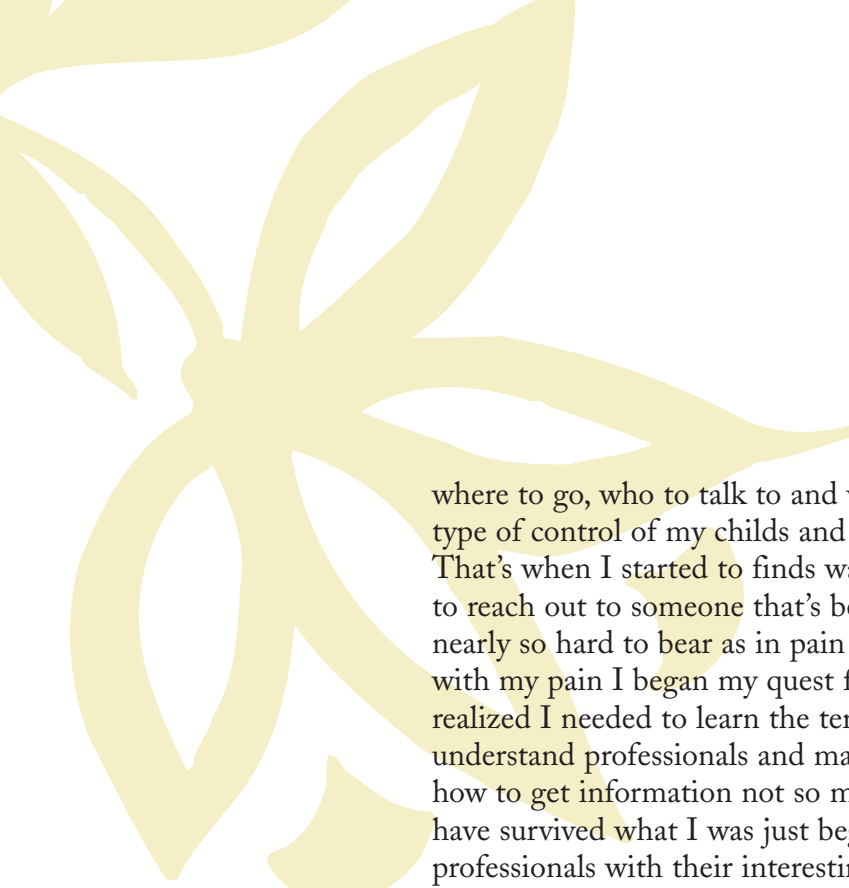


Marti

A AS MY WIFE AND I PREPARED FOR OUR SECOND CHILD WE WERE like any other family, we were extremely excited. Our first child Erin was now 12 and the thought of being a big sister had her as excited as anticipation of gifts on Christmas. Now my wife and I could actually await our new arrival. Imagine, after nine months of anticipation, wishing and hoping, there you are in the delivery room hoping that your last minute prayers for a boy are going to be answered. Then the magic moment arrives, it's girl. A girl, well, what the heck, she's beautiful. Head full of hair and looks just like her sister when she was born, and boy what a set of lungs. Within that instance I was daydreaming. Would her first words be Da-Da? What's kindergarten going to be like? Will she be a cheerleader in high school? What type of guy will she bring home to meet dad, and of course who will she marry? What'll the grandchildren look like?

That moment of imaginative bliss was broken with a comment from the doctor that still resonates as clearly now as it did 13 years ago, "I think there may be a problem", and with that statement the doctor and my brand new baby disappear into another room. Completely oblivious to the statement, I'm thinking, problem, what could be the problem. The baby is breathing, she has ten fingers and toes, she's absolutely beautiful, and she's mine. I know deep in my heart there's no real problem. So I start dreaming again. In less than 5 minutes the doctor returns and I immediately ask "what did you mean by a problem" with a two second delay and a deer in the headlight look she says, "I think your daughter has downs". Downs, what's that? She replies your child won't be able to do all the things normal kids do...your child will be mentally retarded. At that point everything seemed to come to a screeching halt. All that joy and life long anticipation that I dreamed of and hoped for was gone in an instant. The worst thing that could ever happen to anyone is to have someone snatch their dreams from them. In an instant all the control I thought I had over my daughters' future was gone. That's the most vulnerable I have ever felt in my life. Imagine being confused, feeling powerless, being disappointed and feeling guilty all in the same instant. It's not a good feeling.

I was in a lot of pain. That's when I made the decision to get control of my situation. If you can imagine, making a declaration to be in control of a situation but not knowing what the situation is, that's not a very comforting thought. I had no idea



where to go, who to talk to and what the future would bring; but I had to have some type of control of my child and my life. I refused to just take this laying down. That's when I started to find ways to soothe my pain. When you're in pain you have to reach out to someone that's been there. You quickly learn that pain divided is not nearly so hard to bear as in pain in isolation. That's a hard lesson to learn. In dealing with my pain I began my quest for information and that information opened doors. I realized I needed to learn the terminology; that I must become acquainted with to understand professionals and make informed decisions for my child. I had to learn how to get information not so much from the professional but from parents that have survived what I was just beginning. I had to learn how not to be intimidated by professionals with their interesting attitudes. That I needed to learn how not to be afraid to show my emotions, and for a man that was going to be a huge hurdle. I did survive and I needed information on the challenges my daughter would encounter in stages of her life. All of this is what I found was necessary to successfully advocate for my child. I also looked for support groups. The only way I made it this far is by talking with other families that have the same challenges I have.

The first year was the hardest. If you could imagine all the doctors telling you what your child won't be able to do. When you hear that every time it gets harder to keep your head up and remain positive.

After the first year, more doors started to open. Early intervention programs were identified and Marti began receiving supportive services. With these supports she grew and started to reach goals that on that first day of life were not even imaginable. Even as I sit and write this article I think back to that very first day and imagine what would this child's life could have been if I listened to the professionals and didn't keep dreaming.

On the day she was born, if I had let those people steal my dream, I would have denied my child the opportunity to travel the country and share her story, to become an accomplished horseback rider, to be a girl scout, and most of all to dream.

Outside of all the things we give to our children we have to remember to give them the opportunity to dream. As a parent of a special needs child there will be challenges. Challenges with the system and challenges with your child. Take one day at a time and realize this beautiful, loving child was given to you for a reason. Don't ever let anyone take their dreams away, because everybody dreams.

*Respectfully submitted by
Marty Clark, Father*