

A true PARTNERSHIP

By Lynne Bereza, AMM Communications Coordinator

The Western Manitoba

Town of Rivers prides itself on many things, including its friendly and helpful people. Meet two of the friendliest - **Al and Donna Morken**, who also happen to both serve on Town Council.

What would it be like to be married to another council member? According to Al and Donna Morken, it's not much different from being a married couple in any other line of work. However, in Al and Donna's case, coming from the same line of work probably did help to prepare them for their jobs as elected officials. Both retired from the RCMP (with 26 and 25 years respectively), the couple served their last years pre-retirement in Saskatchewan prior to moving to Donna's hometown of Rivers. To hear them tell it, public service is a hard thing to let go of so when the October 2006 municipal election was approaching, both decided that the best way to continue serving a community they love was to run for council. Al was elected Mayor, and Donna was elected one of six councillors.

Al describes the decision by saying, "We just felt that it was good to get as many candidates out there as possible, and let the people decide after hearing what we had to say." The decision to run came easy to both Al and Donna, who both often refer to their RCMP careers as fundamental in paving the path that led them to council. "With the RCMP, when you have a duty, you stay focused and you go out and do it, so we had no hesitation at all."

Donna takes the explanation a step further. "As a married couple in the RCMP, it's the same kind of thing, if you're both working at the same detachment. In fact, you would be surprised how many retired RCMP members are starting to show up on councils. I attribute that to our background and our training," she explains. "Working as a mayor and councillor and running a community is not unlike running a detachment - it's about teamwork and problem solving and communication and budgets and personnel - all similar challenges to running a detachment."

Al continues in the same vein, saying "There are a lot of similarities with our



Al and Donna Morken in the Town of Rivers Council Chambers.

police background and politics, which surprised me. But the first thing that we had to do in police work was to communicate with people and listen to people. When you're working as a community member in police work, you're trying to solve issues and be a problem solver; and that's actually what you're doing as a mayor and a member of council. You're listening to people, you're discussing things with them, and obtaining as much information as you can on an issue before you make your decision and vote. Ultimately, you care about your community."

It is obvious after just a few minutes of speaking with the couple that they have embraced public life enthusiastically. But was

there any hesitation in deciding to run at the same time? What about concern from the community?

"Someone did say to us 'won't this be a conflict of interest?'" notes Donna, "and we said no, because we are both individuals. Women and men are different, and both bring a different view to things."

Al adds, "During the election, Donna addressed any questions by explaining that men and women think differently, and when it comes to the decision making process Donna is her own person and I am my own person."

"I think this sums it up best," states Donna. "My mother always taught me that, after you get married, the only thing in your

life that is totally your own is your vote. So I always brought that up when I thought it needed to be said – and it turned out it wasn't an issue or a concern."

Al describes the effect of their marriage on their council positions as not much different than it would be if they had other jobs. "We're like many couples, in that we leave each other lots of notes because we sit on different committees and we're gone to different meetings. That's what you do in busy households these days – you leave notes for each other! We're both going in different directions because we have different responsibilities to attend different meetings."

The couple has some sage advice for others looking to take on a public position. "I think you have to feel in your heart that you have something to offer, and want to do good things for your area. For us, we were both in our mid 40s when we retired, now we're in our early 50s. We felt it was the right time in our lives, we have the energy, we're healthy, and we have things we want to contribute." Donna expands on that by again referring to their long RCMP careers: "Once you've gone that long in serving the public – for us it was 26 and 25 years – it's pretty tough NOT to want to do that."

The couple is quick to stress that they are two of seven council members, and teamwork is essential to the success of any council. "In October 2006 I got together with not just my wife but with five other people who I knew, but wasn't necessarily close to," explains Al. "All of a sudden, for the next four years, you have to start working with this group of people and you see how personalities and dynamics start to take shape. What is interesting to me is how you start to understand and read each other's personalities. When you are having a discussion about an issue, you may have thought initially about something in one way but then you hear from people who have more information to give you. It's amazing how that type of discussion can impact you because you see an issue through the eyes of six other people who are very passionate also."

Both Al and Donna say they learn from others at every meeting. "Not only from council, but from our CAO who has about 32 years of experience, from our office staff, from our public works and utility staff, from working with the RM of Daly and other municipalities, from going to AMM functions – it's a constant learning curve," explains Al. "You have to keep your mind open because nobody has all the answers – you must keep learning because if you don't, you close your

mind to all kinds of possibilities. It's an exciting time because we are making decisions today that will have an impact many years down the road. You want to get it right if you can!"

The Morkens are quick to point out that while it is sometimes convenient to have a partner to discuss municipal issues with, they are, again, part of a team. "We don't try to stay away from discussions relating to council business, probably because we do bounce things off each other. But we don't make decisions because we need the

... the only thing in life that is totally your own is your vote.

- Donna Morken

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input from everybody else on the council. We're two of seven – Al has his thoughts, I have mine, and while we do get to bounce ideas off each other, we don't discuss it 24/7 because you don't want it taking over your life," says Donna. And do they ever find themselves on opposing sides of a position? "Oh, sure!" Donna quickly answers. Al adds that "Sometimes we see things differently and sometimes we see things the same. Each is an individual case."

Al also finds, particularly as Mayor, there is benefit to serving the level of government closest to the people. "My belief is that the most accountable level of government is municipal because you're living here full time, and the person who may be against something council is looking at doing for the community could be your next door neighbor," he explains. "You could be out shopping or attending a function and people will come up and start talking to you about something that's happening in your community and want information. That is a constant process that I think any councillor or mayor welcomes because sometimes the coffee-shop talk isn't accurate, and it's a good way to set certain issues straight."

If a love of community is a requirement of the job of a council member, it is apparent that this couple truly passes that test. The Town of Rivers, with a population Donna describes as "1,193 and growing" is indeed a growing, thriving bedroom community close to Brandon, but with many amenities of its own. In fact, according to Donna, the 2006 census listed Manitoba's growth rate at 2.6%, while Rivers' rate was 6.6%. Donna's community pride clearly shows when she describes her feeling about being on council. "Because it's my home community, and now it's our home, it's a chance to assist in moving the community forward, making it progressive, and showing the world what we have. We're a good little community and we have lots on the go. We're both involved with lots of community groups but being on council, it gives us a chance to work within a bigger venue to help move things along."

Al stresses that while the challenges and time commitment of council life are great, so are the rewards. "Just like everything in life, everybody has choices, and if people want to get involved with serving the community in this way it's a great thing to do. It is a four-year term that can go by slowly or really quickly." And how has it been for the Morkens, almost one-and-a-half years into their term? This is one question these individuals answered in unison: "It flew by!"

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