


Alva Review Courier

ONLINE EDITION

December 31, 2003

Click  for sub-menu

- ▶ [Home](#)
- ▼ [News](#)
 - [Local Headlines](#)
 - [National Headlines](#)
 - [Local Opinion](#)
 - [Sports](#)
 - [Events](#)
 - [Announcements](#)
 - [Weddings](#)
 - [Engagements](#)
 - [Weather](#)
 - [Stocks](#)
 - [Business](#)
- ▶ [Sports](#)
- ▶ [Events](#)
- ▶ [Classifieds](#)
- ▶ [Directories](#)
- ▶ [Entertainment](#)
- ▶ [Photo Gallery](#)
- ▶ [General Information](#)
- ▶ [Subscriber PDF Download](#)

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[Weather Center](#)
by Intellicast
Weather

Search

News



The Whole = the Sum of Its Parts

Family of Former Alvan Featured in Magazine

By Helen Barrett

"We don't think of it as being that unique," former Alva native Lex Frieden said by phone of his blended family. "I think that's what families are all about -- helping one another out."



Photo 1

What makes the Lex Frieden family of national interest is the fact that Lex and his wife Joyce, along with Mac Brodie, an extended member of the "family," all have major disabilities.

But in this family, their combined abilities equal one whole, complete family.

The Lex Frieden family's story is told in the January 2004 edition of Family Circle magazine.

"It was a good journalist from Dallas who wrote it," Lex said of author William M. Hendryx. "It was a good experience. I've already had lots of feedback from the article."

There may not be any copies of the magazine available in Alva because Rialto Theatre owner Johnny Jones purchased all of the magazines he could find to distribute to friends.

Lex, was born and raised in Alva, sang in the Alva Boys Choir, attained the rank of Eagle

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Local Poll

Do you think the recently passed Medicare bill will be good or bad for senior citizens?

Good 43%
Bad 39%
Mixed 11%
Not Sure 6%

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Scout, attended the First United Methodist Church and graduated valedictorian of his class, according to long time friend Fred Neuman.



Photo 2

Lex's father worked for Zenith Gas Company which was purchased by ONG, eventually resulting in the family's move to the Tulsa area.

While a freshman at Oklahoma State University, he and a carload of pals were involved in a head-on collision where everyone walked away with only minor injuries . . . except Lex.

His neck broken at the fifth vertebra left him with no use of his lower body and only limited use of his arms.

"When he had his accident, we all went down to St. Anthony's hospital to play Tripoli," Neuman said referring to a Boys Choir tradition.

"We had a trip planned to Acapulco that summer and we took him with us," Neuman recalls. "He got into the old station wagon, we drove to Texas, got on an airplane and went to Acapulco."

It was when Lex applied for admission to Oral Roberts University in Tulsa that he ran head-long into discrimination. Despite a straight-A transcript, he was denied admittance.

"I was shattered," Lex says in the article. "Breaking my neck was nothing compared to that. I cannot describe the sensation of being discriminated against because of nothing more than a physical characteristic."

Lex's father came to his rescue. Being acquainted with Harry Carter, then dean of students at the University of Tulsa, the elder Frieden arranged a meeting.

At the time, only one of the buildings had wheelchair access. Carter immediately devised a solution to Lex's education problem.

"Just tell us what classes you want to take, and we'll hold them in that building," Carter said.

Lex completed his education, became a professor of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, and is a senior vice president at

TIRR, the rehab center where he first received the therapy and skills necessary to continue his life.

While living at an experimental housing annex sponsored by the Institute for Rehabilitation and Research in Houston, Lex met Mac, a resident in a nearby home for the mentally retarded.

Mac received a brain injury in the late 1960s when his Navy squad encountered a land mine while on patrol in Vietnam. His injury impaired his ability to think and make decisions and his memory.

Mac volunteered to assist residents where Lex lived and the two established a bond immediately. Mac's mother suggested the two might be able to live on their own if they pooled their abilities.

A couple of years later, Lex met his wife Joyce while both were students at the University of Houston. The two were married in 1977 in front of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Joyce, a single mother, became paralyzed from the waist down by encephalomyelitis. Joyce drives their specially equipped van wherever the family needs to go. Mac serves as Lex's arms and legs, while Lex functions as Mac's memory and decision maker.

Together the three function as a whole unit. Lex and Joyce have become legal guardians for Joyce's 12-year-old grandson, Trey O'Connor.

Largely as a result of Lex's efforts, the Americans with Disabilities Act became law in 1990. As executive director of the National Council on Disability, Lex and his staff developed the proposal which prohibited discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, public accommodations, transportation, etc.

It's because of that bill that persons confined to wheelchairs can easily access a restaurant, use a public restroom, attend church or other public functions.

"I believe the impact of ADA has been profound," Lex says. "I think a lot of people who have disabilities and their family members have benefited from the opportunity to participate fully in life."

In the fall of 2002, President Bush named Lex chairman of the National Council on Disability. Chief of Staff

Andrew Card swore him in at an Oval Office ceremony with the President, his wife, Joyce, Mac and Trey as witnesses.

Lex says his "family" is a natural outgrowth of the values he learned in Alva.

"There are a lot of really nice people in Alva," Lex said. "People there help each other out, and are inclined to do that naturally. I just acquired that sense of family from that experience."

PHOTO 1: The Lex Frieden Family -- clockwise from left are Melissa Cassel, daughter of Joyce Frieden, Mac Brodie, Lex and Joyce Frieden and Trey O'Conner, the Frieden's grandson. Photo provided by Lex Frieden

PHOTO 2: Lex Frieden, second from left on the next to top row, sings with the Alva Boys Choir many years ago. Photo provided by Fred Neuman