

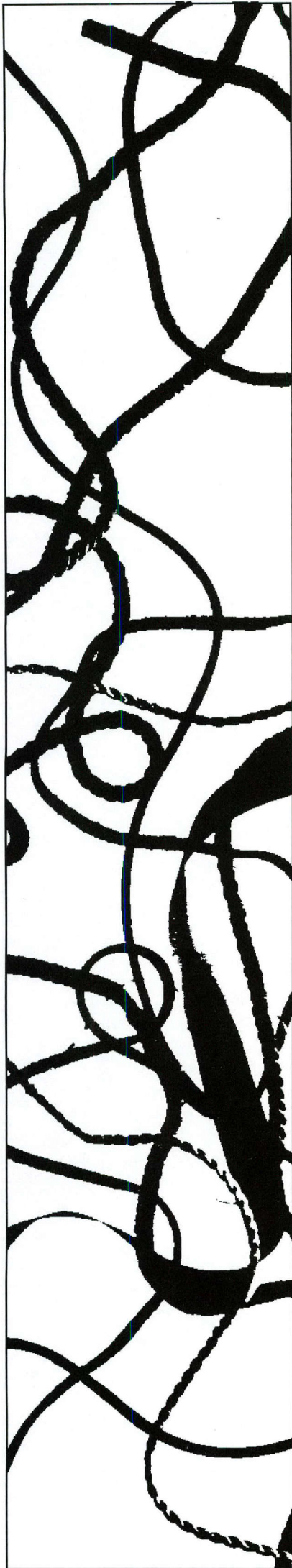
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# *Community Connections*

... Weaving Friendships







# *Community Connections*

*... Weaving Friendships*

*In seven Texas communities,  
new bonds of friendship have been woven  
between individuals with disabilities  
and other people,  
bringing an end to social isolation  
and enriching the lives of everyone involved  
in often-unexpected ways.*

*Each friendship weaves a fabric of its own design.  
Separate lives touch, intertwine,  
then flow outward in new directions  
as the individuals become connected  
to each other and to their communities.  
They spend time together, share experiences,  
have fun, and support each other  
as they grow and change.  
That is what friendship is all about.*

*And so, new "community connections" take shape,  
two interwoven strands at a time.*

*Here are 15 stories about such friendships . . .*

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*This monograph was created by  
Sharon Clark,  
Clark & Associates, Dallas.*

*Photography by  
David Edmonson.*

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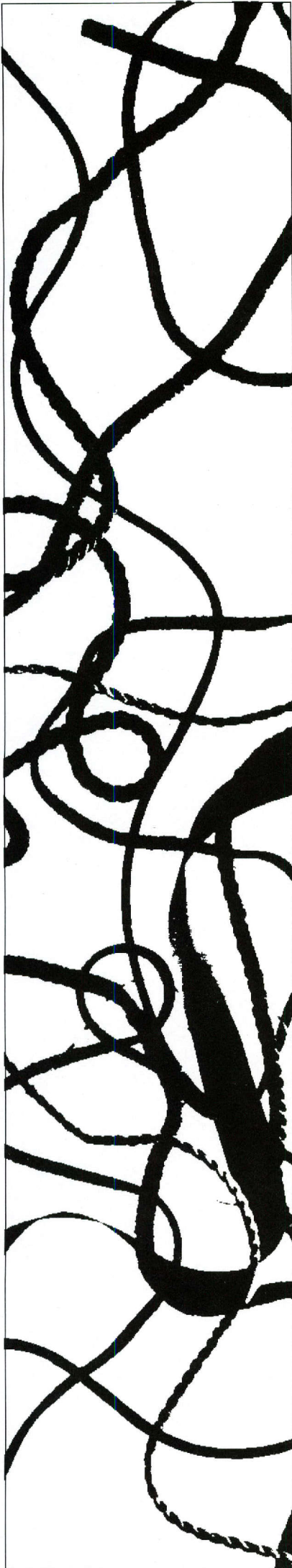
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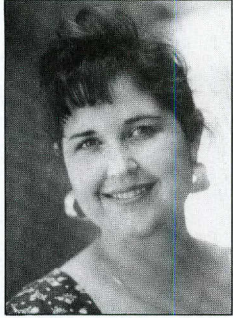
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# About Community Connections



*"I think life without a friend must be the emptiest feeling. A friend accepts you unconditionally; loves you regardless; shares the good and the bad. A friend is the person we call to share our good times, who holds us when we cry about bad times, supports us through the rough times and accepts us in spite of our faults. No one should go through life without the caring and support a friend provides."*

Gail Susik  
Community Connections Project, Midland

The mission of the **Texas Planning Council for Developmental Disabilities** is to create change so that people are fully included in their communities and exercise control over their own lives.

