

The Arc Angel Project

Holiday Project Sparks Connections & Spreads Joy

Gus Kvalevog was just two years old when his parents left him at the Life Skills and Transition Center in Grafton, ND (formerly known as the Developmental Center) in 1937.

He resided there for the next 73 years without any contact from his family. And his story might have ended there, if not for a series of coincidences.

The Spark

In 2008, The Arc, Upper Valley received a call from Mary Dusek at the Life Skills and Transition Center, inquiring whether or not The Arc had any funds available to purchase Christmas gifts for residents who had no family ties and would otherwise not receive a gift during the holiday season.

Program Director Pam Solga reached out to members for donations and worked with staff in Grafton to obtain a list of referrals and suggested gift items for each individual.

While reviewing the referral list, Solga recognized the surname, Kvalevog. It wasn't a common surname, but it was very familiar. She contacted her good friend, Kelly Kvalevog Arganbright, in Grand Rapids, Michigan to see if there was a connection.

She found that although many in the Kvalevog family were aware of Gus, nobody really knew much about him and most had assumed he was no longer living.

"We were pleasantly surprised to hear from Pam and learn about the work The Arc, Upper Valley was doing to provide Christmas gifts to these all-but-forgotten people. We were even more surprised to hear one of them was Gus, someone who had only existed in the fringes of the family history and someone we had always wondered about," recalled Arganbright.

The Connection

The Arganbright Family adopted Gus for Christmas that year and every year after that.



Gus - Christmas 2008

"Well, there was no question that we were going to adopt him for Christmas. It added a whole new dimension to our Christmas and what it means to be family. We had so much fun, as a family, learning about Gus and picking out gifts for him. I think one of the things that made it so fun was that you knew you were buying for someone who had almost nothing."

"We spend endless hours at the mall picking out gifts for people who have everything, because it's so difficult to find something they don't already own. But, how often do you get to buy for someone who would be happy to get anything? Even one thing?"

For the next few years, Gus and the Arganbrights exchanged greeting cards on holidays like Easter and Thanksgiving.

"Once we had that connection, we wanted to keep it. I think we would have done that even if he wasn't family. I mean, we are talking about a group of people who have no one. So, we'd try to occasionally drop a line to him, here and there, to tell him about our family or the latest happenings."

"Even though Gus could not read or write, we'd often get a card from him and the staff, telling us about him and what he had going on. It was nice having a window into his life and, sometimes, that would give us ideas about what to get him for the following Christmas or Easter."

In July of 2012, she made the trip to Grafton for Gus' 77th birthday.

The Meeting

"I had always wanted to meet Gus, but when I heard he was turning 77, it seemed like the right time to make that happen," said Arganbright.

"Gus had a small party with cake and balloons. It was then that I

learned he had never had a family visitor. Seventy plus years is a long time to go without seeing your family.”

“That really hit me hard and made me especially glad I had been there to celebrate with him.”

Gus could no longer speak, so it was from the staff that she learned about his life.

As a young man, he used to enjoy playing silly pranks on his staff and then pretending to be innocent when discovered.

When she heard that, Arganbright laughed and said, “He’s a Kvalevog, alright!”

He enjoyed gospel music and liked nature and animals. He especially enjoyed holiday decorations.

He once took a vacation to Medora, where his staff had a photo taken of him, dressed up as a gunslinger. It was proudly displayed on the wall of his room.

Another photo showed a smiling Gus riding in a fire truck during a Grafton parade.

Arganbright spent a pleasant afternoon visiting and looking at Gus’ photo albums.

Gus J. Kvalevog passed away in his sleep just three months later.

“Who knew that after we finally made this connection, our time would be so short together? We are better people for having known Gus, he broadened our world in so many positive ways.

And, none of this would have been possible without The Arc Angel Project.”



Kelly and Gus celebrate Gus’ 77th birthday in July 2012.

The Legacy

To honor Gus, The Arc officially changed the name of the program to “The Gus Kvalevog Memorial Arc Angel Project.”

“Gus is a wonderful example of who The Arc Angel Project serves,” said Solga. “There are many programs that provide gifts for needy children at Christmas, but disadvantaged adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities who have no family ties are often forgotten during the holiday season. The Arc Angel Project strives to make the holidays a happy time for those who are less fortunate.”

Arganbright agrees. “We were so honored that they named the project after Gus. How fitting, that a seemingly insignificant life, led alone for 75 years would end in such celebrity. That someone, once unknown to even his own family,

would now be known to the world. It really chokes you up at how appropriate that is and we could not be prouder to have him honored in this way.”

The program has grown to now include referrals from local service providers for individuals living independently or in group homes in Grand Forks and the surrounding area.

You can partner with The Arc, Upper Valley by making a monetary donation to The Arc Angel Project, or you can adopt an individual to personally shop for. You will be able to choose whether you wish to shop for a male or female within a certain age range.

Together we can continue to spread joy during the holiday season.

Call The Arc at 701-772-3148 for more information.