

# MY FRIEND JOHN \_\_\_\_\_ “NELLIE” \_\_\_\_\_ NELSON



*A personal story of how a man with seemingly nothing has so much to give*

**T**he first time I met John Nelson I had just transferred to Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, to play football. At a special meeting I was introduced to the coaching staff and the team. My parents were also there. It was then that I met John "Nellie" Nelson, an assistant football coach at PLU. He is also a quadriplegic who, I was soon to learn, has been in a wheelchair his entire life.

**John "Nellie" Nelson enjoys a swim with John Rowbotham, a BFS clinician who met Nellie when he played football at Pacific Lutheran University. Nellie was born with arthrogryposis, a disease that locks all his joints from the neck down.**

After I shook all the coaches' hands I went over to shake John's hand and got an immediate shock: John couldn't move his arm. In fact, he can only move

his head; all his joints from the neck down are locked due to a disease he was born with called arthrogryposis. I was completely embarrassed, and I felt horrible because my awkward response happened in front of





the team, the coaching staff and my parents. Did I ever get started off on the wrong foot! After that, I really didn't want to have anything to do with John. To be honest, I tried to avoid him as much as I could.

One day John asked me if I would like to go get something to eat with him, to get a chance to know each other. Reluctantly, I said yes. I didn't realize it until we sat down that I was going to have to feed him. John has no use of his hands, has never gone to the bathroom by himself, has never brushed his teeth by himself or dressed himself, or anything like that. So I fed him, and it was very humbling for me. But while we were eating I discovered that he is intelligent - his mind is sharp. I also found out that we had a lot in common, and from that point on we started building a friendship. From then on, he was just "Nellie."

## Getting to Know Nellie

The first time I heard Nellie tell about his life was after one of the games where he spoke to the football team. His story set me to tears right away hearing what he'd gone through and the things he had to deal with in his life. When I heard how tough his life had been and still is, I was just amazed at the man he has become. Nellie is a proud man, confident, hard working and determined. I just couldn't imagine going through the things he has and having the outlook on life that he has. At that point I really wanted to get to know him better, and to draw on his strength.

We started hanging out more and doing things together. I remember my first experience of taking him to the bathroom, which was tough. I'd never taken another guy to the

bathroom. But you learn how to do that; it's humbling, but you do it.

We developed a close friendship and a trusting relationship. It was very important for him to be able

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**Nellie was head usher at John Rowbotham's wedding last year. Nellie has become an important part of the John and Laura's life. Says John, "Nellie is always there for the people in his life, no matter how busy he is."**

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to trust me. That year I decided to take our friendship to the next level, and I invited Nellie to stay at our house in Utah during spring break. At the time I thought it was a great idea, even though I remember saying to myself, as I took him to the airport and carried him onto the plane, "Geesh, this is going to be tough!" It turned out to be the best week of my entire life. I learned so much about Nellie, myself and life in general.

That first night Nellie told me that he didn't want to have blankets on him and asked me to open the window. I did so, and then I went to the next room and fell asleep. That night Nellie became very cold; he couldn't get his blankets back on him or shut the window, obviously. So he called for me, shouted my name, but I slept through all this. Fortunately, my mom, who was upstairs, heard him and helped Nellie.

The next morning I woke up, came into his room and jovially asked him how he was doing. He said, "I was freezing! How come you didn't wake up?" Then I realized point blank that every single thing I take for granted in my daily life Nellie has to have somebody else do for him. This time my humbling experience was not an embarrassment to me; this time it was a lesson I was ready to learn.

Nellie and I had a great time spending time with my family and friends, building relationships with them and really getting to know one another on a personal basis. I took him to a Utah Jazz game, and we did a lot of fun things. But once we had an intense argument-over ice cream, of all things. He wanted to buy me an ice cream cone, and I wouldn't let him because I knew he had a very small income. Our argument definitely helped us understand each other better.

Every day while Nellie was at our house in Salt Lake brought a new lesson for me to learn. Brushing my teeth, tak-



ing a shower, going to the bathroom, waking up whenever I wanted to—all these simple abilities are actually amazing gifts. Not everyone has the advantages that most of us take for granted all our lives.

Our visit during spring break was a success; it was a great experience for me. After I took Nellie back, I found I missed helping him on a daily basis. Nellie and I continued to become better friends the rest of that term and the following year, my senior year.

Throughout that last year, I felt that in a way I was playing football as a tribute to Nellie, and the idea became part of my personal motivation. As it turned out, I received two bad ankle injuries late in the season—only four games remained. I decided to consider my injuries as an opportunity to follow Nellie's lead. I continued to play through the pain. Nellie was the reason I wouldn't allow myself to give up, because he was a guy who played through pain every day and never quit.

That spring I became engaged, and I asked Nellie to be part of our wedding and serve as head usher. On the day of the wedding Nellie had his tux on and he was ushering people in his chair, meeting both sides of the family. At the reception Nellie let loose on the dance floor dancing with all our friends. It was a great privilege to have Nellie there. It was a perfect day.

When it was time to take him back home after the wedding, it was tough to say goodbye, but now we have a tradition where we see each other every spring. This year he flew to Utah to stay with my wife and me at our home. We did a lot together—simple things—playing with our new puppy, going swimming in my parents' pool and spending a lot of time here at BFS, getting to know all the people at the company.

Nellie also surprised my younger sister Sara by coming to her high school graduation this year. She didn't know he was coming, but it was important to Nellie to be at Sara's graduation, so he did. He continues to stay in contact with our family, and we're already making plans for his next visit. Nellie's been unofficially adopted into our family as a son and brother, and we're all very grateful and very blessed to have him here.

## The Gift of Nellie


Nellie's life impacts us on a daily basis. He, not just his example of courage, makes all of us—and all the people he continues to meet every day—better. He helps people understand life. Too often, the things that should matter—taking care of others, integrity and love—get swept under the rug because we get involved in seemingly more important things such as money, winning and ever-changing priorities. Nellie brings us down to the essentials: being humble, seeing the importance of the little things—that's what he is really, really good at. That's Nellie's gift.

Nellie has changed my life and my outlook on things forever. I am a better person because of Nellie,

because he's enabled me to look at challenges in a better, more positive, way. I find myself in my daily life saying, "Hey, Nellie got through that! I can sure as heck get through whatever obstacle I'm going through."

I was in Washington recently doing a clinic, and Nellie came out to do a two-day clinic with me at Sequim High School. The kids just loved him and really responded well. It was great to have him work at a clinic, and we are looking forward to hopefully doing more clinics in the future. At every clinic I've done, I've showed the Nellie video [the award-winning *Nellie: A Life Worth Living*] and it

never fails to have a huge, positive impact.

So that's my friend Nellie. He's taught me a lot about my life and my perceptions. Nellie is always there for the people in his life, no matter how busy he is. He always takes the time to listen. He does everything he can possibly do to be an 11, all the time. John "Nellie" Nelson is a tribute to all that is good in the world right now. 

*An award-winning movie of Nellie's life and influence at PLU is available from Bigger Faster Stronger for \$29 please call for details. 1-800-628-9737*

