

SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS

Pat and Kelsey

Twenty-seven years ago my husband Kevin and I were preparing to send our 17-year-old son AJ to college and thinking about downsizing. We had our life planned. At least we thought we did.

We always wanted more children. But after years of miscarriages, ectopic pregnancies and the constant heartache and disappointment, we gave up.

Then....surprise! I thought I was in early menopause after all the stress on my body. But at 42 years old, I was pregnant with a little girl. We found out when I was 20 weeks along. Because of my age the doctor immediately suggested an amniocentesis to test for Down Syndrome. But the three of us decided to forego the test. After waiting so long for another child, we were going to love this baby girl no matter what.

I never said this out loud...but I just knew God would not give me that kind of challenge because I waited so very long for this perfect baby.

At 30 weeks, the doctor said the baby was in distress and we had to deliver immediately. My little baby girl Kelsey went straight into an incubator. A little while later, the doctor came in. He sat down beside me. Took my hand. And in the most compassionate way possible said 'I think we have a problem. I think she has Down Syndrome.'



All I could think about were all the things she wouldn't be or do: she wouldn't be valedictorian, go to dances, play sports, date, get married...

The next few years were filled with a heart surgery at 10 months old, physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and fighting for her to be included in school with her peers.

And, one of my biggest worries, how was she going to make friends? This little girl was so happy. She would say hi to everyone, but they didn't always say hi back. What would her life be like if kids her own age wouldn't accept her?

All I wanted for Kelsey was for her to reach her potential. But somedays it seemed like an uphill battle.

How the heck was I going to get Kelsey where she needed to be in life?

At the same time, life for our family was changing dramatically too. Taking care of Kelsey was my first priority. All my time was focused on her. There was less and less time for my husband, my son and for myself. Time for our family was gone.

Then a friend had told us about WDSRA. At 8 years old we put Kelsey in rhythmic gymnastics. I remember sitting through the whole program just watching. I didn't know the coaches or the system. I didn't know how they would treat her, if she would be safe or even like it.

What I saw was a coach who took care of Kelsey. She taught and challenged her. And even though Kelsey was and still is that friendly child who wants to make friends wherever she goes, the coach helped her make friends. That was a god-send. It's one thing for me to try and help her make friends but how long would that work? At WDSRA, she found instant acceptance.... from the kids and the staff. This was a place where she could be herself and not 'the different child'.

The coach kept me updated on how she was doing and was honest about her behavior. We practiced her routines together outside of the program. It was pretty special. WDSRA made me feel like I was a part of it without having to be alongside Kelsey. She was in good hands with them.

I realized then, that when she was at WDSRA, I didn't have to be. I could let WDSRA be her time AND my time...separately.

As she got older and did more with WDSRA, we were able to get back to being a family. I didn't have to take Kelsey everywhere, all the time, with me anymore. And I found more time for my husband and for myself. That changed everything.

Now...18 years later, with WDSRA Kelsey plays sports, goes to dances, attends the adult day program and has a full social life. She even has her 'girls' that she met at WDSRA. They have been friends for a very long time. WDSRA has given her a life filled with purpose.

If I could go back to myself 26 years ago when that doctor sat on the bed and gave me Kelsey's diagnosis, I would say ... Just wait. There are good things to come. She WILL have friends, she WILL be active, she WILL take pride in her accomplishments. Just wait. Kelsey is absolutely perfect the way she is.