

DUANE FRENCH

“Pity is just another form of abuse.”

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who ARE we?

Washington's Kaleidoscope



French talks with well-wishers outside the state Capitol in 2008 after Booth Gardner filed Initiative 1000, the “Death with Dignity” proposal.
Thomas James Hurst © The Seattle Times, reprinted with permission

Duane French scoots into Starbucks in his electric wheelchair. Though his hands are misshapen from paralysis, he’s Jeff Gordon with a joystick—boyishly handsome at 62 and natty in a checked shirt, tasteful tie and blue-suede shoes. His smile is contagious. Yet some people glance furtively from their Frappuccinos. Their eyes say, “What if that were me?”

The director of disability services for the Washington State Department of Social & Health Services oversees a \$53 million budget and 325 employees. In one sense he is uniquely qualified for his job. Duane French is a quadriplegic. In 1968, he was a happy-go-lucky 14-year-old who dove into a river of despair. There were times, doped up on Demerol, feeling useless, when he just wanted to die. And without his family and the intervention of other caring people he might have. They brought him out of his shell, convinced him he could go to college and goosed him to think big: Why not set his sights on becoming the director of a vocational-rehab program? French rolled his eyes. He was floundering at a community college; now they were telling him he should go to a university. “It just

seemed so ridiculous. But seeing it written down imprinted it on my brain; it’s like it took on a life outside of me.”

By the 1990s he was directing a major vocational rehabilitation program in Anchorage, running for the Alaska Legislature and volunteering on the front lines of the battle to pass the Americans with Disabilities Act. He was twice forcefully removed from the halls of Congress and spent a night



Senator Tom Harkin presents French the 2005 Frank Harkin Leadership Award from the National Council on Independent Living. The award honors the senator’s brother, who was born deaf. *French family collection*

in jail. He was at the White House on July 26, 1990, when President George H.W. Bush signed the landmark bill into law.

In 2005, together with Christopher Reeve, French was one of the inaugural inductees in the Spinal Cord Injury Hall of Fame. You’re thinking that’s a club no one would want to join. That’s exactly why some look away when they see a disabled person. “They’re *afraid*,” French says. “Disability is the one minority that doesn’t discriminate. You can’t become African American; you can’t become Hispanic. You’re born the race you are. But disability is a group we can all join—in a split second—so that fear is ever-present.”

It doesn’t happen very often today, French says, but 15 or 20 years ago when he’d be waiting to cross a street, a total stranger might stop and say, “I just couldn’t live if I were in your situation.”

“Excuse me?” he’d say, incredulous.

“I couldn’t live if I were you.”

“So, I just want to make sure you understand what you just said to me: ‘I’d rather be dead than be you.’ Is that your opening line with everybody?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“No, it is *exactly* what you’re saying.”

Another day, he might be waylaid by an empty-headed proselytizer:

“Are you a believer?”

“Do you mean ‘Am I a Christian?’ ”

“Yes.”

“In that case, ‘Yes.’ ”

“Do you want to pray with me?”

“Well, we’re in a hotel lobby. I don’t even know your name. You didn’t even say hello. So, no, I’m not really comfortable doing that.”

“But you need to.”

“*I need to?*”

“Yes. Because if you pray and you really believe, you can be healed.”

“Ma’am, I am healed. Why do you think I would want to be?”

“Well, so you wouldn’t be helpless. So you wouldn’t be so weak.”

“Do you think you could live with a disability?”

“Oh no, I know I couldn’t. I’d rather die than do that.”

“So, I guess what you’re saying then is that you’re weaker than I am. Because I’m strong enough that while I have a disability, I have a job; I’m married, have a wonderful life and I’m very happy. So I guess I’m stronger than you are. Maybe you need to pray to be as strong as I am.”

It was like her head was going to explode, French says, laughing at the memory.

“Well, that’s rude!”

“*Exactly,*” French said.

And she just walked away.

A BILLION PEOPLE, 15 percent of the world’s population, are living with disabilities. The World Health Organization calls them “the world’s largest minority.” The total includes nearly 40 million Americans, about half with disabilities rated as severe. “More than a million Americans are paralyzed as a result of spinal-cord injuries,” according to the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation. The number grows by around 12,000 a year: a car

crash, a slippery stair, a crushing tackle. The football stadium crowd holds its breath. We all clap when the player finally moves his arms and legs. The fear dissipates, but it’s always lurking until the next time we encounter someone who seems “crippled.”

The Americans with Disabilities Act ostensibly made the U.S. a world leader in disability rights. Every office building, Walmart and Target has parking spaces set aside for the disabled. Even small-town sidewalks have curb ramps. It’s progress, French says, but disabled people still face bureaucratic back-sliding, lip-service and outright discrimination, not to mention preachy do-gooders. “The work is far from over,” says French’s friend, former U.S. Senator Tom Harkin. Inspired by a deaf older brother, the Iowa Democrat championed the Americans with Disabilities Act. “Before the ADA,”



Harkin remembers, he’d heard stories “of individuals who had to crawl on their hands and knees to go up a flight of stairs at a school or a courthouse, who couldn’t ride a bus because there wasn’t a lift and individuals who couldn’t attend a baseball game with their own family due to inaccessibility at the ball park.” But on the 25th anniversary of the ADA in 2015, Harkin pointed to a disappointing statistic: “We have barely seen any increase in employment of people with disabilities since 1990, despite what every survey and study says—that people with disabilities want the benefits, dignity and power of work.” In 2014, only 22.5 percent of Americans with disabilities were employed, to say nothing of underemployment. Far fewer disabled Americans achieve a four-year college degree, according to the Census Bureau, and a substantial percentage subsist below poverty levels. In Washington State, 853,000 people 16 and older live with a disability, including 118,176 military veterans with a service-connected disability. In an aging America, Baby Boomers’ demands on health-care and long-term care services will escalate dramatically over the next 30 years. Some 36 percent of Washingtonians 65 and over are living with a disability.

In other words, this could be you, sooner or later, even if you pray.

French and millions of other disabled people who just want to be people still bristle at the head-patting that passes for constructive empathy. Some are so used to it that they just mutter privately; others have a rallying cry that's vulgar but eloquent: "Piss on pity!"

"For those of us in the disability community who are leaders, it's kind of a perplexing place," French says. Being an inspirational leader is a worthy goal, certainly, but it rings hollow when people in essence say, "Oh, you're such an inspiration just because you survived and you're out in the world!" That feels condescending, he says, "more like pity than praise."

"Pity," said Michael J. Fox, the popular actor diagnosed with Parkinson's when he was only 30, "is just another form of abuse."

DUANE FRENCH was born in 1953 in Hastings, Nebraska. About 4,000 more people live there now but not much has changed: Hastings, pop. 25,000, is a polite, well-manicured county-seat town in the middle of the Great Plains. If you remember your sixth-grade jigsaw puzzle of America, Nebraska is nestled between Kansas, Colorado, Wyoming, South Dakota, Iowa and Missouri. Hastings is 108 miles west of Lincoln, the capital. The state's metropolis, Omaha, is 50 miles farther. Besides being celebrated as the birthplace of Tom Osborne, the revered former University of Nebraska football coach and congressman, Kool-Aid was invented there in 1927. Hastings Googles into focus as a lot like Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." That was certainly so with the French family.

