

Ross and Erv

by Bill Meunier

When Ross Walker, 61, and Erv Uecker, 67, decided to settle in Milwaukee, its LGBT community gained more than two additional residents, it gained two community leaders.

They met in June, 1957 through a mutual friend. It wasn't love at first sight. "We were friends at first sight," said Erv. They say "we are still friends" 42 years later.

Perhaps that's the key to a relationship, which has taken them from a Lutheran parsonage in Chicago to a horse breeding farm and finally to Milwaukee, where they are instrumental in keeping the BESTD Clinic operating. That's a lot of scenery for one couple and perhaps that's part of their secret, too.

"I am stubborn," says Ross. "We're both stubborn," adds Erv. "It isn't something we planned. It just unfolded. At this point in our lives, we wouldn't have it any other way. We're friends, we compliment each other."

Erv said he is a "recovering Lutheran." He was ordained as a Lutheran Minister in 1968. For ten years, he was the Pastor at Chicago's St. Luke's Lutheran Church where he directed a staff of four associate pastors.

Although the church was in a middle class, blue-collar neighborhood, the couple lived together in the parsonage. "Everybody did what they had to do to deal with it," said Erv. Ross added, "Some people thought we were brothers until both of our mothers showed up at church one day."



Our Elders Village

There was a confrontation with the Church council over a Gay issue. "We challenged them to look at what they were doing," said Erv. "A group in Chicago wanted to have a Gay dance. The church was a community center but most people were squeamish about that." The dance was held at the church.

A few years ago, St. Luke's voted to be an "affirming congregation" that welcomes Gays and Lesbians. "There was a same-sex couple that left the congregation because of that vote," said Erv. "They didn't like being labeled."

Erv makes it clear he doesn't like labels, either. "I think people get to know you as a friend, a co-worker. Then when they realize, you do whatever you have to do to deal with it," said Erv.

Ross was a special education teacher in the Chicago Public System. "I did that until it was no longer fun," he said. He started the system's Environmental Education program.

The two also bought a horse-breeding farm here in Oxford, Wisconsin. They bred horses there for about 12 years before selling it. We had 60 head of horses at one time and 5, if you pardon the expression, studs," said Erv. "It was not our idea of retirement. Who wants to shovel horse dung all day?" asks Ross.

In 1983, the couple stopped in Milwaukee on their way to sell a property. "We were going to retire at Marco Island in Florida," said Ross. "We met some friends in Milwaukee. We decided we didn't need Florida."

That fateful decision was Milwaukee's gain. Ross and Erv got very involved in the BESTD Clinic. They were instrumental in the founding of its new Milwaukee LGBT Community Center.

Ross and Erv work full time – without pay – for the Clinic. Ross said, "I can see some direct results of my efforts." He also likes "helping people get connected to a system that's going to work for them." Erv said he likes the structure of BESTD. "Everybody works. Our board consists of active volunteers."

Ross and Erv helped fulfill the dream of an LGBT community center in Milwaukee. They provided the initial money and the impetus for the Center. Although they are no longer involved with the Center, both can take pride in what they brought about. "They did a splendid job in converting the space," said Erv. He praises Brian O'Malley, who supervised the remodeling.

Ross says, "The Center will be successful if people get involved and make it successful. I think it will be what the community wants it to be."

So what do these two whirlwinds of energy do for fun? "We have romantic candlelit dinners at home," said Erv. He laughed adding, "In fact we had one just last night."

"We have no need to travel. We've been there, done that," said Ross. "We're just very comfortable being at home and sharing with a few friends." They do take day trips partly to satisfy their newfound interest in genealogy. "We make a lot of stops at cemeteries," laughs Ross.

A few years ago, Ross did some research on his parents but put it aside. Last year, he became interested in it again. The couple has amassed the names of 16,000 relatives. That figure doesn't include their adopted "family" in Milwaukee.

Despite their dislike of labels, the members of that family have a few to pin on Ross and Erv: caring, committed and deeply in love.