

Sara's Story

My name is Sara and I would like to share a little bit about myself with you. I definitely have something unique about me—and that is an extra-chromosome. You can't catch it, buy it, or even inherit it. It is something that happens in the 1st 24 hours of conception. There are 23 sets of chromosomes, in my case, the 21st takes on an extra-chromosome giving me 47 instead of 46, and a label that I have Down Syndrome. There are many characteristics associated with DS but none of them has ever stopped me from doing anything! (Except for the fact that my nose is too small and glasses they fall right down on me).

I don't think of myself as having "DOWN" syndrome but "Up" syndrome because I am an upbeat and positive person. I have been raised with the motto "Never" say "Never" and the words "I can't" don't exist.

"Inclusion" began the moment I was born. My family included me in everything they did. I saw all the activities my brothers and sister were involved in at church, school, and community. I knew that I wanted to do these things also. I was fortunate to have parents who believe in me. Thank God, they didn't listen to the words "Kids like these," "Can't," "Won't," "Don't," or the psychologist who said "She doesn't have the intelligence to walk through those doors alone." Instead, they met the challenge and listened to the words "You must become your child's biggest advocate, if you don't, no one else will." They saw "ability" not "disability."

Change is always difficult. Each school year began with my mom meeting the teachers, hoping to ease their fears and help them greet the idea of inclusion with an open mind. She would tell them, “We don’t expect miracles” just make her a part of the class, use your instincts and together we can create not only a challenging but a rewarding educational experience for everyone. Every September began with much doubt on their part, but by June they were believers.

Look around the room— unless you have a twin here we are all different – and yet, we all want a lot of the same things. Families that love us, friendships, good jobs and opportunities to be successful.

I was an included student from pre-school thru High School Graduation. With the help of a learning support teacher and the hard work of my parents I had a very successful educational experience. I am proud to say I even made the honor role several times. I learned from my classmates and they learned from me. I wasn’t just a follower - sometimes I was the first to do new things like when we had to memorize the Presidents or recite the Preamble to the Constitution. (Please don’t ask me to do that now).

I participated in extra-curricular activities and made lasting friendships. I was a cheerleader, played the drums in the Concert/Marching band. I went on yearly trips, including marching in the Disney World parade. I danced in our High School Variety Show for 4 years. I not only

entertained the audience, but gained the respect and admiration of my peers. They saw my “Ability” not my “Disability” and the standing ovations I received will be forever etched in my memory.

I loved Basketball, when I was younger I played on a team. My teammates and those on opposing teams learned to overlook differences and find similarities. When it became too competitive for me to play physically I wasn't about to give up my love for the game. I became the Girl's team manager. I was able to feel the joy of victory and the disappointment of defeat. A bond was built with my teammate's that has lasted longer than any season. I still hear from some of them and we talk about the good times we had.

My list of accomplishments can go on but the one that I am most proud of was organizing the 1st Buddy Walk in our area as my senior graduation project. My goal was to change hearts and attitudes towards people with Down Syndrome. The Buddy Walk is now an annual event. I do believe I have made a difference to promote awareness and understanding of the potential of individuals with Down Syndrome.

But, life does go on, leaving high school to adulthood can be a tough road to travel, but that doesn't mean it as to be a bad one. Yes, it was hard to see my high school friends go off to college, something I would love to do, but

I wasn't about to sit back and feel sorry for myself. I was determined to continue to be an involved, inclusive member of society.

I have a job in a law office - which I enjoy. I take college courses and have earned 12 credits. I lecture at my church and a volunteer in my community. I am on the NEPA Arc board and recently I was appointed to the Board of Directors of The Arc of Pennsylvania. Last September I was appointed to the National Down Syndrome Society Board in New York as a self-advocate.

In March, I attended the National Disability Conference in Washington D.C. I went to the Capital and met our legislative representatives from PA hoping they will pass the bills for people with disabilities to insure they have a better life. I hope to continue to speak as an advocate for myself and for others.

I have painted a rosy picture for you, but it hasn't always been easy. There was a time when I wanted to change my face, but I don't feel that way anymore. This face is who I am. This face has made a difference in people's lives. It doesn't matter what we look like on the outside but it's what's inside that counts. I believe in my uniqueness and I am proud of who I am.

Recently, it was mentioned to one of my high school guidance counselors, "How lucky I was to have a school

like North Pocono accept me.” His reply, “We were the lucky ones to have Sara in our school.” When I heard this, a tear came to my eye and joy filled my heart, knowing I have open doors and made a difference.

THANK YOU!