

Season 2 | Episode 37

Marriage Story: A Couple with Dwarfism Navigates Life's Detours with Faith

Angela Muir Van Etten

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Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and this is the Joni and Friends ministry podcast. Each week we're bringing you real conversations about disability and finding hope through hardship and sharing practical ways that you can welcome and include people living with disability in your community. Be sure to subscribe wherever you listen to [podcasts](#) so you don't miss any of our encouraging conversations. What happens when marriage is complicated by dwarfism, disability and discrimination? Today on the podcast, Angela Muir Van Etten, author of *Pass Me Your Shoes*, is back to share how God grew her and her husband Robert into a faithful couple who honored him. Well Angela, it's great to have you back on the podcast and I love a good love story, so I'm very interested to know how you met your husband Robert since you're from New Zealand and he is from the United States.

Angela Muir Van Etten:

1981 was the international year of people with disabilities and I came to the United States on a Winston Churchill fellowship, and I was studying American Wars, protecting disability, civil rights and public education programs designed to improve attitudes towards people with disabilities. And LPA was one of 40 disability organizations on my list, Robert was the president and so he was the person I interviewed.

Crystal Keating:

Fascinating. He was the president of little people of America, and you were there on a Winston Churchill fellowship. Is that what you said?

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Yes. It was Winston Churchill fellowship, which was sponsored by the New Zealand government and because it was the international year of disabled people, they were open to my proposal, so it was quite a honor to get that.

Crystal Keating:

How exciting. You were interviewing him, was it love at first sight?



Angela Muir Van Etten:

I'd say no. It took two weeks. Yeah. We didn't actually officially date since I was only in Boston and DC for a month. My fellowship was only three months so even though we spent a lot of time together, he was more my tour guide and my host. He was certainly not my boyfriend. At least I didn't think so. Love took us both by surprise and we met on St. Patrick's day. We got engaged on mother's day and we got married in New Zealand and the US, we had two different ceremonies on Halloween.

Crystal Keating:

Okay. Well tell us about Robert.

Angela Muir Van Etten:

All Right. Well, he is an engineer. He's the same height as me. Three feet, four inches. He had just moved to Washington, DC himself from Florida. He had got a job with the federal government with the access board. It's a federal agency that fits the standards and government facilities for access and public buildings. It's the parallel to the organization that I had gone into that sets a model code for access and public buildings. They coordinate their work. So, they benefit from each other's research.

Crystal Keating:

Kind of both aiming at bettering the lives of people with disabilities.

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Right. And then Robert's one of five children. He's the second oldest. His brothers are tall. They're definitely not average size. They're all over six feet. And his sister was average height. He grew up in a family where he was loved, and he went to college and got a master's in electrical engineering with a sub-specialty in biomedical.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. So, you and your husband both have advanced degrees. You in law and he an engineer. Let's talk about the first few years of marriage, any big surprises. Were there ways short stature impacted your marriage?

Angela Muir Van Etten:

After we got engaged, I had to leave and go back to New Zealand, didn't see him for five months. We had a long-distance relationship with letters and so when we got together after we were married, it felt like we were dating then. There was some surprises there. We had some obviously different culture. We both speak from English speaking countries, but the words were different. But the surprise came when Robert changed jobs three times in four years. We moved, people used to make fun of us and LPA because we moved every year it seemed. And we had a joke, ABC, Arlington, Virginia, Baltimore, Maryland, Cleveland, Ohio so where are we going with the D. We didn't go with D. We went to Rochester, New York. All of those changes made it difficult, especially funny with the studying and which bar exam am I going to take.



Crystal Keating:

For which state?

Angela Muir Van Etten:

For which state, yes. It's a state-by-state thing.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. You were transitioning to a new country, a new culture, a new husband, a new roommate really with his careers and moving a lot. That's a lot in a couple of years.

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Yes. And then I guess you have a surprise is when I had finished law school, because we had moved to Cleveland, so I took the Ohio bar, I was very surprised there was still job discrimination because I had the credentials. I had five years of law practice from New Zealand, and they still discriminated. I write about how the job interviews where. They didn't give me any chance at all. They just couldn't see past the height. It was before there was any protection from the ADA, Americans with disabilities act. There was nothing I can do about it, so you just keep looking and trusting God. In time we actually were both on the job market, we didn't expect that either. That freed us up to go outside of Ohio, so we started putting out a national search. That's how we ended up at Rochester.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. That was in the first three years of your marriage. Is that right?