Between 1950 and 1963, Duane's hard-working parents, Bob and Peg French, had six blond, freckle-nosed kids: Kathy, Bobbi, Duane, Rodney, Jane and Tim. The branches of the family tree are part Protestant, part Catholic. Duane's father was descended from English immigrants who first arrived in the 1700s. They farmed their way west with mixed luck as the United States grew. Wiped out by a dust storm in Colorado, Duane's grandpa, John L. French, moved his family to Nebras-

ka in a battered pickup truck at the height of the Depression. John's wife, Tressie May, died in 1932 after giving birth to their seventh child. Duane's dad, the fourth, was only 10 when his father died three years later at the age of 43. After Pearl Harbor, the teenager enlisted in the Navy. Bob French was not much for showing emotion—"the strong, silent type," his kids say—but patriotic to the core. Duane says the opportunity for "three hots and a cot," as they used to say, also must have been attractive for a kid who'd been on his own since 15. When Bob French met Winifred "Peg" Layton after the war, he was already at his life's work as a switchman for the railroad. Peg, as charming as she was efficient, worked her way up in the Hastings Post Office, serving as both the postmaster's secretary and postmaster in a nearby one-horse town called Ayr. The joke in Nebraska back then was that "You pass Ayr going to Blue Hill."

Duane's maternal great-great-grandparents fled the Irish potato famine in the mid-1800s. Whenever Duane visited his grandparents to watch *Bonanza*, his rough-and-tumble Grandpa Layton would point to a portrait of John F. Kennedy, a framed shamrock and a crucifix bearing a withered Palm Sunday frond. "Duane!" he'd declare, "These three things are forever constant in your life: You're Catholic, you're Irish and you're a Democrat!"

Growing up, Duane was an enterprising "little cutie," his sister Kathy says. "Big eyes. Always smiling." He watched boxing matches with his dad, went fishing with his grandpa, loved to swim and had a paper route. Hastings was a great place to grow up, though their dad often worked 16-hour days. They'd take him his dinner down by the tracks. Mrs. French was the nurturer. Friends used to say, "Let's go to your house. I need a hug from your mom."

When Duane was 11, he talked his way into a job as a



A busy toddler takes a nap.
French family collection



Bob and Peg French with their six kids. Duane, around 12, is at top right. *French family collection*

gofer at “Ray’s,” the store across the street. “When I’d come in for a Butterfinger and Mountain Dew, Ray would say, ‘Frenchie, me and the boys are going to go in the back (to have a snort). Watch the front and if anybody comes in let me know.’ Pretty soon, I told him I had a proposition for him: I figured it up that I was spending about \$6 a month on candy. ‘So I’ll tell you what I’ll do: I’ll dust all your bottles on the shelves

for \$6 a month.’ Then Ray bought out the insurance business in the building and opened a lounge. My role got a bit bigger: keep both places clean. I got to know everybody. They’d say, ‘Hey, Frenchie, howya doing? I can’t be here too long; my wife will complain.’ Some of the guys had nice cars. And I’d say, ‘You know what? I’ll wash your car, and clean the inside, too. And you can just tell your wife you’re going to get the car washed.’ I didn’t realize I was being an enabler back then,” French laughs. “It was cool because I could start the car and pull it around, wash it off and drive it back. And there were some cool cars. I’d do a great job. They’d pay me \$10. It was a great deal for me, and it worked out pretty slick for them too.”

IT WAS PUSHING 90 by noon on August 13, 1968. A perfect day for a swim. Duane’s cousin, Dean Pittman, also 14, was one of his best friends. So when he stopped by Ray’s with a couple of girls who had driver’s licenses and said, “Come on Duane, let’s go!” the impulse to skip out on work was irresist-

ible. They drove to the Alda Bridge, which crosses the Platte River a few miles north of Hastings.

"The Platte isn't very deep in any case," Duane says, "but during the hottest part of summer when it's being drawn down for irrigation, it's really shallow. The sand was so hot it was burning our feet, so we had to find areas where we could swim around." His cousin decided it would be fun to dive off the 13-foot bridge. "It was more of a belly flop than a dive. And I said, 'Aw man, let me show you how to do the perfect dive!' When I got to the top I thought, 'Wow, this is really high.' I had to crawl over the rail. My feet were hanging over the edge and I was holding on with my hands. The others were down there saying, 'Come on Duane, hurry up! Our feet are getting hot. We've got to get back in the water.'

"OK," he thought, "here goes nothing."

He sprang off the edge, stretched his arms, straightened his legs and pointed his toes. In midair for a split second he was proud of his form. Then he entered three feet of water with a sickening splash, emerging like a crumpled rag doll.

"The next thing I knew my cousin had me in his arms. I was numb from the neck down, but my neck felt like it was on fire. Dean picked me up, ran across the river and laid me on the sand."

His cousin scampered back to the bridge and flagged down a state patrolman who immediately concluded the injury was life-threatening.

"You can't call this in," the injured boy protested, pain searing his brain.

"Son, why? What are you talking about?"

"My Uncle Wayne is a State Patrol captain. He'll tell my mom and dad. I'm here without permission."

"*Wayne French is your uncle?*"

Wayne and Bob French, born 2½ years apart, were the closest of the seven kids orphaned during the Depression.

The trooper gingerly placed Duane in the cruiser, with Duane's head propped against his cousin. The only thing Duane could see was the speedometer needle buried as they sped toward the hospital.

Wayne French at first couldn't locate his brother. He called his sister-in-law at the Post Office and said it looked bad. When Peg collected Bob they set out for Grand Island, 25 miles north, a city twice as big and with a larger hospital. They were slowed by construction crews, which made the miles more agonizing. "He might never walk again, Peg," her husband warned, fighting to control his emotions.

CAPTAIN FRENCH was at the hospital when Duane arrived. When Duane saw that his uncle wasn't mad at him—just "warm and loving but obviously scared to death"—he knew something was very wrong. There was one fleeting comic moment in the emergency room. "Duane," his cousin whispered, "they're cutting your underwear off!" Duane remembered every mother's admonition to always wear clean underwear because you never know when strangers will have to undress you. "But at that point I knew that was the least of my problems."

Next, they shaved his head. He had talked his dad into letting him grow his hair longer, like the Beatles. The clippers buzzed. Suddenly he was bald. Now they were drilling into his skull. His head throbbed; the smell was nauseating. They attached a pair of tongs to his head to stabilize his neck and demobilize the cervical spine. He wanted to sleep but they told him, "You've got to stay awake!" His temperature soared. He hallucinated that John Glenn was taking him on a tour of a space museum.

"Will he live?" his mother asked the doctors.

"That's up to someone a lot bigger than we are."

And if he lived, what kind of life could he have?

Who could say?

That was nearly half a century ago. As the terrible memories flooded her brain, Mrs. French sobbed. "I'm sorry," she told the writer, as if she had anything to apologize for.

"It was really tough on all of us," says Duane's big sister, Kathy French Smith, wiping away her own tears. The oldest of the six kids, Kathy was 17 when her brother broke his neck.

When his condition stabilized, they moved him to the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha. They



Duane's siblings gather around his hospital bed in the dining room of their house in April of 1969. He wasn't doing well, physically and emotionally. *French family collection*

strapped him into a contraption called a Stryker frame, a revolving bed that allows hospital staff to turn a patient with a spinal-cord injury. Sometimes Duane felt like the meat in a canvas sandwich—or a pathetic roast on a rotisserie that turned every two hours. When they realized he was addicted to opioids, they abruptly cut him off. The withdrawal was agonizing. The substitute pills barely dented the pain. Just the smell of food gave him the dry heaves.

