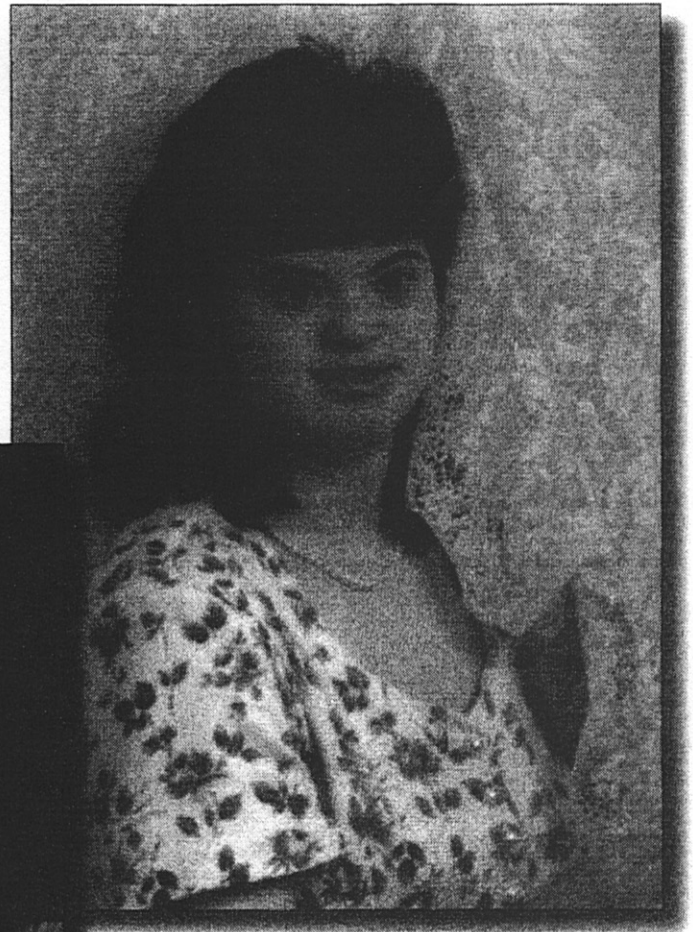
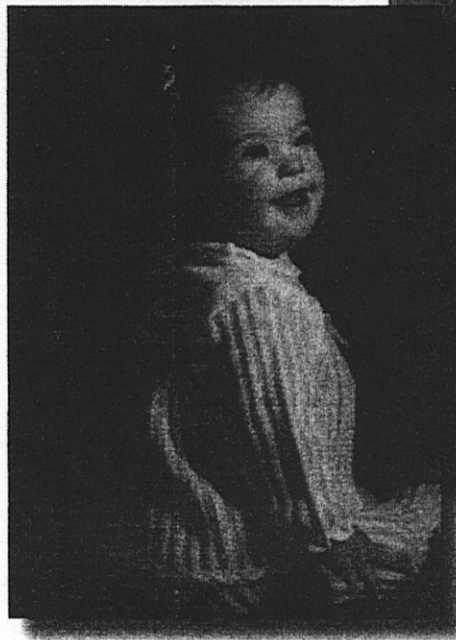


A Very Special Success



Amy as a toddler and teenager worked to overcome her mental disabilities. Now she lives independently in a group home.

“I’m running away. I don’t want to live here anymore,” Amy exclaimed while stomping up the steps to her room.

We all know how challenging adolescence can be, and it was no different for my younger sister, Amy. She wanted to do things that my mother would not allow. She always wanted her way and even though she was the youngest of six, my mother held her ground.

“Do you need help packing your bags?” my mother asked, using the response previously utilized with my three brothers, who had been actors in identical scenes.

This always worked well in the past. The “runaway son at the time” would pack a bag or two, take off down the street, maybe go around the block and return within the hour; only to discover that mom wasn’t even looking for him and had continued with her housework as if nothing had ever happened.

We quickly learned in our household that Mom was not one to react quickly to our drama and that the world did not revolve around us. Apparently, the world according to Amy was different.

It was a dark and drenching day, pouring hard rain that saturates you in a few short minutes. As mom was helping Amy fill two large tote bags with her valuables, she suggested Amy put on her boots and raincoat, then walked her to the door and

wished her well. Amy stepped off the porch, walked down the front steps with her umbrella angled in the direction of her travels, and started marching with purpose.

