

South Dakota ***Possibilities***



A publication by the Center for Disabilities at the University of South Dakota Sanford School of Medicine about the state's abundant opportunities for people with disabilities.

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Welcome to our fourth edition of *South Dakota Possibilities!*

This publication was created as a way to share the successes of individuals with disabilities and their families. In South Dakota there are many wonderful employees with disabilities and employers who support their work. It is our goal to continue to raise awareness and highlight the skills, abilities and unique gifts of persons with disabilities.

In this edition, you will find stories of independence, perseverance, optimism and dedication to pursuing one's life goals. No matter how big or small, everyone has something to contribute. We hope you enjoy getting to know the South Dakotans featured in this issue. Join us in honoring them and their many achievements as they represent the best of the best in our state. We are excited to share with you the truly great faces of South Dakota. This is only the beginning – imagine all the possibilities for our great state!

We love sharing these stories and are always looking for more people to feature from around the state. If you know of someone who might be interested in being in our next issue, please send an email to cd@usd.edu with the name and contact information.

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Leah Bernhard

Speaking Quietly but **Boldly**

Leah Bernhard will never be the loudest voice in a room her friends say, but when she speaks, what she shares will have an impact on her listeners.

“She has a confidence and just a determination and drive to accomplish what she sets out to do,” says Bev Petersen, who has known Bernhard for several years; they met prior to Youth Leadership Forum (YLF). “When she sets her sights on something, I have no doubt she will accomplish it.”

Currently, those sights are set on obtaining her Master of Social Work degree from the University of South Dakota. That is a steppingstone to Bernhard’s long-held desire to devote herself to helping others, particularly those with disabilities, as a social worker.

Berhard, 24, uses a wheelchair full time for mobility purposes. She was diagnosed with cerebral palsy as an infant, after she was born more than 10 weeks prematurely and then experienced bleeding in her brain while being treated in a neonatal intensive care unit.

“My cerebral palsy affects my walking, balance and muscle tone,” Berhard explains. “The muscle tone also affects my upper extremities through my gross motor and fine motor skills. Writing and typing are a little bit more difficult for me, and time consuming.”

Assistive devices such as computer programs that transcribe her verbal statements into print and technology that allows her to record long lectures, turning the professor’s words into notes, have proven invaluable as Bernhard pursues an advanced degree. It’s her personal determination, however, that makes the difference.

“I would say helping others is what makes her tick,” said Kendra Gottsleben, a marketing communications specialist at the Center for Disabilities in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. “I really feel an empathy coming from her. As a counselor or a social worker, she will understand what it’s like to have obstacles that her client may also have to overcome. And problem-solving, trying to figure out how to solve the situation – she’s done that all her life.”

Berhard and Gottsleben first met at



YLF, where Gottsleben was serving as a mentor. That’s also how Bernard and Petersen connected. Petersen is a transition liaison with the Transition Services Liaison Project, which hosts the forums. One of the purposes of YLF is to expand the self-advocacy skills and career awareness among people with disabilities.

“Her goals have been consistent,” Petersen said. “From the first time I met her she talked about wanting to be a counselor of some sort.”

Bernard’s educational background has helped in the pursuit of her career goal. She graduated from New Tech High School in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, a project-based-learning high school with smaller class sizes. She was a member of its first graduating class.

After high school she enrolled at Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU) in Marshall, Minnesota, majoring in psychology and sociology while participating

in the honors program. She had first toured SMSU as a high school sophomore, drawn there by its purposeful design to be accessible to people with all abilities. Classroom buildings are interconnected with plentiful elevators and ramps.



In addition to a full class load, Bernard participates in the South Dakota Leadership Education and Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (SD LEND) program through the Center for Disabilities. It offers an interdisciplinary focus in the health sciences with a particular emphasis on neurodevelopmental disabilities. Bernard takes part in didactic leadership training, interdisciplinary clinics and research while also assisting in the Center for the Prevention of Child Maltreatment.

