

Sometimes God provides us with our heroes

This article is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of April 10–11, 2010. This article ran under the chapter title "Heroes" in the book *Gifts 2: How People With Down Syndrome Enrich the World*, edited by Kathryn L. Soper and published by Woodbine House in 2009. It is reprinted here by permission.

By Colleen Bailey

GLADEWATER, Texas—Hero: "a person of distinguished courage or ability, admired for his brave deeds and noble qualities." Heroes save us. Heroes overcome adversity. Heroes inspire us. Heroes change us forever.

When our firstborn child arrived in our 21st year of marriage we were elated. When we received the diagnosis of Down syndrome we were devastated.

Four weeks after Ryan's birth, I sat alone and cold on a remote country road staring at all the prescription bottles I had grabbed before leaving the house. Sleep deprivation had set in after weeks of worrying about my newborn's health and future. He didn't have the strength to breast-feed. I felt like a failure. I thought that someone else would be a better mom.

My husband rushed home from work to join the search for me. While family and friends were praying, flashes of my newborn's innocent face and gentle disposition gave me the courage to return home. Ryan needed a hero. And, while I was pretty sure it wouldn't be me, I was determined to find him one.

A year later we met Rachel, a young adult with Down syndrome who cheerfully took pictures at a luncheon our group hosted for champion swimmer Karen Gaffney. At first I was just impressed that Rachel could use a digital camera. My admiration grew as we formed a friendship.

Rachel has worked in a local CPA office locating and managing documents with ease because of her extraordinary memory, and more recently in an upscale delicatessen. While visiting Rachel at her office for her television interview about the Buddy Walk [an annual walk to raise awareness of Down syndrome], I noticed how friendly she was to *all* her coworkers.

Her volunteer association with the national AMBUCS group [American Business Clubs, a national charitable organization that helps create mobility and independence for people with disabilities] resulted in our son receiving a specially designed Amtryke bicycle for people with mobility challenges.

During Ryan's second year we met Lisa. Ryan's speech pathologist had told us about an amazing young woman with Down syndrome who was on tour with the national Women of Faith organization.

After some inquiries, Lisa's mom and I began communicating. I was treated to a private viewing of Lisa's beautiful sign-language performance accompanied by Sandi Patty's music. A year later, after attending a taping of her performance for a televised TBN concert with Sandi Patty, I overheard ladies talking in the restroom.

"That Lisa gave me chills," expressed one concert patron.

"Did you see how passionate that young girl was in her performance?" another one asked.

I just listened from behind the closed stall door and smiled. Did I mention Lisa performed on the Dr. Phil show too and now has her own website and talent agent?

As Ryan continues to grow, I'm grateful for heroes like Josh who are exceptional role models. Every time I see Josh he kisses my hand like a true gentleman. He was raised to respect ladies and was named 2007 Goodwill Ambassador for our local Buddy Walk. His character is invaluable in this world and a real gift that stands out in a crowd.

The first time we met, Josh offered me not a serving of pretzels but the entire unopened family-size bag! Josh's parents emphasized appropriate behavior as he grew into adulthood, which makes him a true delight and joy to be around. Thanks to him, my husband and I have a more clear understanding of how we want to raise our son.

My other heroes include the individuals and families in the Down-syndrome community we've been privileged to meet since Ryan's birth five years ago. I used to fear their company, thinking I would break down and cry. The sight of another family reminded me of the uncertainties and challenges we were facing that somehow made it harder to cope at first.

Tears of joy are more often the case now, and the quiet goodness, determination and courage of these friends bring me peace.

When Alex was introduced to us, she was prompted to count in Spanish; she was only 4 years old! Dylan came through his open-heart surgery as a newborn and is thriving in school now. Alexis is the little princess and pride of her family. Kirsten reminds us that life is fragile and moves her parents on to greater purpose. Allison recovered from leukemia treatments at a very young age and now plays actively with her sister and friends. Natalee has such a gentle spirit and shares her toys readily. Sweet Kate wasn't fazed about her recent heart surgery. Blessed stillness in my heart has replaced so many fears I once clung to desperately.

Other heroes of mine include those people and families I have not had the privilege to meet in person yet have had a powerful impact on my life.

The writers of *Gifts, Volume I* propelled me onward and upward to greater heights in my wonderful journey with Ryan. Each author offers something similar and something different that we're sharing as moms. On the last page of the book, Jennifer Groneberg writes: "He is the child that I wanted, *that I did not know I wanted*. He is my son."

I echo those words.

Thanks to my heroes, I no longer doubt my ability to love and care for Ryan. I watch him listen and learn on a daily basis, and he inspires me to do the same. I once listened to him recite all of Psalm 23 at the church my dad pastors, holding a big microphone in hand and bringing the audience to tears.

Recently I listened to his insightful thoughts regarding the world economy: "All these people. It's a big mess. Eat oatmeal."

Of all the heroes I've met since his birth, Ryan is my greatest hero. I can still see those dark newborn eyes that sweetly gazed into mine when I told him good-bye on that day. Somehow I sensed he was communicating to me that I'd be back.

It hurts to look back on that terrible afternoon when I considered taking my own life, but at the same time I'm amazingly grateful and humbled to have experienced a pain and heartache so great that I can understand when another mom says, "I don't know how to do this."

When I meet such parents in my local area, I offer them a complimentary *Gifts, Volume I* from our East Texas Down Syndrome Group and hope they will meet some of their own heroes within its pages. Then I think of Ryan, and I thank God for this boy, this challenge and this joy that surpasses any experience I've ever known.