“It was awful to see him like that,” his big sister remembers. “Mom and Dad would take turns sitting with him at the hospital. The kids kind of got farmed out, staying with aunts, uncles and family friends. The littler kids actually lived with others for about a year. It just crushed my dad, especially because he couldn't do anything to help Duane.”

“I was his oldest son,” Duane says. “He had high hopes for me, so it was rough on him because he couldn't share his emotions. While there weren't any real supports for me, there were even less for my family, so they all went through it in their own way. I think my Dad thought, ‘All the hope I had for him is gone.’ So in the first years after the accident, in addition to ev-

everything else I was going through, I was pretty angry, bitter and resentful because I saw that in my dad.”

Counselors at university hospital asked a young paraplegic to visit him. “This good-looking, pretty accomplished guy” came wheeling in:

“Hi Duane, I’m John. Nice to meet you.”

“Hi John, nice to meet you, too. Now would you please leave my room?”

“I just want to talk to you for a little bit.”

“I don’t really need you to talk to me.”

“I just want to talk to you about what it’s like to be in a wheelchair.”

“I don’t want to talk about it because I’m going to get well. I don’t need to talk to you about being in a wheelchair. Leave.”

He started screaming until John left.

Looking back, despite his denial and anger, Duane believes “the fact that I saw someone with a disability who had gone on and had lived his life probably left an impression on me that there could be a life other than the one I imagined.”



Duane early in the rehab stage of his recovery.
French family collection

COUNSELORS SAID he needed to go to a nursing home or state institution. He landed at Nebraska Orthopedic Hospital in Lincoln for two frustrating years. Sometimes his dad couldn’t contain his exasperation. “Have you done your exercises?” he’d say. “Have you really tried?” Bob French had heard stories about people with broken necks who regained the ability to walk. He couldn’t grasp—or fully accept—that Duane had sustained a catastrophic spinal cord injury. Whenever they put him on a tilt table to stand him up, his head would fall forward. “Hold your head up!” they’d say. “I can’t!” he’d protest, neck throbbing, eyes filled with tears. Fortunately, he met an em-



Duane's Hastings High School annual featured this photo, noting that he was always the first to cross the bridge for a convocation. *The Tiger yearbook*

pathetic young doctor named McIntire. They became friends. “You know, Mac,” Duane said one day, “they say in PT that I’m lazy and that’s why I won’t hold my head up. But I’m not. I’m in pain because I just can’t hold my head up.” The doctor ordered X-rays, and discovered Duane’s vertebrae had never fused. There was no way he could hold his head up. The surgery that followed was crucial to a better life after quadriplegia. Now he could sit up and hold his head erect.

Back home at last, Duane promptly developed pneumonia. A knowledgeable family-practice doctor recommended the Younker Rehabilitation Center in Des Moines, Iowa. It was—and remains—one of the best rehab facilities in the nation.

In 1972, Duane got his first electric wheelchair. With credit for the schooling he’d managed while at Younker he started his senior year at Hastings High School, only to be pigeonholed in special-ed. An enterprising guidance counselor, James Anderson, studied the Congressional Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and made sure the state vocational rehab people understood that the old classification of “Handicapped, too severe” was no longer an out.

Still, the only viable occupation that occurred to Duane was radio broadcasting. His brother Rodney, three years young-



His senior photo. *The Tiger yearbook*

er and a state champion wrestler, was Duane's rock while he attended community college in Hastings. Duane tried to put up a brave front. At a New Year's Eve party, with Rodney heading off to the Navy, the ritual kissing and cheering at the stroke of midnight seemed depressingly hollow. "Take me home!" Duane told his brother. Alone in his room, he called the Crisis Line and declared he just wanted to die.* "Seven years of pent-up stuff poured out. Then I recognized the volunteer's voice. It was one of my teachers at the community college, Myrna Cassel. She was a wonderful woman, but

I was so embarrassed because I grew up in a family where, like most Midwestern families, if you needed counseling you were crazy."

Cassel, who was wearing three more hats—teacher, counselor and associate dean of students—encouraged a charismatic counselor at the college, Bob Glenn, to invite Duane to group sessions. Bob prodded him to not hide his crumpled left hand inside his prized Nebraska Cornhusker jacket. One day, Glenn asked one of Duane's classmates if she would mind holding his hand. Near the end of session, Glenn asked them how it was going. Duane lied that it was no problem. The young woman said she was exhausted "because he's been pulling away from me this whole time. But he has nice, soft, warm hands and it actually felt very nice if he wasn't trying so hard to pull away from me."

"I went home that night, pulled my hand out and looked at it. I thought, 'It is warm. It is soft.' It was one of those breakthrough counseling moments, and it led to me starting to keep the hand out in the world, to take the jacket off and live again."

* "The suicide rate of Americans with spinal-cord injuries is three times higher than the average," the writer D.T. Max reported in a 2016 *New Yorker* article on new surgical techniques.

Meantime, Duane’s speech teacher, Carolyn Friedson, told him he had a wonderful voice and it needed to be heard. She believed in Duane so much, he started to believe in himself.

“Bob, Carolyn and Myrna were kind of the trinity of my salvation,” Duane says.

“He’s made us out to be saints,” says Glenn, still a fixture in Hastings. “But helping people like Duane French find their way is what makes an educator’s job so rewarding. Duane was at the beginning of his new and emerging self; he was learning from the struggle. At that point he simply did not know his strengths and, by God, he found them! Look what he has accomplished.”

Cassel, retired and living in Texas, vividly remembers the Crisis Line call. “I recognized Duane’s voice right away, and I was afraid he would recognize mine. But before he did he was able to get it all out and I think that really helped him. So many of our students then were people who had been held back or pigeonholed. It was really wonderful seeing them come out. It was right at the time the new law was finally being enforced. There were so many handicapped people who couldn’t believe their good fortune—but also couldn’t figure out what to do. That’s where people like Bob Glenn played such an important role. I remember Duane realizing that he could do things with his life. I think he knew it before. But because of the new law, not only could he do it but he would be *allowed* to do it.”

Broadcasting, however, wasn’t a good fit. The job was too physically challenging, especially given the accessibility issues of the era. A small-town broadcaster had to do it all—haul around gear, run wires. In 2½ years at the community college French had managed to accrue only nine of the 36 credits required for a degree.

“So, what do you think we should do?” his adviser asked as Duane’s vocational-rehab counselor looked on intently.

“Well,” Duane joked, “given my great success here it sounds like I should go on to a four-year university.”

“That’s exactly what we think.”

“Are you being serious?”

“Yes! And what will your major be?”

Duane eyed his counselor: “Well, based on what I’m experiencing today, I think I could do your job.”

“OK, we’ll put ‘voc-rehab counselor’ down here. What do you see for your long-term future?”

“What’s the highest job where you work?”

“That would be our director.”

“OK, put that down. I’ll be a vocational rehabilitation director.”

It seemed like a pipe dream.

HE ENROLLED at Emporia State University in Emporia, Kansas, about five hours southeast of Hastings. The college president, John E. King, had become one of the nation’s leading disability rights advocates in the 1950s when disabled veterans began enrolling in technical schools and colleges. On King’s watch, Emporia State installed wheelchair ramps and provided special assistance to disabled students to help them succeed academically.