Field experience is required to obtain her Master of Social Work, and her role in the SD LEND program fulfills that expectation.

Everything she does today lays a solid foundation for her goal of working in the field of disabilities. The broader her experiences today, the easier it will be to narrow her career goals.

“I’m looking at the co-morbidity between neurodevelopmental disabilities and mental health issues,” Bernard said. “I’m looking at abilities and childhood trauma. At this point I don’t have a set image in my head. I really just want to grow and work in the field related to disabilities.”

That could involve developing programs

for different services, looking at educational opportunities for providers or the public or people with disabilities. Summing it up, Bernard said simply, “I have a wide range of varying interests at this point.”

Bernard also has not narrowed down who she will work with. While she thinks it would be a great opportunity to work with and evaluate children, she also enjoys interacting with adolescents and adults.

She expects to stay in the Midwest after obtaining her master’s degree, where housing and other living expenses are affordable and the need for social workers is great. South Dakota is the last state in the nation to offer a formal Master of Social Work program, and she expects continual growth and development in that area.

“Things are heading in a good direction,” she said. “There’s definitely growth in a lot of areas in disabilities and also growth in understanding and ability. I recognize that my disability is part of me, but that doesn’t tell the whole story of me or my level of confidence, and I think future employers will see it too. It isn’t the end-all of who I am. Just part of who I am.” •

Carissa Brandt

Powering Through Her Challenges

When Carissa Brandt was in kindergarten, students were asked to bring something that started with the letter “D” for show and tell. She asked her father, Kelly Brandt, if she could invite someone special.

“Sure,” said Dad-with-a-D.

Instead, little Brandt invited another important “D” in her life – Deb Kenworthy, her early childhood special education teacher. Their bond had formed when Brandt was 2, shortly after life-altering surgery to remove a brain tumor, and it has strengthened over the past two decades.

Kenworthy describes her young friend

in glowing terms: “Determined. Strong. Compassionate. And loyal.” She sums up Brandt’s attitude as “Never give up. Never, ever give up. And life could always be worse, even on your toughest days.”

Tough days came early to Brandt, the second of Kelly and Lisa Brandt’s four children. She was just six months old when doctors gave her parents a heart-stopping diagnosis: Brandt had a medulloblastoma, a cancer that starts in the brain at the base of the skull and quickly can spread elsewhere in the brain and spinal cord.

Surgery removed three-fourths



of her cerebellum, and 15 months of chemotherapy followed. Both procedures halted the cancer, but the extensive loss of brain mass affected Brandt's balance. The life-saving chemotherapy also affected her hearing – she now wears a hearing aid – and in turn that caused speech difficulties.

What it couldn't do was stop Brandt from living her life to its fullest.

“She's full of energy,” Kelly Brandt said. “She's always smiling.”

Kenworthy remembers a two-year-old who, while scared, powered through her challenges. It took time to gain Brandt's trust, but the two became fast friends. Brandt would leave a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup on her former teacher's desk long after she graduated from the early childhood program and moved on to other grades. The sweet treat means a lot to the two women, who both live in Pierre, South Dakota.

“During the flood in 2011, Brandt called and said, ‘Deb, I can't help sandbag, but I'm coming over,’” Kenworthy recalled. Brandt brought along a Diet Coke and a big bag of peanut butter cups to give her friend strength to keep working.

Brandt, now 23, graduated from Riggs High School in Pierre, then attended Presentation College in Aberdeen, South Dakota. She was interested in a career in the medical field but unsure if nursing was her calling. The staff at Presentation College told Brandt about the field of medical assisting, which involves administrative duties, and she was intrigued.

Since March 2018, Brandt has worked at the Avera Medical Group at its clinic in Pierre. In her role as a medical assistant, she takes patients' vital signs such as blood pressure levels, gives inoculations and sets up necessary equipment before in-clinic procedures. She also documents patient

records and answers phone calls.

