

SPECIAL CHILDREN



Special Mother

LINDA OWEN

IT IS EARLY MORNING on a cold and blustery day in February. Falling sleet has made driving almost impossible in San Antonio, Texas, where motorists are not accustomed to such weather.

Although the radio announcer warns people to stay home, Mary MacPherson has ventured forth, feeling that at least one employee should be at the child-care facility for those parents who may have to leave their children there.

Concentrating carefully, Mary peers over the steering wheel at the white world outside. Her muddy brown van with the *Pro-Life* bumper sticker edges through yesterday's snow that still laces the streets. With her are her five adopted sons, still excited about the snowman they had built the previous afternoon.

This is not an ordinary winter's day in San Antonio, nor is this an ordinary woman with an ordinary family.

Mary sees herself as a typical American mother who happens to work—and who “loves her children and enjoys watching them grow.” Other people see her as a woman who has been called by God—a crusader who believes that “all children can have rewarding lives, even if they begin life under a dark cloud.”

Mary has proven this theory time and time again. You see, her adopted children—the ones who danced in snow piles yesterday, the ones who made a snowman's smile out of buttons—all have disabilities.

Choosing motherhood

Mary could have chosen an easier life. In 1974, at the age of thirty-four, she was a special-education teacher at a San Antonio school for children with mental disabilities. She had a comfortable middle-class income and summers free to see the world. But this single career woman had begun to wonder if she would ever marry—because the one thing she wanted most was to be a mother.

Eventually, Mary decided to adopt a baby. After visiting several

agencies, however, she soon discovered how difficult it was in the 1970s for a single woman to adopt. At the same time, Mary found that children with disabilities were always available—children who had not been adopted as infants and who would eventually be institutionalized if not received into someone's home.

Mary embraced the challenge. In the years that followed, she would foster fifty-eight children—and adopt the ones with disabilities.

“All my life I wanted the diapers and the two A.M. feedings,” Mary

admits. "So I fostered infants—as many as I could. I loved them and wanted to adopt them, but the agencies wanted to place them—the ones who did not have disabilities—in homes with couples."

Jesus leads

In the fall of 1974, Mary was given Tommy, a two-year-old "with a failure to thrive." From the moment she saw him, her heart raced. "Something inside me said 'take him home,'" she remembers.

But the agency, worried that Tommy was not walking or talking or relating to his surroundings, put conditions on his adoption:

"If I took Tommy, I had to agree that it would be a whole year before I could start my six-month trial period to adopt him," Mary explains. "I was single, you see, and I wanted a child who most social workers thought should be placed in an institution."

But Tommy progressed. In fact, he was doing so well after two months that the agency asked Mary to foster other special children as soon as Tommy's adoption was finalized.

In her first two years with Tommy, Mary also fostered forty other children. Slowly she began to realize that God was using her, that he had given her a mission: "When God's call crystallizes, it's like finding the missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle," Mary explains. "Everything I had done in my life—step by step—had prepared me for this. I felt as if Jesus had been leading me around by the hand, making sure I had the

experience I needed to take care of his tiniest flock."

Her voice cracks with emotion. "I felt very strongly about fostering children....I was really grateful to have Tommy—a child of my own. And I needed to share that blessing with others. Tommy had been in a foster home for two years before I got him....Someone had cared for him and loved him; I needed to do it for someone else."

Strength from Scripture

After a few years, Mary again asked to adopt an infant. Instead, she got three-year-old Bobby, "a freckle-faced boy who looked like a cute Norman Rockwell kid." But Bobby had been neglected and abused, his body scarred with bite marks and cigarette burns. He had neurological disorders that caused temperamental seizures, later diagnosed as episodic discontrol. As a child, he talked with his hands when he was aggravated; as he grew up, "he'd have violent outbursts, putting his fist through the walls."

Bobby was a handful. Still, Mary loved him, adopted him, and prayed for God's guidance. She felt that God had called her to care for Bobby and that "the Lord would help me." When Mary needed strength, she recalled this passage from Mark 10:27: "All things are possible for God."

Bearing this verse in mind, she reminded herself that Tommy had surpassed everything the social workers thought possible. "I knew I had not done that alone," she says, "and that's what kept me going."

Miraculously, one day Mary discovered how to control Bobby's "threshold of aggravation" by eliminating corn and milk from his diet.

A special gift

Encouraged by a "revelation from God," Mary adopted three more boys in the next few years: John, a ten-year-old with mental and visual impairments; Chris, a three-and-a-half-year-old, with mental disability and mild cerebral palsy; and two-year-old Steve, born with learning disabilities in language, reading, and problem-solving skills.

As word got around about Mary's gift with special children, agencies and acquaintances—even strangers—began to call on her for help. That year Mary took in two unwed mothers-to-be. Both had been warned by doctors that their babies might have "defects." One of the teenagers, "Alice," had episodic discontrol and a shortened left arm. Alice confided in Mary that she was afraid her baby would inherit these conditions. Mary told her, "I'll raise the baby if you don't want to. The Lord loves all children, especially the ones with disabilities."