In 1991 the Council initiated a program called **Community Connections** with projects in Alvin, Arlington, Austin, El Paso, Houston, Lubbock and Midland. Community Connections matches individuals who have developmental disabilities and are isolated from community life, with other people who share common interests. With the new friendships come expanded horizons -- opportunities to share new experiences, meet others, and be welcomed into the many regular everyday activities of neighborhood and community life.

*"Community Connections is the opportunity to go African dancing, lift weights, eat at What-a-Burger, join a martial arts class, see the circus, go to church/synagogue, attend poetry readings, find country western bars, drum with a drumming group, look into the local Elvis club, attend Star-Trek conventions, and explore all the possible avenues for connections with our community and the people who live here with us."*



Betty Siegel  
Community Connections Project, Austin

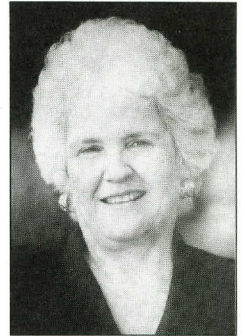
Like all of us, people with disabilities thrive in the company of good friends. But all too often people with developmental disabilities are isolated, especially if they have lost contact with their family or are in nursing homes. Even those who live outside institutions may still be in sheltered or segregated settings, spending most of their time surrounded only by paid service providers and other people with disabilities.

Loneliness can be a problem, and opportunities for genuine new friendships can be limited. Community Connections creates these opportunities.

"While the social services system has made a great deal of effort to make sure we have case managers and food stamps arranged, and we've taken care of housing and how to cook, no one has ever taken the time to say, 'Wow, you need a life. You need to enjoy things. You need to do things and be in your community.'" -- Gail Susik.

*"Community Connections enables isolated persons with developmental disabilities to have a friend of their very own with whom to share their dreams and confidences, to learn to make choices and to explore options in the community. I know 'learning to make choices' seems strange to us who have always had that privilege, but if a person has never been allowed to make choices, he doesn't know how."*

Betty Ketchum  
Community Connections Project, Alvin



Community Connections friendships are just that -- friendships. The goal is naturally occurring, long-term relationships. This is not "volunteering my time to help someone less fortunate," although it is normal to help one's friends and advocacy may develop out of a friendship.

Each friendship is a two-way street where each person is equal. Each actively participates in the friendship, enjoys it, gives to it and benefits from it.

Like any other friends, they share whatever time and activities they choose. They also share each other's pain, happiness, frustration, sadness, indignation, dreams, hopes, confusion, and celebration.

Community Connections staff perform a sort of matchmaking function. They seek out individuals who have similar interests, who seem to have things in common, who are open to meeting new friends, and introduce them. "The nature of this work is small and personal. It can only be done one person at a time." -- Tom Kohler, Citizen Advocacy, Savannah, Georgia.

Once a new friendship begins to develop naturally on its own, staff involvement fades into the background. Each friendship is free to take its own direction, though staff remain available to provide ideas, information and moral support if requested. One staff person defined a successful relationship as one that goes on indefinitely without the staff's knowledge.





*"Don't believe anyone who tells you that one person can't make a difference. I've seen one-on-one relationships in Community Connections change lives in subtle and dramatic ways for everyone involved."*

Cindy Lindsey  
Community Connections Project, Houston

"If people will stay connected to one another for really long periods of time, they become more important to one another than they could ever imagine." -- Tom Kohler.

In this age of scattered families, busy schedules and fast-paced living, it has become easy to lose sight of the need to stay in touch. People need to stay connected -- to family and friends, organizations and activities.

"Friendship is an essential source of support, motivation, and inspiration in all our lives. Community Connections friends have found that the simple act of friendship has expanded their horizons in unpredictable ways and given them the confidence to overcome challenges. As friends, they have looked past the superficial differences that keep people apart and found many things to share and enjoy in each other." -- Moving Image Production.