French found a personal assistant and forever friend in Bill Burgoon, a fellow student. Burgoon, who recently died of cancer, was a free-spirited “deeply caring human being,” French remembers. Burgoon’s father was an Army colonel stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas, which was a lot closer than Hastings. “Going home for a weekend was difficult for me, so I spent a lot of time with the Burgoons. They just adopted me.”

French received a degree in psychology and rehabilitation services in 1979. To his surprise, he quickly found a job.

His counselor informed him there was an opening for a state vocational rehab counselor in North Platte, 150 miles west of Hastings. Duane’s cousin, Danny Pittman, volunteered to drive him to the interview. “I was dressed up in a suit, and so was Danny because he was so excited for me.” They checked in with the receptionist. When the regional supervisor, Mike Sprague, arrived from lunch, she informed him that Mr. French was there for his interview. Sprague strolled over to Duane’s cousin, extended his hand and declared, “Welcome, Mr. French. Come into my office.” The cousins exchanged knowing glances.

“I’m Mr. French,” Duane said.

Surprised and embarrassed, Sprague ushered French into his office and made a stab at explaining himself.

“When I was talking to you on the phone you didn’t sound...”

“I didn’t *sound* like I’m handicapped?”

“I guess that’s kind of embarrassing to admit, but, yeah.”

French powered his wheelchair a bit closer, thinking to himself, “This is my interview now, buddy.”

That awkward first moment had changed the power dynamic. “It’s probably why I ended up getting the job because it added to my confidence. The thing I’m prone to is ‘I’ll show you!’ It’s a French family trait.”

In those days, there weren’t many vocational rehabilitation counselors who were disabled—in Nebraska at least. For Sprague and French it was the beginning of a strong professional and personal relationship. “Mike was a wonderful man and a huge influence on my life and my career. Over the years, the memory of that first meeting has become a moment of levity for both of us. I was fortunate that Mike was the guy on the other end of that exchange because someone else—someone full of himself—could have gotten defensive at my assertiveness.” Twenty years later, when French was named director of Alaska’s vocational rehabilitation program, Sprague was one of the first people he called.

Duane’s brother Tim, a high school student at the time, volunteered to transfer from Hastings to North Platte High School to help him find an apartment and adjust to his first job. When people told



Duane and Tim with their mom after Tim’s stroke. *French family collection*

him that was a noble thing to do, Tim French just shrugged and smiled. “He ain’t heavy,” he’d say, borrowing a line from the hit song, “he’s my brother!”

In 1993, Tim French was paralyzed from the waist down after a mishap during surgery for a brain aneurism. An instrument slipped from the surgeon’s hand, nicked the carotid artery and triggered a stroke. Uniquely qualified to offer advice and empathy, Duane has done his best to help his brother learn to cope. “Without Tim, I wouldn’t have been successful,” Duane says. “He’s one of the big heroes of my life.”

IN NORTH PLATTE, French met the woman who would become his first wife, and within a year earned a promotion to the agency’s offices in Lincoln, the state capital. He soon realized, however, that he wasn’t ready to manage even a small client assistance program—especially one that hinged on a dicey federal grant—so he became a state disability examiner. He was learning, yet still restless. He wanted to work one-on-one with the disabled. An independent living program called the League of Human Dignity was just the ticket.

For three years French traveled from Lincoln to small communities, visiting nursing homes to help people transition to independent living. “I loved working in independent living because it has so much soul. You’re connected with people on a pretty intimate level. They were often scared to death, never envisioning being able to leave the nursing home or whatever state institution they might be in. They had to trust you because you were asking them to do something that was incredibly risky. And you had to keep that trust.” From his mother especially, French has inherited the ability to connect with people “and to be authentic. I think that paid more dividends than anything else.” It had to help, too, that his clients saw him as someone for whom empathy wasn’t a secondhand emotion.

Disabled people have expenses most able-bodied people never consider: caregivers, wheelchairs, ramps and special fixtures. To supplement his income, French fell into a second job that was a source of special joy and personal growth.

The Nebraska Department of Education’s award-winning

Instructional Television Services, working with the state ETV Network, brought enhanced curriculum to Nebraska’s far-flung school districts. A talented, ebullient music educator named Sheila Brown was hired to help develop and write songs for a new children’s series focused on the arts and diversity. Another music educator, Nancy Marcy, wrote the script and played one of the roles in what became *Strawberry Square*. A homespun *Sesame Street* with lots of singing, the show made its debut on the PBS affiliate in Lincoln in the fall of 1981. “The square was a rundown place where people had forgotten how to sing, dance and lead joyful lives,” Brown says. “Because Nebraska has a very small minority population, we wanted a show to not only promote understanding of music and life, but to help kids see a community that welcomed all people. ‘Skipper,’ a talented young African American, owned a ‘Tune Shop’ on a rundown street where Jan, a single mom, lived with her two children. Soon, new people arrive and the Square comes to life. Carlitta opens a Mexican restaurant; Eliza, a retired actor, opens a theatre, and John Red Feather, a Native American, has a plant shop. The chil-



Strawberry Square cast.
Nebraska Public Television

dren make a new friend who is Japanese. The Square becomes a place filled with song, dance, visual arts and new experiences for everyone. Working on that show is one of the highlights of my life,” says Brown, now retired in Colorado.

Strawberry Square quickly developed a wide following across the Plains and was picked up by Public Broadcasting outlets as far east as Massachusetts. The episodes on YouTube are viewed often by nostalgic former first graders.

What the show lacked early on was a disabled person.

French was famous for singing around the office—everything from Neil Diamond to Neil Young. One day when he had the day off, the secretary fielded a call from an agent for *Strawberry Square*. “Oh,” she said, “we have the perfect guy for you.”

“And he was!” Brown remembers. French became “Andy,” a young man in a wheelchair who visited the square. “The kids had a lot of questions for him. Soon he became a regular. He helped us script episodes and was involved in the choreography. But one experience with Duane will be with me forever: We went on the road for our first workshop with teachers—350 miles across the state to Sidney, a town near the Colorado line with more cows than people. A hundred teachers drove in for the workshop. We pushed the shelves back in the media center, because that was the biggest room in the school. When we introduced everyone on that first day, Duane drew a lot of interest from the teachers. He talked about all the names they call people who have disabilities and explained the derivation of ‘handicapped’—that it came from the phrase ‘cap in hand’ when people who couldn’t participate in regular life were reduced to begging, holding their caps out for money. It was fascinating. Then he said, ‘Please do not call me crippled! I am not crippled. And please do not call me handicapped.’ Then, from the back of the circle, a teacher raised her hand. ‘What do you want to be called?’ He took a deep breath and said, ‘I want to be called Duane!’ *That is my name: I am Duannnnne!* I am a person. A person who experiences a disability. But most of all I am a person.’ You could have heard a pin drop in that room,” Brown remembers. “I’ve been telling that story for years. That’s what I



Sporting a mustache, Duane visits Hastings in the 1990s. From left: Kathy, Bobbi, Jane, dad, mom, Rodney and Tim. *French family collection*

call a ‘learning experience.’ ”

Strawberry Square aired through 1983, some 60 episodes in all. Duane is especially marvelous in an episode where the cast dons duck suits to empathize with an ostracized Ugly Duckling. His mellifluous, reassuring quack rings out as he flaps his wings and maneuvers his wheelchair in perfect unison with the choreography. Being part of the cast was an enormously satisfying creative outlet. The medium was an important message about diversity. The extra income helped, too.