It's a position that suits Brandt's strong sense of order.

“I like to be very organized,” Brandt said. “I do whatever it takes. I'm very friendly. I'm very passionate. I do have a lot of patience and I'm willing to help with whatever.”

She started in a part-time position, then worked her way into full time. Brandt now works 36 hours a week, mainly weekdays. That schedule gives her plenty of time to pursue other interests. That's essential because she does not believe in being idle. That is obvious when she recounts stories of her high school years as the student manager for volleyball, girls' basketball and track. During high school she also worked at an Italian restaurant and an ice-cream stand and continued her food-service career at a chain restaurant in Aberdeen.

This past summer, Brandt, who stands less than 5 feet tall, went paddle boating on the river. She also enjoys watching competitive dance, cross country races, baseball and high school sports where she can cheer on her younger siblings. She lives at home, enjoying the closeness of life with her parents and brother and sister. Her goal is to save enough money to purchase a new car – something with four-wheel drive, heated seats, and an automatic start so it can be warm when she leaves for work on cold mornings.

Right now, everything his daughter does puts a spring in her step, Kelly Brandt says, but particularly having a job.

“She's always excited to go to work,” he said. “When she got out of college until she got a job, she'd be at home all day and everybody else was gone so she got really bored. Now she's excited to do different things.” •

The Evolution of Adult Foster Care

Becoming part of a Shared Living residence – whether as a provider or the person receiving support – isn't a fast process, but ultimately it can be a rewarding experience, say those who work closely with the still-evolving program.

“It gives people a quality of life they always knew they wanted but was not possible before,” said Kelli Anderson, director of the Resources for Human Development (RHD) office in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. “Some of our folks have been extremely challenging to serve by other

providers, but here they have been wildly successful. It's about choice and control.”

Shared Living started in South Dakota on June 1, 2017. The residential service for people with disabilities has been gaining widespread popularity across the United States as an alternative to congregate home situations, said Darryl Millner, director of the state Department of Human Services Division of Developmental Services in Pierre, South Dakota.

“We wanted our services to keep pace with innovations happening across the country,” he said. “The more we learned, its benefits came out very clear to us: Less reliance on the traditional workforce in a group home setting and less reliance on



those brick-and-mortar-type settings that eat up costs from an overhead perspective.”

“Most importantly, the strongest benefit we learned was the fact that individuals are able to select a person that they can choose to live with and enjoy life experiences with and yet still have their needs met. It’s a win-win.”

In fact, the first Shared Living provider to begin working with RHD, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that offers social services, behavioral health, homelessness and support services for people with developmental disabilities, came through a recommendation from a person receiving the services, Anderson said.

“They were involved in her life for several years,” she said. “They would come visit and take her home for holidays. She said, ‘I want to live with these guys,’ and they came in and said, ‘OK.’ We have done next to no advertising for Shared Living Providers.”

Forty percent of RHD’s providers are the person’s family members according to Anderson. The newest generation of families and self-advocates is supporting an option that is much different than a 24-hour, round-the-clock staffed group home, Millner shared. “They want more of a community setting where they can receive the care they need in a truly homelike

environment. The most significant feedback we obtained through the public input process was to not over-complicate Shared Living with a lot of regulations and policies. You let Shared Living happen as organically as possible. We ensure health, safety and welfare as part of an individualized services plan.”

Shared Living is not the solution for every person with a disability. According to Anderson, making the match between the person RHD supports and their Shared Living provider is key to making it work. That’s why it may take several months to set up a Shared Living situation, because it does neither side any good to rush into a pairing.

RHD also has learned it is important to continually monitor and ask questions of the people they support.

“Some of the people we support have been dependent on the system for so long they have a hard time making independent choices,” Anderson said. “They’re waiting for someone to say, ‘This is the right thing to do.’ We empower individuals to make





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– Darryl Millner, director of the state Department of Human Services Division of Developmental Services

choices. If it’s the wrong one, well, that’s OK, it’s a mistake and we’ll move on.”

