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In Defense of My Daughter

by Judy Horton

Years ago we played with our fat baby and occasionally worried that the day would come when she would go out into the world, and the world would be cruel to her for no reason at all. That the day would come when the world would look upon the one we loved with all our hearts and see only the defect, the difference. Not her personality full of hope and alive with expectation, or her gentleness, or her terrific sense of humor or her precious little face with a beauty all its own. Just a syndrome named for Dr. Down.

"I'll be understanding," I said. "If some kid is mean, I'll explain to him about Kelly. It's really just a matter of education. Kids need to learn. They're afraid of what they don't understand."

"Yeah," said my husband. "Education. That's the thing to remember." And we looked at each other, and we looked at Kelly, and he muttered under his breath, "And then I'll rub the kid's nose off on the sidewalk." He took his fat baby girl and he hoisted her high in the air, and she laughed. He blew raspberries on her belly, and she gave forth her deep rolling chuckle.

Now that baby is eight years old, a person of fine sensibilities and definite opinions. Although we know she gets teased, we seldom see it.

But one day last year I saw it, on the playground of a church summer day care program for elementary school-aged kids. As we entered the yard one girl stage-whispered loudly to her two friends, "Look! There's that REE-tard. Ooooh, I hope she's not coming here!"

My eyes flew to Kelly's face where I saw a mask of stony indifference and icy dignity instantly install itself across her delicate features. And I knew that this was not the first time Kelly had experienced being summed up in the word "REE-tard."

The person in charge had heard this pronouncement too, but chose to pretend he had not. I politely pretended I had not heard it either. The little girls retreated to a corner of the playground, snickering and staring. There would be no room for Kelly at this particular inn. After many phone calls back and forth to discuss whether the center could meet her "needs," we ended up with no day care for the summer. (Her "needs" are these: She eats, plays, sleeps and loves to play with friends. She's a little poky and somewhat slow to catch on. She's seldom the only one.)

I hated myself for being tongue-tied. I hated Taylor, Texas. I hated the church. I hated that little girl. I hated her friends. I hated the day care worker and the director too.

We came home and Kelly went to her room to play with Heather, the imaginary friend who never fails her. My

Kelly Horton, age eight.



husband, Jerry, came home, and I cried and raged. I resolved I would never allow a thing like that to happen to my child again in my presence. I stormed to the word processor and wrote a script for myself entitled *In Defense of My Daughter*. I committed it to memory.

Yesterday, a year later, I recited it to a young boy at the town swimming pool. He was putting on a macho act for his little friends as Kelly played by herself in the water. He twisted his mouth around and hung his tongue out in a grotesque parody of our brothers and sisters and children who have mental retardation. (Kelly does not have tongue thrust, but never mind that.) He pulled his hands up and bent them over at awkward angles and lurched around with his head contorted against his neck. (Kelly has no trace of cerebral palsy, but never mind that either.) The little boys stared at Kelly and laughed at their friend's cleverness.

I strode confidently to the side of the pool and caught his eye. "Come over here," I said. He glanced around nervously, hoping I was talking to someone else. "You!" I said loudly—Ursula the Sea Witch appears at Taylor Pool! He approached the rim of the pool. I did not crouch down in a friendly manner. I drew myself up even taller.

"You are making fun of my little girl," I said.

"No ma'am," he said. "I wasn't, no, really."

"You were too," I said, "and I want you to stop it. My daughter has Down syndrome. That's the way she was born. God made her just as he made you. That's the way he made her, and he does not make mistakes. He is ashamed of you for the way you are acting, and I am ashamed of you, and you should be ashamed of yourself."

"Yes, ma'am," he said to the Sea Witch whose voice had risen and now drew the attention of a major portion of the kiddie pool. His eyes were huge and full of fear, all bravado long since gone. I waited for the words to sink in.

"Please tell me you will never do that again," I said, committing him to a lifetime of disability awareness and inclusive behavior.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "I mean, no ma'am, I won't."

"Thank you," I said. "She is my daughter, and I love her just like your own mom loves you. I won't let anyone hurt her feelings, just like your mom won't let anyone hurt you"—I hoped this was true.