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Yes. The first four years. It was a hard going.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. That is difficult for any marriage regardless of ability or stature surely. I read an interesting book many years ago on marriage. The author is Paul David Tripp, and he wrote everyone's marriage morphs into something they didn't intend it to be. At some point you need something sturdier than romance. You need something deeper than shared interest and mutual attraction. You need changed expectations. You need radical commitments. And most importantly you need grace. Does this quote ring true to you at all?

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Yes. It most certainly did. I think that we needed changed expectations, which I needed for sure because I would get disappointed about things. I needed to lower my expectations to minimize the disappointment when he's not doing something that I think he should be doing, but he's quite happy with what's happening. And also change expectations to recognize and accept limitations. It could be my limitation as well. As far as the radical commitment goes, we had made marriage vows to each other that we would stand by each other no matter what happens. And so that to me is a radical commitment that applied to us because a lot happened. A lot has happened, is happening in our marriage. It's radical that you stick with it. The other commitment is to be patient and allow God to work because I can't change him.



I can't change Robert. I tried. It didn't work out too well. The radical commitment is to let God do the work of changing him and for me to stop trying. I had a friend that I met when we were first married and she said to me, well, the things that annoy you now, because we were newlyweds back then, probably our first year. And she said, the things that annoy you today will still be annoying you in 20 years. I looked at her, I thought, really? She was trying to tell me, accept him the way he is. All the things that you could carry them, treat them as funny in the beginning, kind of get a bit tired and old when you always getting lost or you're running late, not going out, not telling me how long you're going to be.

One time I almost called the police because I thought he couldn't possibly still be doing what he said he was doing, but he was. These are things that still happen. I do better with it now, except for they're running late. If we're going somewhere together, I actually had a pastor's wife say this to me. And she said, well, you have two cars. If you're going to the same place, you take your car, and he comes when he's ready.

Crystal Keating:

What did you think about that?

Angela Muir Van Etten:

It was great. I did it. I hated doing it and he wasn't happy about it, but it's like I'm teaching the Sunday school class. I am not coming late. And in fact, I needed to be early because the ladies are all very punctual and they all get there early. Some of them get up at five in the morning, which is not me. But I'm not coming late. It helped for the most part.

Crystal Keating:

It eliminates some of those things that can really pick at your marriage, and you think, okay, we got to be creative about this and not let this be a point of contention. Even though it's annoying in the moment, it's probably a good thing for the longevity of a relationship like that.

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Right. This pastor's wife had done this with her husband, but he didn't like being left behind and they wanted to ride together. We want to ride together. It's a chance to talk coming and going and stop off on the way home. But anyway, these are the things that are still happening.

Crystal Keating:

Definitely. I'm sure many of our married listeners can relate.

Angela Muir Van Etten:

I'm sure he could make his own list about me.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. It goes both ways. But that's why we need God's grace and good counsel. Certainly. I want to ask you something a little bit more personal. I know that Joni and Ken had to have this conversation and other people living with disabilities. Couples often thoughtfully weigh both the joys and challenges of the possibility of having children. As you settled into marriage, did you and your husband Robert desire to grow your family?



Angela Muir Van Etten:

Yes. We did talk about it before we were married. We got medical counsel and we elected not to have biological children. That would not have been medically wise for us. But we always thought that we would adopt children. LPA, little people of America has a great adoption culture. We thought that's what we would do. However, in the early part of our marriage with all this moving around, changing jobs and everything, we didn't have the money to do it. Adoption is expensive, especially international adoption. These adoptions in LPA are typically little people that have in discarded or not wanted in their home country. We thought we would adopt a little person. So then when we moved to Rochester, Robert started his own business. We only really had the one stable income, and he was building his business up.

He did not want to be Mr. Mom staying home with the kids while I was out working. We did not want to have a daycare raise our children. When we did have the money, it's still really just never worked out. Mainly with the finances and who's going to take care of the children was something that never lined up. It never came into focus for us. Not that you want to put your career first. We didn't really do that, but not career [inaudible 00:13:24] as some people do today. It just didn't happen. I guess that's the way we have to just say it.

