I thought about her ministry.

I thought about her authenticity and strength, her fiery spirit and her joyful passion.

The writer of Hebrews likens the life of faith to an athlete running a race. Each of us is running. Perhaps we're running bursting with energy - confident, encouraged, and excited. Perhaps we're running burdened by fear - weary, drained, and downcast.

But we're all running, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, shouting and singing and cheering us on.



*Nella Vitvolutz,*  
Executive Director  
1996-2013



These witnesses give us a sense of place.  
These witnesses give us a sense of culture.  
These witnesses give us a sense of tradition,  
worldview, and God.

These witnesses give us a pathway of faith to follow.

Nella is our witness: in faith, in life, and in disability ministry.

She encouraged us to celebrate and cultivate individual gifts that may be difficult to find. She taught us to welcome new ideas and new opinions. She urged us to serve those who so often were unheard or excluded.

Perhaps the greatest lesson I learned from Nella is this: We all bring our gifts and our failings into this work of being the body of Christ, and it takes all of us – even those of us who are very badly broken – to embody something of God's grace in this world.

So now it's our turn to run.

It may be hard.

We may stumble.  
We may grow weary.  
We may get discouraged, annoyed, or irritated.

Listen then.

Listen to the encouragement from a crowded stadium.  
Listen to the voice of those that ran before.  
Listen to the great cloud of witnesses.

Listen, then, to Nella, cheering you forward in faith.

We do not run alone.

A great cloud of witnesses surrounds us, giving us a pathway of faith to follow.

Thanks be to God. ■

**"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."**

Hebrews 12:1



## FRIENDSHIP FAMILY



*Welcome to the family!*  
Join us in welcoming the following groups:

- First Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, SC
- First United Methodist Church of Indianola, IA
- Friendship Group of West Dundee, IL
- Harvest Bible Chapel of Crystal Lake, IL
- Highlands Church of Scottsdale, AZ
- Hope United Methodist Church of Hastings, MI
- Presbyterian Church of Bellville, OH
- The Church of Brook Hills of Birmingham, AL

### Be in touch!

What's happening in your part of the Friendship family?  
By phone: 888.866.8966, or email: [contact@friendship.org](mailto:contact@friendship.org)



If you are interested in giving to **Friendship Ministries** in Nella's name, please consider a gift to the **Nella Uitvlugt Legacy Fund**. These gifts ensure the work of Friendship Ministries continues. Donate online at [www.friendship.org/give-usa](http://www.friendship.org/give-usa) or send a check noting "*Nella Memorial*" in the memo line.



- IN MEMORY OF:**
- Mary Louters
  - Salli Verseput
  - Nella Uitvlugt

*Notas* DE AMISTAD 

For me, Nella was, is, and forever will be the best example of dedication, care, and love for people with an intellectual disability. She was also a friend, a mentor, and an individual whose advice and stories will be cherished forever.

When I started Ministerio Amistad approximately 13 years ago, a whole new world opened up for Nella. She became acutely aware of all those in Latin America that needed Friendship Ministries and its gift of love, so she worked tirelessly to support me in my work throughout the world.

I thank God for giving me time to meet and to share with Nella over the past several years. Heaven must be happier with her there. ■



To my boss and my friend, God bless.

*Elizabeth R.*

Elizabeth Rodriguez  
Ministerio Amistad

A TRIBUTE FROM A MENTOR

**Tom Van Wingerden**  
Mentor, Plymouth Heights CRC

**W**e will remember Nella as a warm, compassionate, sensitive, flexible, unrelenting, and loving woman. We will also remember her whimsical smile, her willingness to serve, her love for life, her love for her family, and her deep devotion to God.

Nella knew the worth of a soul and took to heart the command of Jesus to "Feed my lambs". She knew the rich blessings of being surrounded by those who loved her, surrounding those whom she loved, and of seeking others who needed to be surrounded by love.

As our friend, we will miss this vibrant member of our community. We will miss a woman with whom we shared joys and sorrows, and most importantly with whom we shared a communal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of every day. What a blessing it is to know that this same Lord and Savior has welcomed Nella to her eternal home in heaven. ■

A TRIBUTE FROM COLLEAGUES

**Reverend Mark Stephenson**

Director, Disability Concerns,  
Christian Reformed Church

**I** have been on the board of a Friendship group for 16 years, and first met Nella when our group celebrated our 30th anniversary in 1998. (Our group, Special Education Ministry of Holland, was used as the model when Friendship Ministries started in 1983.) I've seen first hand the wonderful blessing of people with and without disabilities growing in faith through singing, learning, praying, taking about their faith, and having fun together week after week.

As Executive Director, and only full-time staff person, Nella was administrator, fund raiser, curriculum developer, public speaker, and consultant for the many Friendship groups that minister with some 19,000 people with intellectual disabilities and almost as many mentors. Not only that, Nella served as a tireless advocate for people with disabilities, and did that work with passion, love, and excellence.

She served as an advisor and friend to me in the work I do with Disability Concerns, and she told it like it is. Shortly after I started in July 2006 she initiated a meeting with me in which she told me who I needed to watch out for, who I could trust as a fellow advocate, and who and where I needed to "push." I think that "push" was one of her favorite words. For me, pushing is going to be harder with Nella gone.

But she was a child of God who now knows the riches of unity with Christ Jesus her Lord. She

fought the good fight. She finished the race. She kept the faith. Now she has received the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, awarded to her, and not only to her, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

I wonder how many people with intellectual disabilities came to know the Lord because Nella worked so hard to share God's love with them through Friendship Ministries. She is celebrating in glory with some of them today. ■

## LaVonne Carlson

Administrative Specialist, Friendship Ministries

**N**ella was a veritable fountain of advice on almost every subject. Admittedly, sometimes her advice was unsolicited, but it was almost always good. As spring is coming on, I realize that I will especially miss her wisdom on gardening - she was my most enthusiastic partner for discussing the success and failure of various plants and flowers. "Miracle-Gro" was her suggested remedy for almost everything. Maybe I'll actually try some this year.