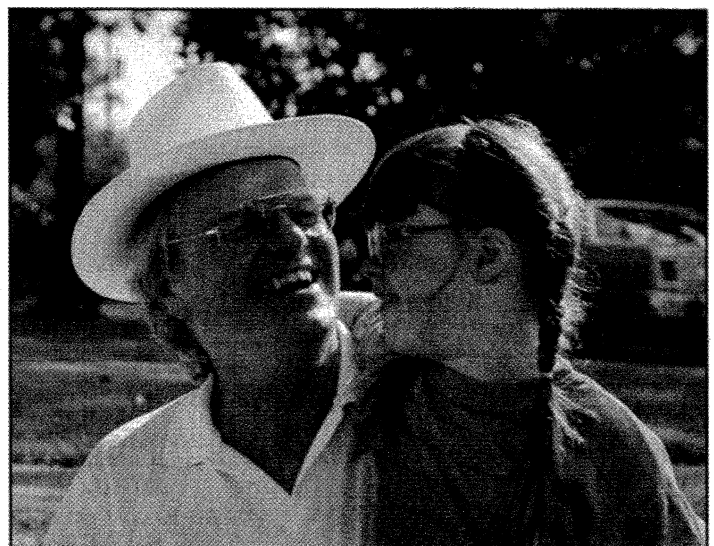
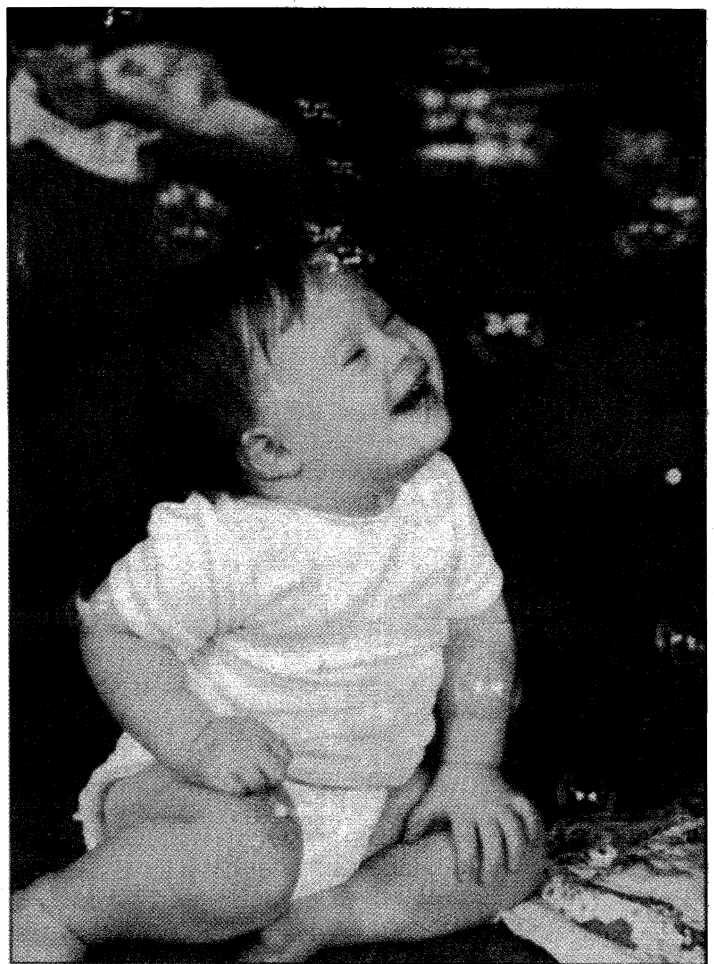
"Yes, ma'am," he repeated, tentatively backing away. He may have been uncertain of God's intentions in this matter, but made no mistake about mine.

He was thus demoted from tormentor to just another tow-headed eight-year-old with big blue eyes. Likewise, I hoped that Ursula the Sea Witch had become just some kid's mom as I returned to my bench.

Kelly had watched this exchange from a corner silently, a little alarmed that perhaps she had done something wrong. She stood transfixed in the water as the offender returned to his friends and began a game of chase.

Then, she looked up at me and smiled. "Look at me, Mommy," she said. "I stand on my hands." She dived down and stood on her hands, then surfaced, happily proclaiming, "I am a fish."

And my heart was sad, and my heart was happy. ■



Top: Kelly, 15 months.

Bottom: Kelly and Dad.

Judy Horton lives in Elgin, Texas, where she and her husband, Jerry, are developing a Christian community for people with mental retardation. Kelly, born in 1984, has Down syndrome. She is a valued member of a regular class in her local school.

