congresswoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers

Touched by Down Syndrome

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CONGRESSWOMAN CATHY MCMORRIS RODgers is serving her second term in the U.S. House of Representatives, representing the people of Washington's Fifth Congressional District. In Congress, McMorris Rodgers is working to expand economic opportunities for the Northwest region, improving access to quality, affordable health care, and keeping our communities and nation safe.

McMorris Rodgers is the descendent of pioneers who traveled the Oregon Trail in the early 1850s to the Pacific Northwest, where her father's family pursued agriculture and her mother's family worked in the forestry industry. She was born and raised on a farm and for 13 years worked in the family owned business, Peachcrest Fruit Basket. She earned her B.A. in prelaw from Pensacola Christian College in Florida and an executive MBA from the University of Washington.

She is married to Brian Rodgers. They have a son, Cole, who was born in April 2007. She enjoys playing the piano, swimming, and reading biographies. She lives by President Reagan's motto: "There's no limit to what a person can do or where one can go if one doesn't mind who gets the credit."

Northwest Woman: How did Brian Rodgers capture the heart of the most eligible woman in Washington State?

Cathy McMorris Rodgers: Brian's sister invited him to my pink-flamingo fundraiser in August 2005. Brian is a Spokane native, graduated from Ferris High School, and served 26 years in the Navy. He was visiting family when his sister introduced us. I soon received a letter from him inviting me to tour the Naval Academy in Annapolis, MD. We had a 12 hour first date –including a Navy football game, we were married a year later.

NWW: What were your thoughts of becoming a mother?

CMR: This is the first marriage for both us. We both always dreamed of becoming parents. Shortly after we were married, we were both surprised when I turned up pregnant. We were facing a spirited campaign and the pregnancy only added to the drama. I was 37 at the time and statistically faced an increased risk of birth defects. I had a quad test at the four month mark which showed a slight increased risk. My first ultrasound was at the 20 week point and everything looked normal. At the end of April my doctor noticed a blockage in Cole's small intestine –duodenal atresia. About half the children with this blockage are born premature, about 30 percent have Down syndrome. Brian and I went for a walk the next day partly to discuss our reaction to this new development. After the walk, I had some bleeding and wondered if I had overdone it. With Brian's encouragement, we headed to the hospital, only to find out that I was dilating and close to delivering. Cole was born at 3:14am

on Sunday morning. Brian and I can be thankful the doctors spotted the intestinal blockage earlier and were ready to operate on Monday morning.

NWW: As a mother, how did you handle the diagnosis of Down syndrome?

CMR: Initially, the doctors were not sure if Cole had Down syndrome. Babies with Down have unique physical characteristics: one crease in each palm, sandal toe, low muscle tone, and almond eyes. Babies with Down syndrome also have a higher risk of heart defects, thyroid issues, and vision and hearing challenges. Cole had no out of the ordinary physical traits pointing to Down syndrome. During Cole's intestinal surgery to remove the duodenal atresia, the doctors took a blood test which ultimately tested positive for Trisomy 21. Hearing the test results was the most difficult. Every parent has hopes and dreams for their child, Down syndrome is not on the list. It is not what we expected, yet we have embraced Cole as the special gift from God that he is. We are developing new dreams for our son and look forward to seeing him reach his potential.

NWW: What advice can you offer a mother faced with the possibility of having a child with a birth defect?

CMR: I would strongly remind mothers faced with a similar experience that it is not a prison sentence and they are not alone. I believe life begins at conception and is a gift from God. All life deserves to be celebrated. I would encourage her that her child will lead a positive, unique, and important life.

It's important for parents with a developmentally disabled child to know that they are not alone. I have received incredible support from my family and people in the developmentally disabled community. There are tremendous resources, support, and early intervention available to families. There are medical advances and breakthroughs in the realm of education and early learning. The good news is we know what to expect with Down syndrome, there are families dealing with conditions that have unknown outcomes and are unsure as to what to expect and to what extent.

Almost daily now, someone shares with me about their loved one who is developmentally disabled, Down, autistic, or other conditions. These people always emphasize the positive impact this person has had on their lives and this world. I find myself extremely grateful to those who have walked this path before me. Cole, today, has more opportunities than others in previous generations due to the hard work of those who have gone down this road before us.

One of the favorite books I have read since Cole's birth is Expecting Adam about a mother who details the unexpected wonders of having a son with Down syndrome. She shared how her son is not interested in making power, wealth, prestige or influence the foundation of life with the expectation it will bring happiness, rather he goes directly to happiness itself and sees the magic of each moment.

NWW: What is a day in the life like as one of the Northwest's most powerful woman, also known as mom?

CMR: I am still learning how to successfully juggle Congress and motherhood. Family is a top priority for me. Millions of women successfully juggle career and motherhood. For me, I see a couple of advantages in that the flexible schedule of this position allows me to spend quality time with my son that other women may not have and I also have the unique advantage of a spouse, who is a 26 year active duty retired Navy pilot, who is excited about being a father and a caregiver. The biggest challenge is finding enough hours in the day to meet the vital needs of my son and family while continuing to be responsive to the needs and issues facing the people of Eastern Washington.

Cole is currently receiving services for physical and speech therapy at the Spokane Guild's School and Neuromuscular Center. The Guild's School has a well deserved, enduring reputation for excellence. Now that they are helping Cole, Brian and I know first hand their dedication to each child and the tremendous impact their efforts will have on the life of one child and one family.

NWW: What is the greatest joy of being a mom?

CMR: Experiencing a whole new capacity for love and it is just the beginning. I am blessed to be a mom. I draw fulfillment and joy from my faith, my family, and my profession yet everything in life pales in comparison to the joy a child brings.