*"Our Community Connections program has opened new horizons for friendship, opportunities and exposure to the community for scores of people who are hearing impaired."*

Don Cabbage  
Community Connections Project, El Paso

People are very conditioned about how they are supposed to think and act around persons with disabilities. But by actions as simple as being seen together and sharing experiences, people can challenge fundamental beliefs of our culture. When other people see a person with a disability having lunch in a restaurant with a person from the community, then people see things they are not used to seeing and realize that it's OK.

"I think it's lack of knowledge; it's the fear of the unknown. People somehow think that a person with a disability is somehow different than them. They don't realize that they have the same wants, needs, desires that we all have. They may ambulate in a different way, or maybe they use a wheelchair, or maybe their speech is different. The uncertainty of knowing how to overcome those, I think, keeps some people from even making the attempt." -- Tammi Lafuente, Community Connections Project, Lubbock.

Our culture has devalued people who do not meet the norm -- people who look different, behave differently or have different values. None of these differences, however, have anything to do with integrity, honesty, kindness, or the ability to be a good friend. People who have disabilities also have goals, skills, humor, humanity, and a capacity for friendship that can enrich all our lives. They can be valued neighbors, co-workers, family members and friends.



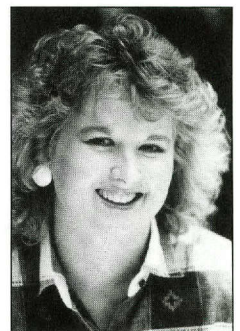
*"Community Connections is essential for the consumers and friends. Relationships are developed which might not usually occur. Both individuals are satisfying needs. It enables consumers to have real life experiences in the community in which they live and to learn what it means to be a part of the community."*

Marsha Hudson  
Community Connections Project, Arlington

Communities suffer when each member isn't valued and active. Healing our communities means seeking out those excluded and displaced and reaching out to them. People with disabilities face overwhelming barriers to community involvement -- barriers such as fear and misinformation. Community Connections overcomes these barriers by linking people with disabilities with other individuals in the community and adding new dimensions to their lives while also making their communities diverse and flourishing, healthy and whole.

*"Community Connections is about life in its purest form -- filling an innate need of acceptance and belonging. It's about the powerful bond that is formed when people share their inner self with one another."*

Tammi Lafuente  
Community Connections Project, Lubbock



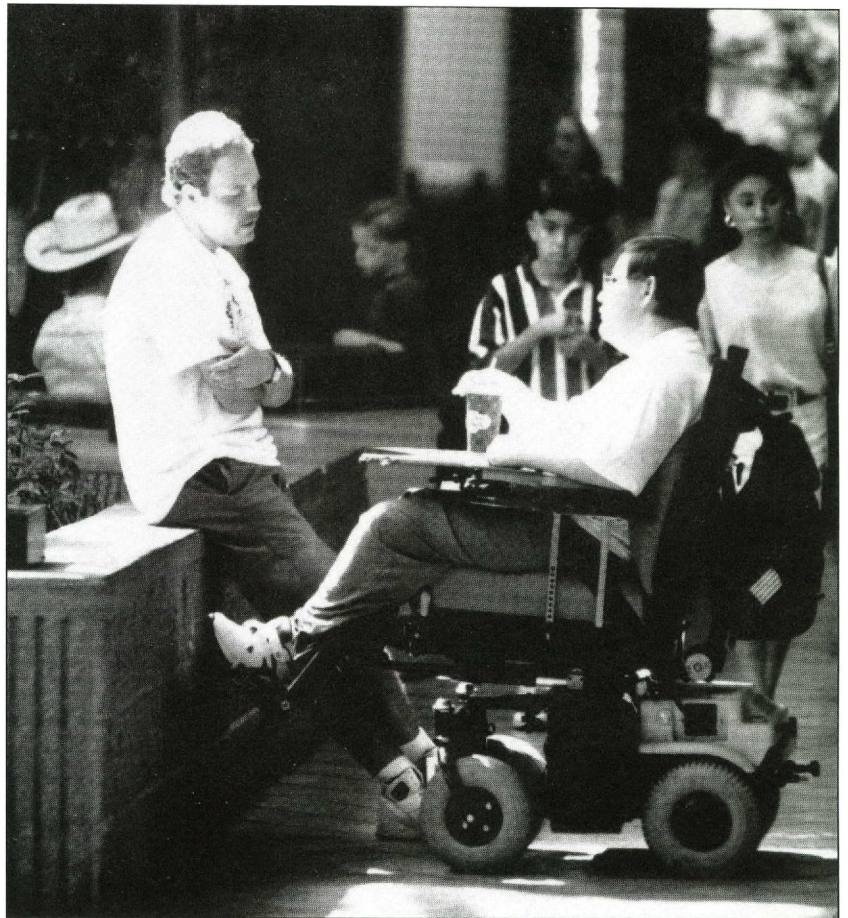
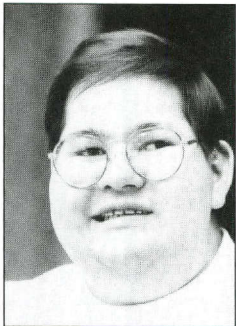
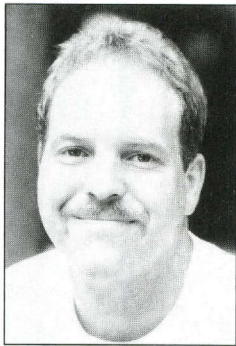
"People without disabilities need to realize that we all have gifts to offer. Most of us grew up not knowing people with disabilities and we've missed out." -- Gail Susik.