View Duane in Strawberry Square:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQkzu4nvtAo

Duane was coming to grips with his inner demons and beginning to accept his disability. He attended a weekend workshop in Lincoln that focused on prodding men to share their emotions.

“There was one guy who reminded me so much of my dad. He had a chiseled chin and was tall and quiet. One of the exercises was to act out the conversation you wished you could have with another man. So I told the guy who reminded me of my dad, ‘I want to have it with you, and I want you to sit in that

chair. I want all you other guys to take off your belts and strap his hands to the back of the chair. Now I want you to strap his legs to the legs of the chair. Put a couple belts around his waist so he can't get out of that chair. Now I want to talk to him.' I said, 'Get out of that chair! Get out of that chair! COME ON!'

"They had tied him in really tight, and he couldn't do it. I said, 'Come on! You can do it if you try. If you just tried you could do it! *But you're not trying hard enough!*' I was screaming at him. And the guy was freaked, he was trying his hardest to get out of the chair and he fell over on the floor."

"See, you can't do it!" Duane shouted.

"It doesn't matter how hard you try, you can't fucking do it, can you?!"

The whole time he was seeing his father's face.

"Then I looked down and it wasn't my dad's face any more. It was mine. I realized, 'You have been pinning all this on your dad and it wasn't your dad at all—it was you.' I realized then that I had to stop being angry at myself because I'd never get to a place of acceptance and true happiness unless I did."

WHEN FRENCH was appearing on *Strawberry Square*, he met a filmmaker working on a television documentary about men and their reluctance to share their emotions because they'd been conditioned to believe it isn't manly. He'd heard about Duane and the men's group. Would he be interested in being interviewed on camera about his journey? Duane agreed.

"We see who you are now and how you are able to express your emotions," they said. "What would be the opposite of that and how can we get to where you were before?"

"Oh, that's easy: My dad."

"Do you think he'd talk to us?"

"No way. He doesn't even like pictures taken. So he'd never be on TV."

"Well, actually we called him and he agreed to do it."

Duane was floored.

They interviewed both of his parents. Afterward the filmmaker said, "Oh, Duane, your dad was great!"

"Really? You sure you got the right address?"



Duane and his dad when Bob French was in the late stage of cancer.
French family collection

The man smiled and nodded.

“There was this one moment at the end when we asked your parents, ‘If you could do anything different what would you do?’ Your dad gave the longest pause and tears rolled from his eyes and he said, ‘I would tell another father who had a son or a daughter in a situation like Duane’s... I would tell them not to lose hope like I did.’ ”

Duane was stunned. “That opened the door. A couple of weeks later I started talking to him about it, and it never stopped until he died of colon cancer in 1994. That’s all it took to open those doors to both of our hearts. It was powerful. I am so lucky I have Nebraska Public Television to thank for that. It was a great documentary and a trailblazing program in the 1980s.”

Strawberry Square brought him a measure of celebrity beyond Nebraska, particularly in the disability services community. At a conference in Colorado in 1984, people took note of his assertive charisma. Here was a guy in a wheelchair who not only understood the issues, he lived them. They were dazzled by his ability to recall the names of practically everyone he was meeting for the first time. “I’d been working on mnemonics to remember people’s names. The conference was the perfect place to practice. It was a nice sunny day and I spent

some time out by the pool. People would come up to me; I'd introduce myself, then introduce those people to the others I'd just met. I think I got to 72 names. I wish I could still do that! But, funny as it now sounds, that really impressed people."

Before long he had interviewed for three new jobs—one in rural Kansas; one in Missouri, and one in Alaska. He asked his wife, Deborah, what she thought. "Well," she said, "if you go to Kansas I hope you enjoy yourself. Missouri maybe, but Alaska sounds like such an adventure." Duane counseled pragmatism. He resolved to accept the first real offer. Alaska called 30 minutes before Kansas. "Fate, once again, intervened on my behalf."

FRENCH JOINED Access Alaska Inc., a private nonprofit dedicated to helping the disabled. After three years of steadily increasing responsibilities, he became its executive director in the spring of 1987. He was soon immersed in Alaska's quirky hardball politics. Anchorage Assemblyman Mark Begich, a future U.S. senator, became a mentor, together with former An-



Duane when he joined Access Alaska.
French family collection

chorage mayor and future governor Tony Knowles. French was also emerging as a player in the national push for federal disability-rights legislation. He met Justin W. Dart Jr., the Martin Luther King of the movement; Senators Tom Harkin and Bob Dole; Maryland Congressman Steny Hoyer and Marilyn Golden, another tireless ADA activist.

In 1990, as the Americans with Disabilities Act was advancing in the 101st Congress, French and other ADA advocates demonstrating outside the

White House were invited inside to meet with the president's aides. They were escorted in, one at a time, in an elevator installed in the 1930s to accommodate Franklin D. Roosevelt in his wheelchair. French was flanked by four squeezed-in Secret Service agents.

"Wow," he said, "I'm on the elevator that was built for FDR. The same elevator he used to use."

"Son, you're no FDR," one agent said.

"Yeah," French snapped back. "And it's a good thing you're not a doctor because your bedside manner would stink."

The other three agents couldn't suppress a chuckle.

Another day, as the legislation seemed to be languishing under pitched opposition from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which asserted that the costs of accommodation would be "enormous," French and other ADA stalwarts staged sit-ins at congressional offices. Hundreds-strong, they later assembled in the Capitol rotunda, chanting "ADA now!"

"It was so powerful and beautiful," he remembers wistfully. "The sound of our voices traveled up into the dome and came echoing back down. It didn't take long, though, before we were surrounded by Capitol Police shouting into their megaphones that it was an unlawful gathering. And unless we immediately dispersed we'd all be arrested."

After the third warning, they descended on French and several dozen others who wouldn't budge, many on crutches or in wheelchairs. French and his assistant shrewdly disengaged the motor on his spiffy new chair, locking the wheels. The cops couldn't figure out how to move it. "They hadn't had much training on how to arrest and drag out people with disabilities. It was probably a 300-pound chair, and with me in it, 400-something. I don't weigh much, but the chair as dead weight was another story."

The police cleared most of the crowd but were befuddled by French, especially when he started singing "We shall overcome. We shall overcome. *We shall overcome some daaaaay!*" in his best Morgan Freeman voice.

They scrounged a manual wheelchair. "Let's just throw him in it," one cop said.

“Hope you’ve got good liability insurance!” French warned, catching the attention of the captain directing the operation.

“Stop! Stop! Don’t touch him!” the captain cried.

After a strategy huddle, the cops called for a cart. “It was a big one like they use at Costco to move products from the warehouse,” French remembers. “With a cop at every corner of my wheelchair, they hoisted me onto the cart, strapped me down and wheeled me away. And of course as I’m rolling down the halls past the offices of members of Congress I’m singing even louder, “We shall overcome!”