If a family member takes on the role of offering Shared Living services, they also must learn to shift from being mother or father, brother or sister, aunt or uncle to a paid Medicare provider.

“You can’t just give a child a Tylenol when they have a headache, you have to see a doctor,” Anderson said. “Some said

‘OK.’ Others say, ‘I don’t want an oversight agency in my business.’ We had one mom, because of the culture she was raised in, who absolutely did not want her son in a traditional residential setting. With Shared Living she had the ability to quit her job, stay home and care for her son.”

A provider can open their home to up to two people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, Millner said,

although in these early stages few have opted for more than one. Shared Living can be described as the evolution of adult foster care, he said.

“It’s more person-centered, and there’s more of a matching process,” he said. “There’s other perks as well. That host home family can earn a salary that would make this a worthwhile career.”

The Division of Developmental Services works with 20 Community Support Providers like RHD across South Dakota, and more than half already have begun delivering Shared Living or are preparing to do so soon.

“The biggest challenge is with the Shared Living workforce,” Millner said. “It’s a new service, and people aren’t quite certain what it is. Once they learn how it works, we expect to see a large number of people who

are willing to open up their home.”

As the program enters its second year, Millner expects to see it grow from the 20 people currently being supported in a Shared Living environment. That’s because the benefits will become obvious, he said. He also anticipates that the program will develop tiers, as people with disabilities who don’t need round-the-clock services become part of Shared Living. His agency is looking at cost structure, reimbursement, policies and regulations for people with lesser needs who are excited about the possibilities Shared Living offers.

“It’s an opportunity to choose a person in your life that can help you live and work in your community and somebody you can share life experiences with for the long term,” Millner said. •

If you’re interested in learning about Shared Living, visit the
DHS Division of Developmental Disabilities online at
<https://dhs.sd.gov/developmentaldisabilities/sharedliving.aspx>.

If you’re interested in becoming a Shared Living provider or in need
of community support from Resources for Human Development,
contact Kristen Groenenboom at 605-377-6490.



Pedaling Into a Bright Future

Garrison

In pleasant weather, you'll find Garrison Mulder on his bicycle, pedaling to and from work.

In fact, you'll find Mulder on his bicycle pedaling to work even during challenging weather that would make most cyclists resort to four-wheel transportation. Only when the weather is really poor will he seek a ride from a friend or call a ride-sharing service.

"It's only six and a half miles," he said, shrugging off any praise or amazement at his commute to his job at a Burger King restaurant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

His commute to the restaurant, where he has worked for more than two years, was made easier a few months ago. After Mulder's travel to and from work was

highlighted in a local television feature titled "Garrison's Journey," the restaurant's franchisee bought him a new bicycle. Actually, Cave Enterprises paid for half the bicycle's cost. When Scheels staff heard Mulder's story, they offered to split the cost.

"He had a regular 10-speed bike, but we bought him one that has sturdier all-terrain tires," said his manager, Michelle Michaeli. It was a thank you to an employee she describes as both "dedicated and determined."

Mulder, 19, graduated from Tri-Valley High School and currently attends Southeast Tech in Sioux Falls. He was raised in Crooks, South Dakota, but about five years ago he moved with his father and stepmother, Wade and Angie Mulder, to an



Mulder

acreage north of Interstate 90.

He was 4 years old when he was diagnosed with high-functioning autism, Mulder said. Its effect on him makes it more difficult to pay attention and comprehend some instructions, he said.

It has not stopped him from being an outstanding employee, Michaeli said. When it was suggested that her Burger King hire Mulder, she barely hesitated before deciding to see how it would work.

The answers to any questions came swiftly and decisively. Mulder divides his work shifts between preparing food in the kitchen and serving customers behind the cash register.