*Fifteen  
Friendships ...*

# Shelby & Danny

... Lubbock



*What's worse on  
Christmas morning?  
Waking up to no gifts?  
Or waking up to no one  
to accept your gifts?*

At the age of eight, Danny developed a brain tumor. After two years, nine surgeries and over 40 radiation treatments, he lost most of his mobility and some of his mental functions.

Danny, age 10, was dropped off at a nursing home. There he became the "perfect" patient, demanding nothing, receiving little and never leaving the facility -- since he was labeled "too medically fragile" to do so. And he lost contact with his family.

With no control over his wheelchair, Danny went to where he was wheeled and stayed there until he was moved.

Little changed until his late teens.

\*\*\*

With the holiday season approaching, Tammi, with Community Connections, had a question: "Danny, for Christmas, if you could have anything in the world that you wanted, what would it be?"

"To live with my family."

Tammi sighed. "Yes ... but ... what *else* would you like?"

"An electric wheelchair."

Well, why not? Controls could surely be designed so that Danny could use his physical capabilities to operate the chair himself, and gain his freedom of movement.

Tammi, determined, went back to the agency. They brainstormed. They located resources. And eventually Danny's new electric wheelchair — "My wheels!" — was delivered.

His friend Shelby was there to help him figure out the controls. Soon -- to the initial dismay of the nursing home staff -- Danny was

zooming around the halls. And, like many new teenage drivers, at first he had his shares of bumps and dents.

But now, Danny can go most anywhere under his own power.

To the mall with Shelby.  
Even to school.

\*\*\*

Shelby, an athletic looking man with warm brown eyes, is a college student by day and a bingo caller by night. "It's a lot of fun — a blast!"

He recalls, "I used to take my guitar to the nursing home, and Danny and I would sing together. Here was a guy who was witty, intelligent, who had a lot of charm and a great sense of humor, and he was in a nursing home and just didn't get to do much.

"I knew he needed someone else in his life."

\*\*\*

When asked what a vigorous twenty-something and a teen-something in a wheelchair have in common, they reply, an interest in "girls, motorcycles, girls, cars, girls, music and *girls*." These interests are reflected in the posters which draw their attention at the mall.

\*\*\*

Danny and Shelby are big music fans. Danny says, "We both like a little bit of rock 'n' roll and a little bit of country." George Jones, Willie Nelson, Van Halen, Poison and Kiss all make the top of Danny's and Shelby's chart.

They laugh about their last outing to the mall when they went into a karaoke place and made a video of the two of them singing a duet, complete with country and western background. The song? "Mama, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys."

Danny adds that he knows another song, too — "Elvira." With just a little urging and a big grin, he sings it. Standing behind him, Shelby mouths the words.

With Shelby there are trips to the mall and the video arcade, movies, and eating out.

And friendship.

\*\*\*

Shelby has gone to bat for his friend — supporting Danny's physician in allowing him to leave the nursing home for social activities, pushing for Danny's attendance at the local public high school, and, most importantly, encouraging Danny's moving into a real home in the community.