Mary assured both girls that their babies would be special—to them as well as to God. "I thank our Lord every day that my boys' birth mothers allowed them to be born. My life would be so empty without my family."

Getting involved

Part of that joy comes from Mary's involvement in her sons' lives. She believes that special children need

the same kinds of experiences with family and church and community that other people have. Sometimes that means "a parent has to become an advocate and fight for her child."

Although Mary's special-education background was an asset in some ways, she insists that the Spirit guided her through "unknown territory." Feeling that her children needed to be "taught in a special way," Mary wrote the Texas Education Agency and requested testing for Bobby, who was having discipline problems at school.

Bobby's teachers were surprised to learn that he was diagnosed with dyslexia and dysgraphia, which explained why he couldn't read or copy from the blackboard. He couldn't express his needs, thus his outbursts.

Mary went to dozens of school-board meetings and consulted with counselors and teachers. As a result, all of her sons have had speech therapy and specialized resource and/or vocational training. Chris and John have been in self-contained special-education classes, and Steve is working with a reading specialist.

Blessings in disguise

One day after school, Tommy asked his mother why God had made children with learning disabilities. Sensing his anxiety, Mary immediately sat Tommy and his brothers down and told them the story of Paul and the "thorn in the flesh" that had caused him such great suffering (2 Cor 12:7). Mary reminded her clan that "no one is

perfect; we all suffer. We all have something wrong with us, something we wish we could change. That's what reminds us that we're mortal and that we need God," she explained.

For the next hour they discussed people the boys knew—children and adults as well—who had disabilities, everything from poor eyesight to baldness to leukemia.

"God's grace is the power to endure a heavy burden or a disability," Mary told them. "In a sense, our hardships are blessings in disguise, for they produce strength of character. They also allow us to see the power of God."

Sometimes, though, it's tough on the boys, who become discouraged when they can't keep up with the other students. Every night Mary helps them with their homework, telling them emphatically: "God loves you the way you are. Just do the best you can, and God will be proud of you."

Sent by God

Mary admits that at times it hasn't been easy for her either. When trials come, she handles them like any other Christian mother: "with love and faith that Jesus is at my side."

One winter her car caught fire and burned, and she had to wait six weeks for the insurance company to pay the claim. During this time, Mary walked her children to school and to church, even in freezing weather. As a result, she came down with pneumonia and couldn't work.

For six months the oven and stove didn't work, so she prepared all the

family's meals in an electric skillet.

In the midst of these hardships, Mary says she saw how "God touched people's hearts." A local pediatric surgeon performed, free of charge, an emergency appendectomy on Bobby. "This doctor still comes every Christmas with a check," Mary says affectionately. "I have no idea what Church he belongs to, but I know he was sent by God."

With the check from the insurance company, Mary was able to purchase a used van. The entire family then started delivering newspapers, taking on six paper routes at one time—one for Mary and one for each of the five boys. It was at this time that a good citizen, the owner of a gas station, donated four tires so that the family could drive around safely.

"We know that we are a true test of Christian discipleship," Mary says frankly. "We know we're *different*. We come in different shapes and colors, and we don't have much money. You really have to practice what you preach to embrace us. But when people do nice things for us, my sons are able to glorify God's presence in our lives."

A lifetime vocation

When the boys were old enough, Mary went to work part-time at a preschool. Seeing the babies in the nursery, she would sometimes "get the old feeling again, that longing to raise a child from infancy, to have the whole motherhood experience."

"People would ask me, 'Why do you want another child? Don't you

have enough mouths to feed, enough problems?' They couldn't understand. But I knew I was doing God's will. I was puzzled that no one else could see it."

All things are possible for God. In 1991 Mary adopted her first daughter, Angela Dawn MacPherson—the infant she had always wanted. The baby's birth mother was Alice, the teenager Mary had befriended.

And today...

The house isn't as full as it used to be. Bobby, now twenty-one, has moved in with friends and is trying to make it on his own. John and Chris are living in a group home for adults with mental disabilities. Mary misses them, of course; but she sees them, talks to them on the telephone, and attends church with them. "When you adopt a child, it's forever," she says.

Meanwhile, Mary, now fifty-three, continues her work at the preschool, where she plays with the three-year-olds in her charge.

Sometimes Mary thinks back to the time in 1983 when it snowed. She remembers the hazardous drive on the ice to a dark school building where children and anxious parents waited inside their cars, the motors still running.

Someday she'll take her pictures out and show Angela what snow looks like. There will be pictures of Tommy, Bobby, Chris, John, and Steve having a snowball fight with the children who came to school that day.

"My kids are just like anyone else's," Mary says with a smile. "I adopted them on faith, and I knew that with God's help, it would all work out. God has been good to us." ▼

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