“He caught on really quickly, and now he’s doing everything,” Michaeli said.

“We like to cross-train everybody, and he’s great at multi-tasking. And he helps out everywhere. If he’s working on the fryers, he’s helping with the broilers. If he’s working on the broilers, he’s helping on the fryers.”

Mulder’s outgoing personality helps him when he’s behind the counter serving hungry customers, Michaeli said. Another reason for his success there is that he likes to make people happy by feeding them.

“I wanted to be able to make food,” he said of his decision to pursue restaurant work. He also likes being able to serve his favorite meal to himself: a 10-piece chicken nuggets meal, small fries, small drink, no sauce – sometimes finished off with two cookies.

Mulder works 25 hours a week,

sometimes more if he is needed to fill in for other shifts. That gives him time to focus on his schoolwork. He is studying accounting and expects to earn his associate degree from Southeast Tech in the spring of 2020. He reduced his credit load a little bit after his Monday and Wednesday classes conflicted, slowing up his pace.



What will come next? Perhaps a job working in accounting or preparing people's taxes, Mulder said. He also would not mind a lifetime working at Burger King but in a different role. He has shared his dreams with Michaeli.

"His goal is to be a certified trainer," she said. "He always says he's going to be a manager someday, and who knows? He might be. But he's not a person who likes confrontation and dealing with people complaining."

What he does like, for now, is playing games, preferring his cell phone over a computer. His current favorite involves collecting points for the number of "gummy drops" he amasses and moving up through various imaginary cities.

When it comes to television, he's a big fan of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and he has followed the animated character and his aquatic friends to the big screen. Mulder enjoys animated movies such as those produced by Disney and Pixar, preferring the adventures of a fish like *Nemo* over a superhero like *Batman*.

By the time he graduates, Mulder hopes to be living in a place of his own. He would prefer not to have a roommate, starting off entirely alone. That means his companions, Abby the black Labrador and Sam, a golden retriever mixed with Brittany spaniel, would stay behind on the acreage. He would miss their companionship, particularly on their daily half-mile walks, but Mulder knows being independent will mean some sacrifices.

Or maybe just one.

"Sam would probably be OK," he said. "I don't think the black Lab is a city guy." •

A ROCK STAR

at the cash register

You might call Maggie Fischbach a rock-star ray-of-sunshine or a ray-of-sunshine rock star. According to her boss, she fits in both categories equally well.

“Maggie is a pure rock star!” enthused Amy Wipf, customer care manager at Kessler’s Grocery in Aberdeen, South Dakota. “She always has this amazing attitude and willingness to help both the customers and other team members.”

Fischbach’s job title at Kessler’s is cashier/bagger. She has worked at the store for about six and a half years, but in the two-plus years she has been on Wipf’s team, her role has expanded. Her six-hour day

shift, Mondays through Fridays, now takes her to multiple store departments.

When Wipf asked her to work in the espresso coffee bar, Fischbach took on that opportunity. Sometimes you can find Fischbach assisting in the store’s parcel department. She also can perform the duties of the liquor express department.

Fischbach also trains new staff, teaching them the correct bagging standards and helping with ongoing cashier training, guiding the newcomers in answering customers’ questions properly.

That’s not all.

“The last and most defining would be

that Maggie has taken initiative to help in a semi-leadership role,” Wipf said. “She has been one that I have asked to assist as a ‘helper – supervisor,’ which means when another supervisor or I are not available she steps up and helps us man the floor by taking calls, helping with charge accounts and other things.

“Again, it’s a solid demonstration that Maggie is that team player that emulates a higher level of achievement, and I absolutely love having her on my team.”

For Fischbach, who was born with a cognitive disability that makes it difficult to express herself and interact with her peers, her five-day per week schedule at Kessler’s isn’t work: It’s the gift of independence that also surfaces in life through an apartment and car of her own.