Danny recently left the nursing home and moved into a transitional home. Plans are underway for his next move: living with a family, as soon as the right family can be found. It's only a matter of time now.

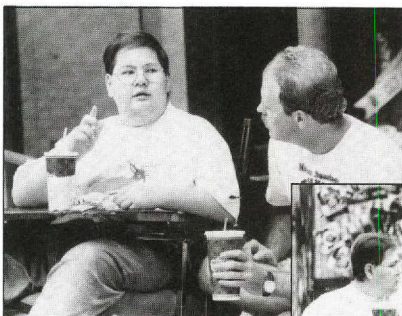
Shelby's push for high school has also paid off. Danny is in some regular classes, and he sings in the choir.

Danny's sense of humor came out during preparations for the choir's Christmas concert. He led his fellow singers in a rousing rendition of the childhood rhyme, "Jingle Bells, Batman Smells," while the teacher was out of the room.

\*\*\*

Danny and Shelby are both going to summer school. How is it? Danny: "It's all right, but I know I could do without it." Shelby: "I like it, but I'm ready for it to be over."

\*\*\*



"Shelby! I found a gray hair!"  
"At least you *have* hair, man! I'd love to have gray hair where I have none."

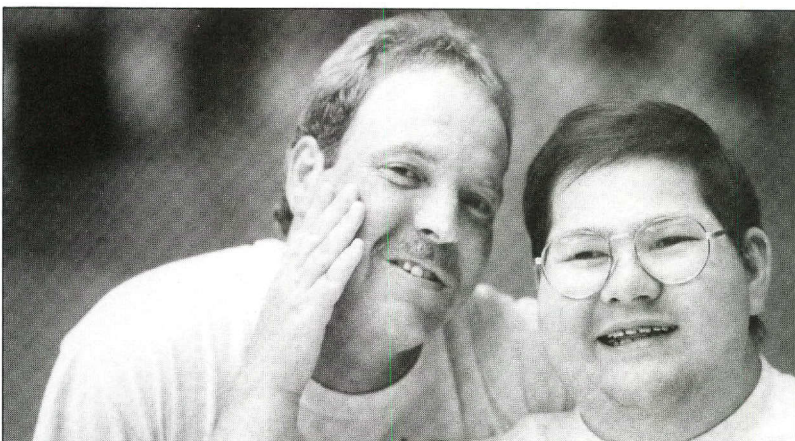
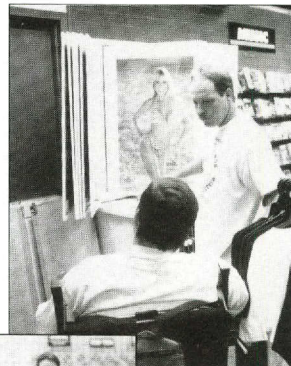
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"Danny, you are such a character. Are you ever serious?"

"No, I'm always Danny."

"You gotta love this guy."

"No. You don't gotta ... you just *can*."



# Theresa & Susan



... Houston



*Sometimes people need "permission" to do what it is their heart is telling them to do. In Theresa's case it was a little notice in a neighborhood newspaper that opened the door to a friendship.*



*Theresa:* "We go to the same church — St. Ignatius Loyola Catholic Church. My husband and I always sat in the same pew as Susan and her parents, and said 'pleasantries' to each other.

"When I saw the notice in the newspaper and read about the people the Community Connections program was trying to reach, I realized that I already knew someone I might approach on my own and see about making friends."

*Susan:* "It is pretty amazing how else we met. When she got pregnant with her first baby I introduced myself." (Matthew is now three years old.)

"I fell in love with her baby. I always have loved children. Children are our future. They're so sweet and innocent. Then I asked Theresa if she wanted to go out. We went out to eat at the mall, and things just led to other things."

\*\*\*

*When Theresa introduced me to people who could help me, I had to say, 'I really believe God sent you to me. This is the answer to my prayers. I have wanted a job, friends, independence, but it just seems I couldn't get there.' Now I have a job and there are the times I spend the night with Theresa and all the places I get to go with her.*

"A year ago I didn't think I would have a friend quite so special as Theresa."

Today, Susan has a position at the Starting Gate Child Care Center and recently completed child care classes at the local community college.

