

September 25, 2001
Letter to the Editor
Jackson County Floridan

On February 12, 1997, I won the lottery.

On that day my younger daughter was born and, unlike eight hundred other babies born at that moment, she was born with Down syndrome. Of course, in the minutes, days and weeks following her birth, I didn't feel like I had won anything. On the contrary, in my ignorance, I felt a deep sense of loss for the child I thought we were having. I was afraid.

Today, though, I can hardly believe how lucky I am. I have two healthy children who are growing and changing and learning each and every day. Above all, I have two happy children, and being happy is really all that matters, especially when you're four or six.

Of course, I know far more about Down syndrome today than I ever imagined I would know about any condition, let alone this particular one. My knowledge is empowering. My knowledge is what allowed me to get over feeling like I had lost something and get on with the business of loving my baby. My knowledge is what I have to share with all the people who come in contact with me and my daughter and our family.

What I know is that my daughter is a pretty regular kid – she cries and laughs and sings and plays like other kids her age. She goes to “big-girl” school and then comes home and pretends like she's still there. She is affectionate, but she will pull her sister's hair when it's “necessary.” She has a mind, and a temper, all her own. Her curiosity, like that of most children, inspires me. She looks, of course, like she has Down syndrome, but she also looks a lot like her daddy, and her mannerisms are much like mine.

She speaks and moves a little more slowly than the rest of us, but in so doing she reminds us to slow down too. She is a testament to the awesome power of modern medicine and to the benefits of seeking and obtaining adequate health care and support services such as speech, occupational and physical therapy. I know that she has benefited enormously from the fact that she loves and is loved by a group of family, friends and teachers who have never questioned her right or her ability to be included in “normal” activities. There have been challenges, of course, for her and for us, but every child and every parent faces challenges of some kind or another. We have great expectations for her tomorrows, just as we do for her big sister who has no “genetic anomalies,” and just as you do for your children, grandchildren, nieces and cousins.

I know that, but for my daughter, I might be tempted to cross to the other side of the street if I saw her or someone like her – I might not have known enough to do otherwise. October is Down syndrome awareness month. At least for this month, I urge you to try and stay on the same side of the street. You never know what joy you may find there.

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