She was also an amazing cook. Her microwaved leftovers would fill the office with delicious smells at lunchtime, making my usual bagel sandwich seem rather bland by comparison. She was always happy to share recipes, though, and we spent many hours over the years debating the best way to roast a chicken or arguing about whether you should always add a dollop of apple butter to your butternut squash soup.

Most all, however, Nella was a genuine "people person". She had what my father would have called the "gift of gab", and in her case it truly was a gift. She never had a phone call that lasted less than fifteen minutes (most were much longer), and by the end of a first conversation she would know more about a person than I would have been able to discover in a year. She always knew who should be connected to whom - or if she didn't know, she would find out. No request was unimportant to her, and she would work hard to make sure everyone had the answers they needed. ■

*She will be greatly missed.*



•• Nella speaks with Marilyn, a friend who sat with her in church on Sunday morning.



# A TRIBUTE FROM THE FRIENDSHIP BOARD

**Reverend Barry Chance**  
President, Friendship Ministries

**N**ella's passing leaves a giant hole in our hearts because she was our friend, our colleague in ministry, and for 17 years our executive director. But she was much more than that, Nella was our prophet and for us the gospel incarnate.

The 56th chapter of Isaiah casts for a vision of a day when "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isaiah 56:7) when the people of the nations will come streaming into the temple and no one will be turned away because of their nationality or because of their disability. Isaiah's vision and Nella's own was that this become a reality. Her constant challenge to congregations was that if the sign on the lawn that read "Everyone Welcome!" were to be true, then they would have to welcome people with disabilities—that a house of prayer for all people cannot simply say that everyone is welcome but that it must break down the barriers that prevent those who love the Lord from fully participating in the life of God's family.

For Friendship, this is what the Kingdom looks like and Nella tirelessly worked to reveal that Kingdom to the world by making it a present reality. I would check in with her from time to time and discover that she had just returned from two speaking engagements in North Carolina, was preparing for a trip to Edmonton, and wondering if she could fit in a trip to California and Florida too. Even as she traveled the country to spread Friendship's vision of the gospel, she kept her heart at her home church of Plymouth Heights. When I brought her down to visit me in



Louisiana to teach a workshop I asked if she might stay over until Sunday to worship with us and her answer was: "Oh no, I need to get back to sit next to Marilyn!"

As a person a little more than half her age, my greatest worry for her was that she would stretch herself too thin and that her limitless enthusiasm would outpace her limited body. But she would not let a little thorn in the flesh impede the spread of the Gospel. Even as she began to struggle with her own limitations in the last few years, she used them for the glory of the Kingdom and reminded us that this is what we are called to do as well. Just a few weeks ago, shortly after her surgery she insisted on teaching a webinar that she had previously scheduled and she said there that the experience of being in a wheelchair during her recovery was giving her a new empathy for her friends in wheelchairs.

That is the Nella I knew and loved—a tireless evangelist for Jesus Christ. We will deeply miss our sister Nella, but as she was the gospel made flesh to us, we know that she will still be with us whenever we make the Good News that was within her the Good News within us as well. ■



CHURCH  
PARTNERSHIP  
PROGRAM

Heartfelt thanks to all **81 members of our Church Partnership Program!** And a special thanks to these new and renewing members:

**Sustaining Partners**  
(\$250 per year):

- Brookfield CRC of Brookfield, WI
- Brookside CRC of Grand Rapids, MI
- Ebenezer CRC of Leduc, AB
- Friends of Listowel, ON
- Midland Park CRC of Midland Park, NJ

**Growing Partners**  
(\$500 per year):

- Crosspoint CRC of Brampton, ON
- First CRC of Hamilton, ON
- Peace Reformed Church of Middleville, MI
- Rehoboth Fellowship CRC of Etobicoke, ON
- Waterloo CRC of Waterloo, ON

**Expanding Partners**  
(\$1,000 per year):

- Bethel CRC of Acton, ON
- Friendship Bible Hour of Chatham, ON
- Immanuel CRC of Caledon, ON
- Inglewood CRC of Edmonton, AB

**Global Outreach Partner**  
(\$2,000 per year):

- Bethel CRC of Waterdown, ON

To learn more about the Church Partnership Program, contact LaVonne at 888.866.8966 ext. 3 or [admin@friendship.org](mailto:admin@friendship.org)

# A TRIBUTE FROM FRIENDS

Plymouth Heights Christian Reformed Church, Nella's church home, celebrated her life with a Friendship Service just a few weeks after her passing. Two of Nella's friends shared their memories of Nella during that time. These are those memories.

**By MaryAnn VanSwol**

We are going to miss you, Nella. We know that you are up in heaven with Jesus now. We will be singing songs to you and God. I was Nella's prayer partner, and she was my prayer partner. I would like the congregation to say the Lord's prayer with me:

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen."*

**By Paul Buursma**

Nella was compassionate. She was kind to everyone. She took the time to visit me when I was in the hospital. She Skyped with me—and she knew how much I love to Skype! I liked the way Nella led Friendship and especially how she made each person feel special and how she understood each person when she led the prayer time. I miss Nella very much, but I know Nella will meet me at the gates of heaven where we will sing and dance and go for walks together. ■



Paul Buursma shares memories of Nella.



The Plymouth Heights CRC Friendship group concludes the service by blessing the congregation.



We would love to hear from you:

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