Fischbach, 29, was raised on a farm near Warner, South Dakota and graduated from the Warner School District. The youngest of Bob and Kathy Fischbach’s three adult children, much of her free time centers on her family, which includes nieces and nephews.

Her parents live at Lake Mina, South Dakota, and that’s where Fischbach goes tubing and rides on a pontoon boat. She joins them after making the commute from her two-bedroom apartment in Aberdeen, South Dakota. She has been driving since her 16th birthday – she only missed two questions on the licensing exam, Fischbach recalled with pride – and her newest vehicle is a 2018 Chevy Colorado in blue, her favorite color.

She attended Presentation College in Aberdeen, South Dakota, for two years.

She also participated in Project SEARCH at Avera St. Luke’s Hospital and Aspire, a nonprofit community support agency that provides services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Project SEARCH is a business-led transition program for individuals with disabilities age 18-21 in high school. The classes at Presentation College helped her become independent, Fischbach said. She lived in a dorm for two years, but by her third year was ready for an apartment of her own.

Fischbach’s mother Kathy said her daughter recently became committed to a healthier lifestyle. That has led to a significant weight loss, helped by Fischbach’s membership at the nearby Aberdeen Family YMCA.

“On Mondays and Tuesdays I go to Zumba classes at the Y,” Fischbach said. “I walk from my apartment and back. It’s just two blocks away.”

Fischbach also is an excellent bowler, Kathy Fischbach said. She played kickball this summer with a mixed league, and she plays volleyball, also on a mixed league.

Fischbach’s mother is proud of the schedule she keeps and proud of her daughter’s attitude.

“She’s a sweetheart and always happy,” Kathy Fischbach said. “She’s very, very dependable, and she’s always an hour early.”

With agencies and institutions such as Aspire, Project Search, and the South Dakota School for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Aberdeen, Kessler’s employs multiple people with disabilities in various departments, Wipf said. While everyone brings their best to work, Fischbach is





exceptional, she said.

“She is outstanding every day,” Wipf said. “I can attest that I don’t believe I have ever seen Maggie come into work in a bad mood. She just is that person that you know shows up and gives 100 percent every day.”

Being at work, Fischbach said, makes her happy.

“I like to meet new people,” she said. “I can chat briefly with them, and I don’t mind standing. I’ve made friends, and they make me happy.”

It’s mutual, Wipf said.

“She has always been a ray of sunshine and has blossomed for me since my role began.” •

SUNSHINE



Lori Kober

Working from the Heart

When Lori Kober was a seventh grader attending school in Wisconsin, her class toured a funeral home. By the time the tour ended, Kober had discovered that being a mortician was a career that would fulfill her passion for helping others.

It didn't matter that she was going to have to break barriers to achieve her dream. As she had done with other challenges in her life, Kober decided what she wanted and went after it.

In her case, that meant becoming the first deaf female licensed funeral director in the United States. And since 2008, she has owned and operated her own business, Kober Funeral Home, with chapels in Vermillion and Elk Point, South Dakota, carrying on a tradition in those communities that began in 1895.

"Deafness didn't stop me," Kober said of pursuing her career goals. "Every person with a disability can be successful if they



have resources and people to help. We're all human. Disability doesn't define us, and it doesn't mean we should be treated differently."

Margie Schissel met Kober more than 20 years ago when Kober and her husband, Tom, moved to Vermillion, South Dakota. Schissel herself had considered becoming a funeral home director but was discouraged by someone who told her it was "a dumb career for a woman." She salutes Kober for persevering against the odds, but her admiration goes deeper than that.

"She has empathy and professionalism and extreme caring all rolled into one fantastic personality," Schissel said. "It's a genuine empathy. It's from her heart. She has a genuine concern for you when you need her the most."