My mother watched, perched from the window, careful not to let Amy become aware of her watchful eye. Amy didn’t care at all! She was marching down the street determined to make her own way. She went down one block, down another, then abruptly turned right toward the

main thoroughfare of town. She seemed happy to have freedom.

Herein lies the problem. Amy has Down Syndrome, which is caused by an extra chromosome number 21, or trisomy 21, affecting both her physical and mental development. One challenge with Amy, in addition to her disability, is her stubbornness. How does a parent win such a battle in this situation? There was too much risk related to Amy's behavior and limitations to let her out of sight for any extended period of time. So my mother jumped into her boots and rain slicker, and followed her, jumping from tree to tree so as not to be seen while getting drenched by the splashing puddles of passing trucks. If any neighbors were watching, they must have wondered about the mental capacity of my mother that day.

Finally, my mother decided this exercise would not work as it had in the past. It was obvious Amy had no intention of turning back. She quickly swooped up to Amy as she was waiting for the light to change at a crosswalk, turned her around and adamantly proclaimed, "Amy, you are coming home right now with me and I don't want to hear another word about it," to which Amy responded: "I hate you and you are not my mother!" Who says she was not a normal teenager?

To add salt to the wound, it was a fact: she was not her biological mother. Amy had been adopted as an infant, but this information had not yet been shared with

Amy. We never thought it necessary or knew whether Amy could comprehend what it meant.

Amy came to us just 8 days old as a foster child, with the muscle capacity of a rag doll, distinctive in babies born with Down Syndrome. With the characteristic flattened face, slanted eyes and protruding tongue, it was quite obvious that she was different from any infant we had cared for in the past. Amy's birth parents had been told by the delivering physician that she would require immediate institutionalization and would be little more than a vegetable.

Within months, Amy was enrolled in an Infant Stimulation Program which taught families how to "pattern" infants in the movements that aid physical development. For example, we learned to train Amy to keep her tongue in her mouth by repetitively and gently pushing it inside and repeating "tongue in." Additionally, we learned how to pattern her arms and legs to simulate crawling.

At 2½, it became apparent that Amy was not going to be adopted by another family. Of course, Amy had already become a part of our family, so we all voted to formalize it and Amy was officially adopted, becoming the sixth child in the brood.

At 3, Amy began attending a special preschool; followed by a Montessori school at age 5, which offered customized

programs based on individual development and learning stage. The Montessori methods seemed perfect for Amy, but as a private school, it required tuition, which normally would be out of reach for our family.

Yet, not known to let an opportunity pass her by, my mother struck a deal with the administrators to clean the school and offered the talents of my father as a handyman in exchange for Amy's tuition. The school, too, was eager to try its methods on a special needs child, as all of the other children enrolled were not handicapped. Here Amy learned to read, write and socialize. Her mainstreaming had begun.

Amy continued mainstreaming in middle school and high school, graduating with a certification in 1997. She was active and involved in a local handicap center and enjoyed swimming, Special Olympics, bowling, dances, socials, basketball, music and boys.

As with any teenager, Amy longed to be on her own, independent of her parents. After all, she saw all of her siblings leave home so she wanted that too. For Amy, that meant moving into a Center for the Mentally Retarded and Developmentally Delayed. Amy soon found her place as one of the higher functioning adults and became compassionate for the nonverbal adults, even reading to residents.

Her next step was to graduate to a group home of seven other

high functioning adults. Amy loved this. She had her own space and schedule, plus she was away from "home." Here Amy also learned some real life lessons, when she was told by a staff member that she was adopted. This forced my mother to explain that Amy's parents could not care for her and that Mom brought her to our family as a newborn. Now, on every birthday, Amy will ask my mother to retell the story of her birth and delivery.

Today Amy approaches her 30th birthday, lives in a group home of four adults with staff, holds two jobs, has a full social calendar, pays for her own vacations and is fairly independent. Now my mother looks at her and realizes — she is like all of my other children, with her own priorities, her own likes and dislikes. I guess you could call her: A Very Special Success, and definitely not a vegetable! ❁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Lynn Zettler was raised in the Midwest in a family which always included foster children. She currently lives in Carmel, Indiana with her husband and 18-year-old son, but frequently visits NYC to see their 22-year-old daughter and fiancé. She obtained a chemistry degree in 1984 and has written over 80 patents. Lynn also works as a Personal Coach (www.lifeactioncoach.com) and is finishing her first book entitled *Talking to Yourself*, a self help book for learning to change negative reactions to peaceful responses.