Crystal Keating:

Do you look back on that and see God's hand or purpose in allowing you and your husband to have somewhat of an undivided devotion to what you were doing advocacy unto the Lord?

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Yes. I think that we occupied ourselves really well with our spare time. We didn't have any spare time, but definitely we're committed to helping people through LPA and through other organizations that we were part of and our jobs that we didn't have spare time. It was not like we were sitting around pining for which we had children. We had lot going on. A lot of work. A lot of volunteer work.

Crystal Keating:

Your lives were full.

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Yeah. We had full lives. We were still involved. I was involved. Both of us in church in Rochester and in Florida, had been involved in children's ministries. It's not like we don't like children. We love children and kids love Robert. They like both of us, but especially Robert. He's like flies to honey. They come to Robert. Little kids would even say to their parents, is Mr. Robert going to be there today? It's kind of cute.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. That was a nice feeling to be adored like that. You brought up an interesting dynamic that occurs in some relationships where a new disability happens, or health issues arise and couples in general where some of the traditional roles get shifted. Can you talk a little bit more about that?



Angela Muir Van Etten:

We do have an hour marriage relationship, both of us, I call it having limited steps in our day. We divided up the job duties and unfortunately Robert's idea of keeping things clean was you clean it when it looks dirty. That's not how it works for me in the bathroom. You don't wait till you can see black rings around the tub. The way we handled this friction that we had for a while was that we hired a cleaning lady. She came every two weeks, but it took away that discussion.

Crystal Keating:

That's another creative alternative.

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Right. We did maintain our role. We kept our, I guess, two career role couple. There were a couple of times like I mentioned in Cleveland that I couldn't find a job and then one other time I was between jobs on unemployment. But for the most part, Robert had a job, but his work didn't pay him enough or he needed to have a working wife in other words to afford to have his own business, the practice that he had. That's why when we moved to Florida, because Robert did get offered a position in Florida, God was in it because his business had, he'd built it up, it went along well for a while and then I started tapering off again.

He was struggling with it. He also had both hips replaced and he needed a different kind of job. He got this offer in Florida. So, we discussed it and I said, well, okay, because this was a paid position with benefits and everything. It sounded great. So, I said, okay, you're going to need to be the bread winner. I'm not taking the Florida bar. I was going to be a contractor and I had plans, but they didn't work out. But like I said, God changes my plans, but Robert got to this job, and it did not work out. We moved again.

Crystal Keating:

We're you disappointed that you couldn't practice law the way you were in Rochester?

Angela Muir Van Etten:

No. I knew that I needed a change. We never intended to stay in Rochester for the rest of our lives. It's really cold up there. It's just the timing. I wasn't quite ready for it, but it was God's time for us to move. I just didn't know what was going to be next. But God had that worked out because my work at the publisher prepared me for my two subsequent jobs. One job I got with the Christian Law association writing for them and they asked for a writing sample and I gave them a book, a law book that I wrote. They said well, we've never had a writing sample like this before.

Crystal Keating:

What are some of the ways your marriage has helped to transform you to be who God wants you to be?



Angela Muir Van Etten:

Well on a personal level, I didn't know until I got married that I even had a temper. He knew how to press all my buttons. Basically, God used that. I still can get mad but nothing like what I used to. But he uses that to rub off the rough edges. Also, I could be very easily offended and expect too much of him, expect him to remember things that were important to me, but not him. God did work to help us, to transform us. It's still definitely a work in progress. We have a long ways to go even though we'd been married 39 years. The book stops at 35, by the way. But we do work harder at encouraging one another, not being too critical, apologizing, not holding a grudge, definitely no holding grudges, forgiving each other.

And then of course not escalating. Where you say, well, you never do this, you always say do that. When you're having a discussion, we learned to stay with the same topic. Not have it drag in everything that's happened in your whole marriage. Okay, we're talking about X. We don't need to go through the alphabet of all that's happened in the past.

Crystal Keating:

That's good advice.