Theresa has encouraged her all along the way. "It is wonderful now that your parents are supportive of your job. And you seem to have more open communications with them now than before. I like your parents, and I think they like me too."

Susan explains, "My parents are in their sixties now. It is not my place to interfere in their house any more. I've been with them since I was a little girl and they don't need the responsibility of taking care of a grown woman. My dad's health is not good. He had a heart attack. My mother doesn't drive. After my dad got sick, we moved here to be near my sister. She lives across the street, four houses down."

\*\*\*

"The number one dream I have is, oh, I don't know, maybe, perhaps, get a home of my own.

"Ever since this job has come in my life, it has changed my life.

"I could never have gotten this far without counseling, too. It has made me even more happy with myself. It has made me accept myself and love myself more. Sometimes I would get jealous over my brothers and sisters and I would get impatient and angry with people. This person I used to know (my former self) — I hope she stays away because I really love the person I know now — she is positive.

"I don't think I could have done it without Theresa's help. Now I've got this job.

"And happiness."

\*\*\*

In the cheerful, brightly-colored child care center where Susan works, a visitor comments on how pleasant the surroundings are. Susan proudly responds:

"Guess who keeps it that way! I clean, fix lunch, and also wash the dishes. I work from 10:30 until 6:30. I also help dish out the food and put the napkins, cups and spoons out, and sometimes my boss gives me special projects.

"But the favorite thing about work is the children. And I like to hold the babies."

\*\*\*

As with all good friendships, theirs works both ways. When Matthew became a toddler, Theresa and her husband spent frustrating months hoping for a second baby. Theresa confided her feelings of discouragement to Susan who shares her love of children. Susan understood and always provided words of encouragement and hope. Now she shares their pleasure in baby Marie, everyone's pride and joy.

\*\*\*



"Susan really gives a lot back to me. We can really talk to each other. With Susan there is no pretense; her feelings are very genuine.

"We used to be 'mall buddies,' but with the new baby, it's hard for me to get out like we used to, so now Susan usually spends a weekend a month with our family. My husband has gotten to know Susan and really enjoys having her come over.

"We cook together. Susan helped me make enchiladas and then muffins for breakfast on her last visit. Susan likes coffee and I prefer hot chocolate with whipped cream, so I bought a special coffee she likes and a new coffee pot. When Susan comes over, out it comes!"

Susan says, "Sometimes we rent movies and I get to pick them out. 'Forever Young' and 'The Firm' were two, and we always get Matthew a Walt Disney movie.



"I got hooked on being like Theresa's sister because she lost her other sister. And today I love her as a sister and look up to her husband as a brother."

\*\*\*

Theresa reflects, "I really feel like our friendship was destined to be. Ours is a large church, but we always sat together and we got to know each other. When I read that story in the paper, I realized, 'Maybe this might be a person who would like a friend.' I just needed to look next door in my own little area.

"Now when I'm having a bad day, I can call Susan. She's always positive."

\*\*\*

"With past friends, I felt like a little kid," says Susan. "But with Theresa, I feel like a grown up."



# David & Bobby

... Austin



*"My wife says I only have two speeds, fast and stopped,"* says David.

Bobby and David were introduced by a mutual friend who first met David in a signing class and sensed that they would "complement each other: Bobby is so shy and retiring, and David is so outgoing and flamboyant."

Sure enough, the two men -- about the same age, both married, serious about religion, working down the street from one another -- quickly discovered many common interests.

"At first, we talked," Bobby recalls, with such an emphasis on the word "talked" that he clearly means "we talked and talked and talked" -- "about the news, our families, church, home, outside things, government, politics, lots of things.

"We like to go out to lunch and talk."

\*\*\*

Bobby grew up in San Antonio, where his parents still live. They are a close family. Bobby writes to them with ease, now that "David helped me learn to use the computer."

The pair both hope computer skills may become a key to career development for Bobby. His goal is to move into a better-paying job than his current clerical position with a non-profit agency. David admires him for this, and tells him so.

"Bobby is not satisfied with being stuck."

"I want to learn and learn," Bobby says determinedly.

Learning useful skills from one another has gone both ways. Bobby says, "I am teaching him to do sign language. We share that."

"I am losing my hearing in one ear, and surgery was not successful," David explains, "so I decided to learn signing." Like Bobby, David now wears a hearing aid.