It would have made for a great scene on *Strawberry Square*, with the kids all shouting, “*Don’t take Andy!*”

When they arrived at the Capitol Police processing center, the wheelchair’s big immobile tires dug into a makeshift plywood ramp. By then a cop the others called “Smitty” was furious with French for not revealing how they could engage the wheelchair’s motor. French was having the time of his life, singing, “Roll ’em, roll ’em, roll ’em! Keep them doggies moving,

Smiittty!” By 3 a.m., however, Smitty and Duane had developed a bond. French has that effect on people. The cop stopped by to see how Duane was doing in detention. “Smitty,” French said, “I’m really sorry about this, man, but you’re doing your job and I’m just doing my job. Really, Congress could make this easier for all of us and just do the right thing.” When they were released, French and many of



Justin Dart and French strategizing outside the White House in 1990 during the campaign for passage of the ADA. *French family collection*

the others went right back to the Capitol. They targeted the offices of Congressman Bud Shuster, a Pennsylvania Republican who had sponsored an ADA amendment to cut back on “reasonable accommodations” in cities of less than 200,000. Shuster was not amused by the sit-in. The cops were better prepared this time. When Smitty collared Duane he tried to make things easier, suggesting



Duane with Kansas Senator Bob Dole, left, and Bob Michaels, a friend and mentor in the disability-rights movement.

French family collection

ing he might need to go to a hospital instead of the lockup. Duane said he appreciated that, but as a matter of principle still couldn’t cooperate. He spent the night in a huge holding cell at the D.C. Jail with some genuine criminals. “I realized what a hick I was because I had no idea there was a world like that out there.”

When Mary McGrory, *The Washington Post’s* Pulitzer Prize-winning political columnist, encountered a jubilant Duane on the day the House sent the ADA to the president’s desk, she learned that the natty young man with a carnation in his buttonhole had come the farthest to lobby and been arrested twice. “The cell door wasn’t wide enough to admit his wheelchair,” she wrote in her widely syndicated column. “He had a good laugh thinking that next time it will be.”

When Duane’s conservative Dad read McGrory’s column in the *Omaha World-Herald*, he was chagrined. Duane was already back in Anchorage when his Dad called that Sunday morning, paper in hand.

“Hi, Dad. How are you? Why are you calling so early?”

“I’m reading a column about you in the paper. You told



President George H.W. Bush signs into law the Americans with Disabilities Act on July 26, 1990. He is flanked by Evan Kemp, left, chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and Justin Dart, chairman of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities. Standing are the Rev. Harold Wilke, an armless disability rights advocate, and Sandra Swift Parrino, chairperson of the National Council on Disability. *White House photo*

us you had been working on the ADA, but you failed to mention you had gone to jail. Twice.”

“Well, it’s not technically twice. I got arrested twice. I didn’t go to jail twice.”

“Oh.”

Bob French was still not thrilled. Then a lot of people started telling him how proud he should be of his boy.

“It took him a while,” Duane says, smiling at the memory. He had to get past the jail part.

French was in a crowd of some 2,000 on the south lawn of the White House on July 26, 1990, when President George H.W. Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act, a watershed moment in American history. The disabled were now a protected class—a minority group deserving of ac-

commodations to secure meaningful jobs, gain access to offices, stores and stadiums, not to mention a wheelchair-accessible toilet stall. Being able to go to the bathroom is a singular civil right. While Bush’s signature line—“a thousand points of light”—was fodder for comedians, the ADA unquestionably is one of the shining moments of his presidency. When Bush learned from Senator Harkin that his brusque chief of staff, John Sununu, was playing hardball over elements of the ADA draft, he intervened forcefully. “Get it done,” the president ordered.

In one of his most eloquent speeches, Bush compared the ADA to the fall of the Berlin Wall:

And now I sign legislation which takes a sledgehammer to another wall, one which has for too many generations separated Americans with disabilities from the freedom they could glimpse, but not grasp. ...

Across the breadth of this nation are 43 million Americans with disabilities. You have made this happen. All of you have made this happen. To all of you, I just want to say your triumph is that your bill will now be law, and that this day belongs to you. On behalf of our nation, thank you very, very much.

Three weeks ago, we celebrated our nation’s Independence Day. Today we’re here to rejoice in and celebrate another that is long overdue. Every man, woman, and child with a disability can now pass through once-closed doors into a bright new era of equality, independence, and freedom. As I look around at all these joyous faces, I remember clearly how many years of dedicated commitment have gone into making this historic new civil rights act a reality. It’s been the work of a true coalition, a strong and inspiring coalition of people who have shared both a dream and a passionate determination to

make that dream come true. ...

Tragically, for too many Americans, the blessings of liberty have been limited or even denied. The Civil Rights Act of '64 took a bold step towards righting that wrong. But the stark fact remained that people with disabilities were still victims of segregation and discrimination, and this was intolerable. Today's legislation brings us closer to that day when no Americans will ever again be deprived of their basic guarantee of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

View President Bush's speech and reaction:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZzmcBVOkx8
www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFKicqqVME8

French earlier had been invited to accompany Justin Dart, Tom Harkin, Ted Kennedy and other ADA stalwarts to meet with the star-crossed 41st president. "I think a lot of people to this day don't recognize that he championed the ADA against the opposition of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and a whole lot of powerful business groups. It was a courageous move on his part," French says, "and I will forever be grateful and respectful of him for doing it because I know it wasn't easy. There were times when I never thought the United States Congress would actually pass legislation protecting the civil rights of people with disabilities. So it was surreal to be there and see it being signed into law. As I looked around, I thought to myself, 'Me? Here?'"

FRENCH'S FORAYS into Alaska politics had left him bruised but unbowed—"and tougher."

Despite living in an ultra-conservative district, French made his first bid for elective office by running for the Alaska House of Representatives as a Democrat in 1988. He captured only 16 percent of the vote. Four years later, however, seeking an open seat, he raised nearly \$36,000, won 62 percent of the



Duane as director of the Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.
French family collection

primary vote and lost to an up-and-coming Republican by only 334 votes in the general election. Then, after losing a close race for the Anchorage Municipal Assembly, he was appointed to the city’s Equal Rights Commission. French was its chairman in 1989 when local activists began pushing to ban discrimination against gays and lesbians. Opponents of the “deviant homosexual lifestyle” got him removed from the commission. French was becoming a

lightning rod for conservatives. His push to make the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts accessible to the disabled made headlines.

In 1991 Governor Walter “Wally” Hickel, Nixon’s former secretary of the Interior, bounced French from the Governor’s Council for the Handicapped and Gifted to “make room for someone with views more compatible with the governor’s.” French had been an energetic council member for six years. His supporters, including a special-needs teacher with a blind child, were outraged by the removal of “a voice that speaks loudly and strongly for the rights of the disabled.”

Mark Begich and other moderates on the Anchorage Assembly engineered French’s appointment to an open seat in 1993. Just 30 minutes after he wheeled up to the assembly table, French cast the vote that ensured his career in elective politics would be short-lived. Or as *The Anchorage Daily News* put it, “Duane French took a long, strange road to his new seat on the Anchorage Assembly. He lost three elections, got bumped from a city human rights commission and finally found himself a key player in a nasty political fight that he didn’t even pick. The fight was over gay rights, an issue that seems to have gone looking for French.”

The push for French's appointment had begun months earlier. But it ended up giving civil rights proponents the eighth vote they needed to override Mayor Tom Fink's veto of a measure, passed the week before, banning municipal job discrimination based on sexual orientation. "Believe me," French told reporters afterward, "neither I nor anyone else could have arranged such a thing." He wondered out loud whether even the flinty Baptist preacher leading the campaign against the anti-discrimination law might conclude that "a higher power was at work." Notwithstanding his passion for civil rights and his impatience with bureaucratic foot-dragging (the Assembly's private restroom was still not wheelchair accessible), French predicted "some people are going to be surprised to find I am not as liberal as they may think. Fiscally, I would call myself conservative."