Angela Muir Van Etten:

These were the things that we learned in marriage counseling because it did come to that. The marriage was on the rocks because it turned out in Robert's distress and trying to make his business work, I hardly saw him. He had an office in the basement initially, so he was down there working all the time. I could not even to get him to come upstairs to eat. I'd make a meal and he wouldn't come and eat it. It was awful. I couldn't take it anymore. And so, I said that we need to go to marriage counseling, and he did agree. He knew it wasn't going well because he had a very distressed wife crying and yelling. I tried everything, none of it worked. We went to marriage counseling, and we learned a lot about each other and how to handle things.

Crystal Keating:

That's so important. Identifying it yourself, but then also being willing to go in and be transparent with another person takes courage, but it can be so helpful if it's the right counselor and it's Christ centered. Did you find it helpful?

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Oh yes. Yes. In fact, when I first described what our problem was, it sounded like it was a simple problem of communication. And he said, oh, I think we can work just a couple of sessions. Well, 12 sessions later, it was a lot of work that we did together. And he gave us the tools we needed. We just have talked to him recently actually, asking him to read that chapter where he was the pastor of family life and counseling at our church. That was the turning point and then also, and I had got involved in the church quite some time before Robert did. Robert would just come. Like the one-hour person at church.



He's there and he was gone. Whereas I was involved in ladies Bible study. I was on the education committee. I was deep in and Robert was just attending. But he came to a Sunday school class because it was on marriage counseling, marriage advice or whatever it was. We were studying the book, Love is a Decision. After reading that book, that was the first time Robert ever gave me flowers. And that was because in that book, it had said you put yourself to think about what would your wife appreciate? He knew I liked flowers so he decided to buy me flowers. And then the other guys in the class said oh, Robert, you're making us look bad. Little did they know what we were going through.

Crystal Keating:

Learning to love his wife. Even those little simple things. Well, your marriage obviously had its ebbs and flows, and Christ became really the center of your relationship and Robert's heart. I know hospitality was a big part of reaching out to people. I know it's enriched you and your husband's life. How have you benefited from giving and receiving hospitality? Why would you say hospitality is so significant to Christians and especially to those in the disability community?

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Well, I think hospitality gives us the opportunity to form deeper relationships that last way beyond the physical separation. For us, we were moving a lot and we were able to receive hospitality in our church through home fellowships. We were in people's homes every couple of weeks, like say on a Sunday evening. We would enjoy time together and take prayer requests. And then we were able to give back hospitality. We received it and we gave it. Sometimes it was the same people that we were giving and receiving. Jesus tells Christians to love one another. Paul says the same thing. That we are to accept one another, just as Christ accepted us in order to bring praise to God. And we're also supposed to encourage one another, serve one another humbly in love. My thinking is we can't do any of it if we don't know one another. That is why hospitality is so important for Christians and people with disabilities. We cannot deliver on what we need to be doing for each other without hospitality.

Crystal Keating:

Right. It gives us an opportunity to, in the colloquial, break bread, to have a meal together and to build relationships. It's a place where families can share the Gospel, read scripture and demonstrate the love of Christ to their neighbors who may not ever step foot in a church, to people with disabilities who may not get the invite that many of us enjoy. I think that is God's way of forming great friendships. It's so neat to hear how you and your husband have, that's been a part of your lives together. Well, as we close our time, what would you say to couples who might be listening today and feel like their marriage is just so difficult. It's not what they expected. They don't feel in love anymore and their situation now seems impossible. Do you have words of encouragement for them today?



Angela Muir Van Etten:

Just would say to somebody, if you need to separate for your own mental and physical health, because we know we don't expect people to be beaten up by their spouse or their partner, but if it's come to that, it's important to do it prayerfully with the intent of trusting God to deal with the partner and that we should seek healing in God's loving arms, not a new relationship. Don't burn the bridge of reconciliation by dating or marrying someone else. That's the first piece of advice. And then I would say that marriage is the hardest thing I've ever done. But it's not too difficult for God to make it work. I recommend reading the book, Marriage is a Decision and not to walk away from marriage because of not feeling in love because it's not about a feeling, it's a decision. And then if you're having trouble in your marriage, get help. Don't try and figure it all out on your own. You need prayer partners and marriage counseling. The verse that I really like is from Matthew 19:26, with man it is impossible, but with God, all things are possible.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, thank you for those words of wisdom and those words of hope. Angela, it's been another great conversation with you. Thank you so much for your time today.

Angela Muir Van Etten:

Thank you. Appreciate it.

Crystal Keating:

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