"I also needed to find out what being deaf is like. Right now, I only hear about half of what's going on. It's like being trapped between two different worlds. The deaf culture is totally different.

Learning this has been both scary and revealing for me. I've gotten a whole different perspective about this through Bobby."

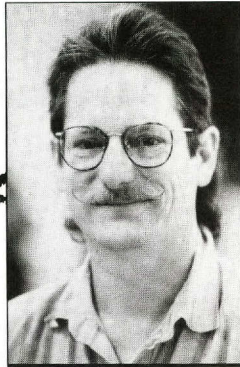
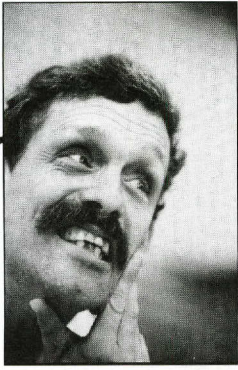
How are David's signing skills coming along? Bobby pauses very thoughtfully, hesitates, looking for the right words, and then says, "Well, he is progressing." David admits, "It's been a struggle. Sometimes you just say, 'This doesn't work; try something else.'" Signing isn't easy for Bobby either because of his cerebral palsy.

David enjoys showing Bobby the signs for some informal slang expressions, making their conversation more easy and casual. Now instead of "good-by," it's "later, man."

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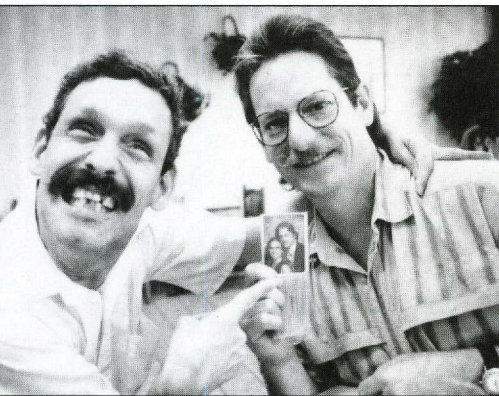
As a friendship grows, so does its circle. After developing their own bond, Bobby and David decided to let their wives, Alma and Judy, into the relationship.

"David's wife is very nice and she is beautiful. She and my wife just talked and talked. They had a nice time," Bobby recalls.

Bobby's wife Alma is from Austin, which has been home to Bobby also for the past 17 years. Friends introduced them. "We met, and things just moved on and then we became married," Bobby explained.

Was it love at first sight? "Oh, yeah!"

\*\*\*



David and his wife Judy live in a house they built themselves outside Austin -- "our cabin in the hills." This spring they invited Bobby and Alma out for a tour and a cook-out with their neighbors. It turned out that Alma and the neighbor's wife already knew each other from church. They enjoyed an idyllic hill-country evening, with towering liveoak trees, beautiful purple flowers, the neighbors' horse wandering through, plenty of barbecue ("It was *delicious*," says Bobby), and as always, good conversation.

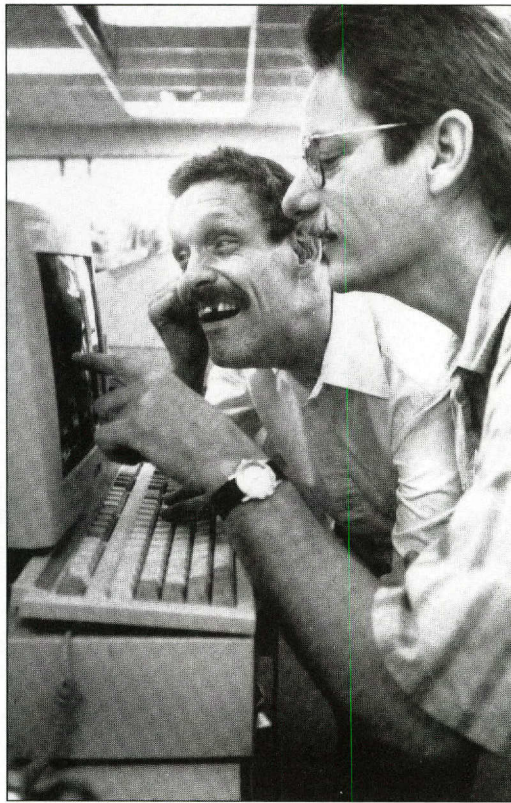
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Reflecting upon the year that has passed since he first met David, Bobby signs, "David is a good friend. Wow, he is really good to me. I just like him."