Some of the preacher's people called him harsher names that spring as they raised thousands of dollars to defeat French and the chairman of the Assembly. "We'd be on a street corner holding signs," French remembers. "I can't begin to tell you how many 4-wheel-drive pickup trucks would drive by with guys yelling 'Faggot lover!' I saw how ugly politics can be, but I had no regrets about voting my conscience. I had hoped to be on the other side of the desk to help improve the lives of people with disabilities, promote civil rights and campaign for the new schools Anchorage badly needed. But I was not giving up."

He toured Europe in 1993 as a member of the National Council for Independent Living to see firsthand how other countries were promoting disability outreach programs.

IN 1995, French was named director of the Alaska Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. A supporter of the newly-elected governor, Democrat Tony Knowles, French became embroiled in a headline-making political dustup a year later. He eliminated the deputy director's position, insisting the move was linked to budget cuts, not political differences with the veteran manager, who had been passed over for director. French's boss at the state Department of Education flatly denied she had

been pressured by the governor’s office to have Duane oust his deputy.

An arbitrator found for the deputy and ordered compensation. As director of Access Alaska, French had clashed with employees of the state agency. Now, he said, “folks who have their own axes to grind” were bristling at changes he was making to improve state services to people with disabilities. “I’m a political appointee,” French told reporters, “and once you become a political appointee the word ‘security’ leaves your vocabulary. If the administration said, ‘Duane, you screwed up; you’re out of here,’ I would honor that. I would know in my heart of hearts that I did the right thing.”

Republican leaders in the Legislature said the governor was playing politics with state agencies. But over the previous eight years, French had developed a cadre of disability-rights allies in the Legislature.

Knowles handily won re-election in 1998 after his opponent’s campaign imploded over fundraising irregularities. French wasn’t going anywhere. He also served on the Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education.

“People talk about how conservative and goofy politics can get in Alaska,” French says. “A lot of the progressive things that got done in Alaska were accomplished later than in some other places, but we were able to learn from others’ experiences and incorporate some of the best practices. It’s a fascinating state.”

Knowles was limited to two consecutive terms. In 2002 when Republican Frank Murkowski was elected governor, French didn’t have to be told he was out of there.

He had hoped to find a new job in Alaska. Then, at a conference in Portland, he saw a striking woman named Kelly Boston, who worked for the Washington Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. “There was something special about her.” His marriage to Deborah had ended amicably in 1990. He wondered if he’d ever fall in love again. He couldn’t even bring himself to approach Kelly. But she noticed him. Everyone knew Duane French. When he returned to Alaska he received an email from Kelly, inquiring about a disabilities program issue. “A few months later we were in D.C. and I worked up the



Duane and Kelly in Hawaii.
French family collection

nerve to ask her out to dinner, but she had other plans so I just kind of gave it up.” For the time being.

A long-distance relationship began. His job search now switched to Washington State.

In 2003, French landed a job in Olympia with the Aging and Disabilities Services Administration. His next move saw him become director of policy for the Employment Assistance Program with the Economic Services Administration. In 2008 he was named director of Disability Determination Services, a division of the Washington Department of Social & Health Services. By then, Duane and Kelly were a

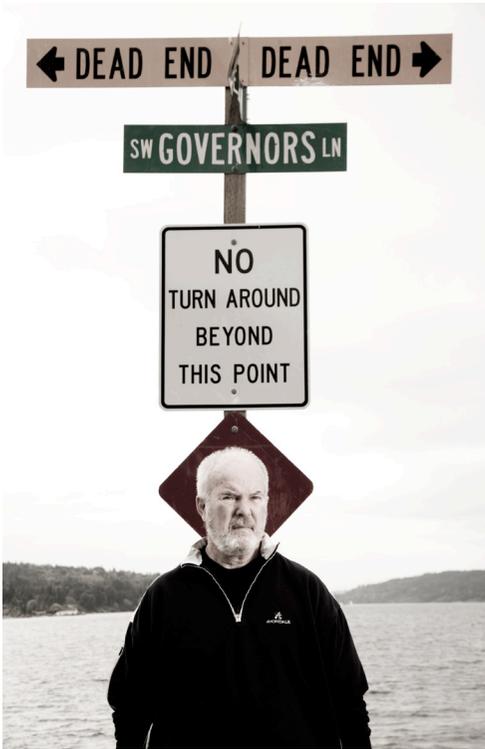
couple. She is now associate director for communications for the Washington Health Benefit Exchange. “If you ask me to assess the greatest successes and moments of my life, it’s meeting Kelly and every moment thereafter.”

And if you ask him to name the most fascinating people of his 30 years in public life, Booth Gardner is near the top.

THOUGH THEY WERE poles apart on a matter of life and death, it was unsurprising that Duane French and Washington’s effervescent former two-term governor became good friends.

Booth Gardner’s boyhood was punctuated by insecurity and heartache. He inherited great wealth, but invested a lot of it and himself in helping people—from disadvantaged kids in Seattle’s Central District to developmentally disabled children and adults. “Booth had a big heart,” French says.

At a time when a U.S. Senate seat, or perhaps even higher office, seemed within his reach, Gardner encountered a life-changing personal problem: Parkinson’s disease. In 2006,



Booth Gardner at his Vashon Island retreat in 2006. *Brian Smale photo*

after a decade of being dosed with all the latest drugs, to little avail, Gardner leapt at the chance to undergo risky deep-brain surgery. He had persevered through 70 years of a complicated life by being able to make “all the tough decisions” for himself, Gardner said. And if he found himself hopelessly enfeebled, “I believe I ought to have the right to make the last decision: when it’s time for me to go and how I go. It’s my life.” He announced he would lead and help finance a campaign to legalize “aid-in-dying” for the termi-

nally ill in Washington State. Don’t call it suicide, proponents insisted. It was “Death with Dignity.”

“As a person with a disability, he is a brother,” French said of Gardner. “I love him, but in this he is misguided.”

When Gardner filed his initiative in 2008, opponents, including French and Gardner’s born-again Christian son, were waiting outside the Capitol. Some brandished Bibles; others pointed to *Mein Kampf*. Before rounding up all the Jews, the Nazis engaged in “mercy killing” of Down syndrome children, the mentally ill and elderly—people judged unproductive or otherwise “not worthy of life.” Now, in an ostensibly more civilized world, how slippery could the slope get? First there’d be a “dignified” exit for those judged terminally ill, French said. Then perhaps the permanently disabled or deeply depressed? Before long, would dementia or Alzheimer’s meet the test?

Unfailingly courteous, French emerged as a leading spokesperson for the Coalition Against Assisted Suicide. In Washington, as he had in Alaska, he helped found a chapter of Not Dead Yet, the national disabilities group. It took its name from an unforgettable scene in the movie *Monty Python & the Holy Grail*. “Bring out yer dead!” cries a droll corpse collector clanging a bell as a handcart heaped with victims of the plague passes through a village. “I’m not dead!” one wretch protests as they prepare to plop him onto the pile. “Oh, don’t be such a baby!” he’s told. When his yelping persists, the dead collector whacks him over the head with his club.

