

# *In Defense of Community*

*Judy Horton, Founder of Down Home Ranch in Elgin, Texas*

*Note: This piece was written as a **Reflections in February 1998**, before any buildings were built, or residents present, at Down Home Ranch. Today the Ranch is home to 17 happy residents, our daughter among them. We are pleased to report that the vision we dreamed of has turned out to be as rich and rewarding a reality as we had hoped and prayed it would be.*

Occasionally, Jerry and I run across people who feel sorry for us because we have a child with Down syndrome, and because we work with people with disabilities. Some people imagine this to be a terrible, sad burden. How odd!

Sad to work with people with disabilities? Nope! Of course it's not always easy. Our work is hard, occasionally very hard. Sometimes it's physically hard, as during Ranch Camp, which is exhausting. And it's not always enlightening to scoop donkey poop (but curiously, sometimes it is). Plus, we have to do so many things we never expected or wanted to do, like learn accounting software.

And there is pain, real pain, which must be confronted or we will be lying to ourselves. Our daughter Kelly, flesh of our flesh, who but for one little chromosome could have matched her big sisters in intelligence, education, and opportunities, had so much taken from her before she was even born.

Kelly dreams of being a teacher, of getting married, of having children. Yet Kelly has a functional age of seven, and a mental age of three. I vacillate between the temptation to reframe and resize her dreams and saying, "Well, why not? Neither the school system nor God are finished with her yet!" But for now we must assume that Kelly will always need a lot of support, and a lot of protection.

And when we think of what that support and protection will look like, we have to come to grips with some important concepts.

First of all, we're well aware that we are swimming against a popular current with regards to "preferred" models of meeting the housing, educational, and vocational needs of people with special needs. The ideal, as expressed in many academic and advocacy circles, is usually the small group home or, better yet, an apartment in the city. "Congregate care facilities" are disparaged as out-moded and undesirable, limiting the freedom and the options of the individual.

Well, I wouldn't want to live in anything with as un-charming a name as a "congregate care facility" myself. That's why we say "Down Home Ranch is a community, a neighborhood, and more and more, we're following that by adding, *not* a facility."

I've heard it said, and I'm sure it's true, that there are people with disabilities living quite happily in their apartments in the city. But I wonder if, more often than not, such living arrangements don't look better to those on the outside than they are actually experienced by those on the inside.

You know, it takes a lot of smarts and very good judgment to live a good life on a less-than minimum wage income. And by a good life, I don't mean just having a place to live and a job. I mean finding and keeping friends, getting to work, church, and entertainment, coping with public transportation, and staying safe in an urban environment. Not being isolated. Not being lonely.

Our second daughter Martha became an advocate years ago for a young mother (I'll call her Sally) with mental disabilities, who had, by age 21, five children by five fathers, all in foster care. Martha became Sally's designated SSI payee, and strove to help her budget, find and keep a job, and fend off a whole host of "friends" (and even relatives) who found Sally popular only on the day each month they knew her SSI check arrived. Sally was an easy target of exploitation and abuse.

Sally's life consisted of one disaster after another owing to her poor judgment and inability to figure out how the world works. Yes, she had the "dignity" of independent living, but it was about the only dignity she enjoyed. I suspect there are a lot of Sallys out there, more than we want to think of.

What we want for the people who come to live at the Ranch is a full life, lived in safety among friends who love them. Our lives—together and individually—will not be that different from our neighbors' lives. We'll live the kind of life you live in the country—not too jazzy by urban standards, but that's the whole point.

Many professionals despair of us parents who "overprotect" our special-needs children. Why don't we just let them grow up and live their lives? But to our thinking, we are only extending them the protection they need. Do *you* want your seven-year old living alone in the city with only a few hours' supervision per week? That's what some states provide for clients with mental retardation living in "supported apartments" in the city.

As a society we wring our hands over our rates of teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, sex and violence on TV, and the general incivility of urban life. And that's among the so-called normal population! Do we expect our friends, children, brothers and sisters with mental disabilities to do any better? By what miracle will this occur?

If the special-needs person living in the city has a full and satisfying life, you can bet it's because he or she has the kind of supervision, support, protection, and care that our people at the Ranch have and will have in the future. The main difference will be that we will do it in the country, and it will be central to our mission.

But there will be another important difference, and this is this: that we do it because we are called in love to build a community, not a facility. The crosses on our gates are a constant reminder of our calling, and we know, more than anyone, how far short we fall in living up to what they represent. But God has sustained us, through many years, by the prayers and donations of good people of many faiths, and by the networks of churches, businesses, fraternal organizations and foundations that have come together in ways that amaze us.

We do it for the very ones whom Jesus said we must be like in order to come into His kingdom. And their presence brings us close to that kingdom.

Is the work of Down Home Ranch sad? Come, and see!