

## Neil's new bookkeeping business latest in life shaped by advocacy, challenges

by Michelle Leach

The rundown of services offered by longtime Omahan Kay E. Neil's new business, By The Book Bookkeeping Services, looks innocuous enough: payroll for small business, accounts payable/receivable, notary. But behind this bookkeeping business is a woman who, despite being thrown everything from a polio diagnosis to three accidents — each caused by drunk drivers — has surmounted; Neil has had a hand in launching organizations that shaped major driver legislation, including the lowering of minimum Blood Alcohol Content levels, and civil rights legislation in the form of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

"This was how I was raised," the southwest Iowa native said. "I was taught to step up to the plate and get involved."

This is a theme that runs throughout the 70-something's life: She was never treated any different than her siblings. Despite being diagnosed with polio in her teens, it didn't define her; in fact, in many ways, chance encounters and circumstances have dictated her involvement with historic legislation.

Neil said she always gravitated toward very precise work, and served as a bookkeeper and, later, business owner with her late husband. Together they owned Sherman Communications, a technology company specializing in work with law enforcement agencies.

Previously, in the 1950s, a drunk driver broadsided her car. Though not a major ac-

cident, he was never prosecuted. Even after a serious accident in the 1970s, involving an intoxicated medical student slamming into Neil and her husband's VW Bug with his Chevy Impala, she still didn't become involved with victims' rights and driver legislation.

"Our car spun like a top," Neil said, recalling the accident.

After spinning several times, the Bug slid down a retaining wall.

Neil suffered a head injury, which only exacerbated pre-existing medical conditions.

"I would black-out," she said. "It was tough to do tax returns if I was going to pass out."

Neil would survive a third accident involving a drunk driver in the following decade. But it was purely a happy accident, for a change, that prompted her to become involved with advocacy work on this front.

Neil recalled that, while traveling between Nebraska and D.C. as part of her work on access for the disabled with the Carter (and later Reagan) administrations, she met an individual who was involved with traffic safety.

She admitted, despite the accidents, she never thought to get involved and said she didn't really know anything about the issues.

But, it was stressed, she should go to Lincoln and testify about her experiences, as traffic safety legislation was on the table.

She continued to testify for many years to come.

And she did more than that; Neil was integral in starting up the local Mothers



**Owner Kay E. Neil ... Reflects on involvement with both driver safety, access for the disabled, as she starts new bookkeeping business.**

Against Drunk Driving chapter, as well as DWI Smart, an organization that supports victims and works to prosecute drivers.

As part of her involvement with these and other related organizations, Neil helped to raise more than \$250,000 to go toward enforcement.

In addition, she helped with efforts to coordinate law enforcement personnel in Nebraska and Iowa; for example, enhanced communication and coordination efforts resulted in officers in Iowa providing a better heads-up to those in Nebraska if a vehicle was

behaving erratically and headed their way.

Over the years, she was involved with laws everyone is familiar with — including increasing the legal drinking age to 21 and lowering the statutory limit on the BAC level.

Neil continues to be involved with victims' advocacy and work on this front — even more so than her work with access and rights for those suffering from physical challenges — though it didn't start out that way.

Contacts within the state led to her getting a personal phone call from then-President

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Jimmy Carter.

She was personally invited by him to become involved with the Architecture and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board — later the Access Board and the forerunner to the ADA.

One of Neil's proudest moments occurred when, during the Reagan administration, she was the only non-federal agency representative to vote against stringent rules regarding accessibility for federally-financed buildings.

In the eyes of, particularly other disabled individuals, she became "Public Enemy No. 1."

But Neil's motivation was always a workable solution, which would also appeal to cash-strapped organizations who may not have had the money to be compliant, as well as broader populations — mothers with strollers and seniors, for example.

Again, her philosophy was driven by her upbringing: "I didn't use my disability as an identifier."

Neil documents these challenges in her 2010 book, "You Never Walk Alone," and hopes to publish two more books — including one about starting over at the age of 70 as a single woman, following her husband's death after a four-month battle with esophageal cancer.