Gardner and French squared off at the University of Washington in an event broadcast state-wide. French pointed to the national debate over the cost of health care. He worried that if assisted suicide became law in Washington and accelerated across America it wouldn’t be long before “they won’t have to use direct coercion” to prompt the terminally ill to check out early and reduce the bill for end-of-life care. French said doctors frequently underestimate the amount of time a person has left to live. Diagnosed with colon cancer, his dad was given a prognosis of three to six months, French said, “and he lived seven years after that—seven of the richest years of his life.” Assisted suicide disproportionately hits those with disabilities, minorities, the poor and other disadvantaged, French added. “At the onset of any disability, chronic illness or terminal illness, people are very depressed. They feel helpless and hopeless and are more inclined to consider assisted suicide,” yet depression is an illness that can be treated with great success. “If assisted suicide had been legal, at many points in my life I probably would have chosen it and I would have missed the full wonder and joy that I live now” with an important job and a new partner—the love of his life.



Duane at DSHS around 2008. French family collection

Gardner moved woodenly to the podium. The deep-brain surgeries were a fleeting reprieve. “Is your wife here?” he asked. French nodded toward Kelly in the audience. Booth flashed one of his flirtatious old Booth smiles and pronounced her “a good-looking lady.”

“I respect your values,” Gardner said, somberly now. “I only ask that you respect mine—and I thought you did a great job with your speech.”

View Duane during the Death with Dignity debate:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKXPBpGW2Fw

Their friendship, a testament to civility, survived the strident battles of the months to come.

That November, nearly 58 percent of Washington voters endorsed the initiative, which became law in March of 2009. At this writing (winter 2016), the state Department of Health reports that some 600 Washington residents have ended their lives under the provisions of the law.

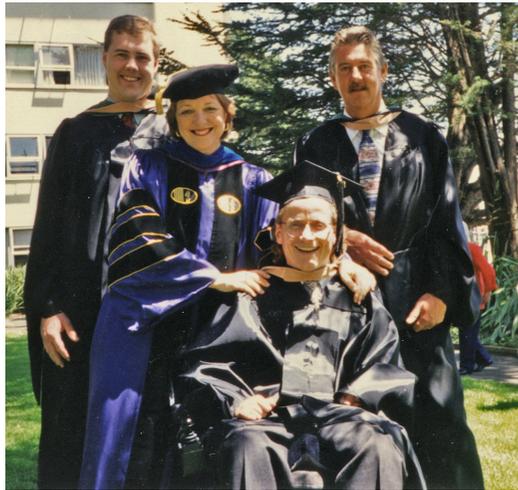
Gardner, 76, died in 2013 of complications from Parkinson’s. French was among the huge crowd at an upbeat memorial service. “He was a wonderful governor,” he told Gardner’s biographer. “I believe some of his compassion—as well as his yearning for popularity—sprang from his troubled childhood.” While Parkinson’s isn’t a terminal disease under the provisions of the Washington law, French believes Gardner could have checked out on his own terms had he so desired, “My own belief is that Booth loved his family and was aware that he had probably let them down in his lifetime. In the end, I think he didn’t want to do that. I think that’s why he let it be an organic death. And I’m glad he did.”

Since 2009, courts or legislators in Montana, Vermont, New Mexico and California have affirmed or instituted euthanasia laws. Voters in Massachusetts narrowly rejected an aid-in-dying initiative in 2012. Similar bills have been introduced in Alaska, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Wyoming, Utah and the District of Columbia.

The Netherlands and Belgium decriminalized euthanasia in 2002, Luxembourg in 2009, Colombia in 2015. Canada appears to be on the verge after a unanimous ruling by its Supreme Court that mentally competent adults “suffering intolerably and permanently have the right to a doctor’s help in dying.”

In a 2015 piece for *The New Yorker*, Rachel Aviv explored disquieting developments in Belgium where euthanasia is being “embraced as an emblem of enlightenment and progress.” Those who suffer from clinical depression have a right to the “tremendous liberation” of a dignified death, says a Belgian physician who has euthanized more than a hundred patients and become a national celebrity. The process is “very magical,” a family-practice doctor told Aviv. “But he sometimes worries about how his own values might influence a patient’s decision to die or to live. ... ‘You spend seven years studying to be a doctor, and all they do is teach you how to get people well—and then you do the opposite. I am afraid of the power that I have in that moment.’ ”

French says you ought to be very afraid. He vows to keep fighting the spread of death-hastening legislation until his dying day. In his view, there’s precious little transparency to regulate the abuses of “enlightenment and progress.” If you’re terminally ill and welcome the promise of a painless early exit, French says “you might be consenting to being smothered to death because the drugs often used to end someone’s life



Duane celebrates with professors and a classmate after his graduation in 1996 from the University of San Francisco with a master’s degree in Rehabilitation Administration.
French family collection



John Hughes of Legacy Washington interviews French in his office in 2015. *Laura Mott photo*

cause apnea, circulatory collapse and respiratory arrest.” Proponents say “you just drift off to sleep.” But a death like that might be more horrific than humane, French says, warning that if the movement keeps advancing it “quite literally poses a grave threat” to not just the terminally ill but to the disabled and elderly.

WHEN HE BEGAN his career as a counselor and advocate for the disabled, “it was much more person to person, soul to soul,” French says. “Today, my job is more bureaucratic, but it’s critically important to the 90,000 Washington residents who apply for Social Security disability benefits every year.” Meaningful lives and untold millions of dollars hang in the balance. The division’s adjudicators, along with physicians and psychologists, are responsible for determining who is and isn’t eligible for Social Security programs. The division also processes claims for medical assistance. The process is often contentious. People genuinely unable to work need help navigating the bureaucracy; scofflaws need to be weeded out. “We have a great division,” French says, “but we don’t make everyone happy.”



Laura Mott photo

He loves it that his job, and his reputation as a national disability-rights leader, puts him in a position to discover new leaders—“people with and without disabilities who want to make a difference in the world.” When 60 percent of adult Americans with disabilities are not in the workforce—Senator Harkin calls that “a blot on our national character”—there’s a lot more work to do, French says. For instance, the Medicare rule-makers who want to make it more expensive for wheelchair users to get custom seating systems and accessories

don’t seem to grasp that one size doesn’t fit all when you’re paralyzed. Bureaucratic nincompoopery drives Duane French nuts.

When he meets kids, they’re curious about his disability but not spooked. They just want to know what happened. Without him saying so, they understand he just wants to be Duane.

The 5-year-old son of the writer’s teammate was playing with his train set on the rug one afternoon. His mom noticed he had slanted one of the tracks next to the train station. “Is that an escalator?” she said. “No,” Max Larson said matter-of-factly. “The escalator is over here. This is the wheelchair ramp.” When Duane heard that story he beamed. “That’s the proof we’re getting there.”

What we all need to understand, Duane French says, is that everyone has a sack of rocks—some heavier than others. “My disability has its challenges, just like fighting cancer has its challenges; just like being a woman has its challenges. Ev-

ery person encounters challenges in their life. It’s the oppression, the prejudice and the discrimination that holds back far too many people from achieving the full extent of greatness in them. I hope in my lifetime I’ve done something to break through some of that oppression—that prejudice and discrimination—and made a difference for others so they won’t have to experience it in their lifetime. To that extent if people say I’m an inspiration, I’m OK with that.”

And he doesn’t need to be healed.

A sad postscript: Duane French died of cancer on September 12, 2019. Diagnosed seven months earlier, “he fought courageously and fiercely, as you knew Duane would,” said Kelly Boston, his longtime partner.

John C. Hughes

Legacy Washington

Office of the Secretary of State

Published 2016

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