Kober was raised on a dairy farm near Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin. Her deafness is attributed to a lack of oxygen when she was born. She was about 18 months old when her parents learned their daughter could not hear. With few resources in tiny Elkhart Lake, her family relied on a recommendation for St. John's School for the Deaf in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, when

it came time to enroll her in school. She would stay in a dorm during the week, spending weekends with her family, which included a younger brother and sister.

"The nuns and priests there were able to sign, although they were hearing," she said. "No one in my family signs. I was raised in an aural program."

Aural habilitation is a plan to improve communication with younger children who have not yet developed spoken language. Kober does have speech, with some limitations, and she uses written communication when dealing with a person one on one.

If she's with a group of people, such as a family making funeral arrangements for a loved one, she always has a certified interpreter available 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. A video relay service provides interpreters and video phones at no cost in her private life. If it involves her business, she pays for the interpreter.

The Rev. Sandy Aakre, pastor of the First Baptist Church in Vermillion, said the use of interpreters and Kober's ease with reading lips means people don't hesitate when it comes to choosing her as their guide



through a time of grief.

“I think in the past not always talking directly to her bothered some people but not any longer,” he said. “She has an empathy, maybe because she has a handicap herself, but she understands the problems people have, particularly if they’ve lost a child.”

Kober’s community outreach is apparent in the memorial service she founded and hosts for families who have suffered a personal loss in the past year. She gives participants an ornament with the deceased’s name on it and prepares a video presentation for each person.

“I think it’s been very good for the community to have that,” Rev. Aakre said.

Kober’s path to her career as a funeral director accelerated after six years at the Wisconsin School for the Deaf and then the pursuit of her Bachelor of Arts degree from Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. After graduating from the liberal arts school for the deaf and hard of hearing, she enrolled in mortuary sciences classes at the University of District of Columbia (UDC). She had worked at a funeral home one summer while attending Gallaudet and “absolutely loved it.” Her path was set.

She relied on a note-taker and a sign

language interpreter at UDC and finished third in her class in 1994.

She and her husband, Tom, married in 1989. Their parents were friends, so they had first met as children. They renewed their acquaintance in high school in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and maintained a long-distance relationship when he left for Gallaudet two years before she did.

They own the funeral home together, with Tom in charge of vendors and finances, and Lori meeting with families and taking care of daily operations. They came to South Dakota with a first stop in Sioux Falls for his career, then one year later moved to Vermillion. Alton and Marilyn Siecke, who owned Iverson-Siecke Funeral Home in Vermillion and Anderson-Siecke Funeral Home in Elk Point, needed an assistant. The Kobers purchased both funeral homes in 2008 when the Sieckes retired.

The Sieckes treated her like their own child, and the Kobers were entrusted with the Sieckes’ dog when the older couple passed away.

“Al gave me this opportunity to work with families,” Kober said. “And I’m blessed to be in a small community that gives me lots of support.”

That’s because she works directly from the heart, said Schissel, who turned to Kober when she needed to make her late husband’s funeral arrangements in 2018. “Her eyes speak volumes,” she said. “And her hand gestures tell you what you need to hear.”

Family, her husband, friends and coworkers make it possible to do her job, Kober said. Equally important: the technology she has at her fingertips and the people who act as her voice.

Kober shared, “It’s been a real challenge, but I didn’t let deafness stop me from pursuing my goal.” •

The Center for Disabilities
would like to thank all the businesses,
organizations and individuals who
connected us with the extraordinary
people featured in this publication.

the cover

Arc of Dreams

is a stunning sculpture that exemplifies the Center for Disabilities' motivation in producing communications such as *South Dakota Possibilities*. We strive for all South Dakotan, especially those individuals with disabilities, to dream big, be unique and to thrive as they head towards their future.

Dale Lamphere is the sculptor of the massive stainless-steel sculpture that spans nearly a football field across the Big Sioux River in downtown Sioux Falls, South Dakota. At the center of the *Arc of Dreams* is an 18-foot gap, 70 feet above the river, representing the leap of faith dreamers take to see their dreams come true.



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