Bobby grins. "David teases me. He is very funny. He jokes, and we laugh."

The handlebar moustache has become David's trademark. Now Bobby is working on growing one too.

\*\*\*



David is a printer. The explosion of new technology to keep up with in his field, plus long hours and demanding customers, can leave him feeling overburdened with responsibility.

Bobby's life has its own pressures.

They have found that making time for lunch together is not only a pleasure but a stress-reliever. "In the middle of a tough work day, it's enjoyable just to stop and find a completely different environment" -- to take time out together for relaxation, sharing experiences, laughter, fun, and renewal.



# Brandy & Ginny,

... Lubbock

Upon entering Brandy's bedroom, one of the first things you notice is the color pink ... a pretty pink bedspread, pink dresses on stuffed animals and a collection of pink hairbows.

Thumbtacked to the closet door is a poster of "Beverly Hills 90210" star Luke Perry. Over the bed is a poster of guitar-wielding country music mega-star Garth Brooks. His music plays softly. A bulletin board is crowded with pictures of Garth, Clint Black and Dwight Yoakum, plus a handsome young man in an Army uniform, her big brother.

For those familiar with such scenes, Brandy's bedroom qualifies as a typical bedroom of a teenage girl.

Except that it is in a nursing home.

\*\*\*

Even before junior high school, Brandy was known as strong-willed. Then, when her parents divorced, she went through what her family describes as her rebellious stage. She seemed to need to take risks and prove she could make her own decisions, as so many teenagers do. One of these decisions was to stop taking the medication that controlled her epilepsy.

While out with friends one night, Brandy had a severe seizure.

She was rushed into intensive care and lapsed into a coma.

Day after day, her friends kept a vigil at the hospital. But as those first dramatic hours stretched into days then dragged on into weeks, the friends stopped coming around.

After some three months, Brandy regained consciousness. She was no longer able to walk or talk.

\*\*\*

Debbie combines a warm and feminine appearance with the no-nonsense bearing of a deputy sheriff. She wears a hand-tooled leather belt decorated with an intricate design of leaves and flowers. When she turns around it is startling to note that attached to this pretty belt are matching pouches for her handcuffs and gun. Having just arrested two



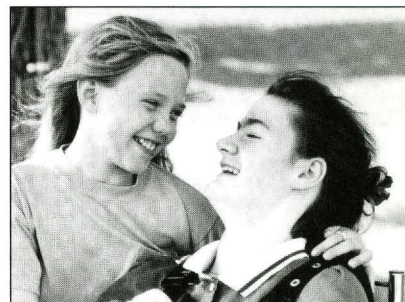
kids for stealing a car, she says matter-of-factly, "They may as well learn now rather than later: Friends who steal together, go to jail together."

Since this divorced mother works multiple jobs, Debbie wanted to find something she and her daughters Ginava (Ginny) and Amanda could do together. A colleague in the sheriff's office steered her toward Community Connections. There she heard about Brandy's situation and her family's desire for her to develop new friends.

As the story unfolded, Debbie's brow began to furrow. Finally she exclaimed, "I know that girl! She's

the girl who was at my daughter's junior high school and who had the terrible accident. I've met her mother. We just never knew what eventually happened to them."

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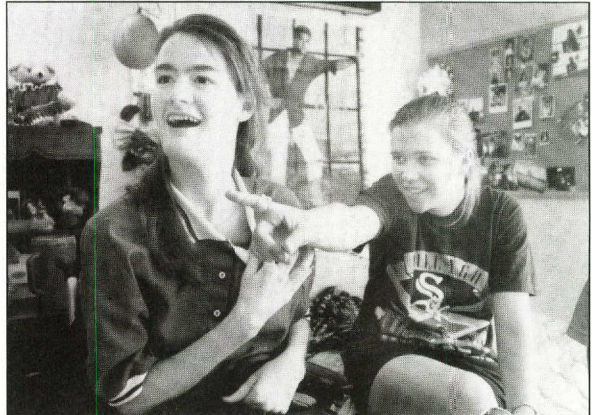
# Amanda, and Debbie

While Debbie was eager to meet with Brandy, she was also a bit apprehensive. The girls were a little nervous too. A nursing home, even one like Lakeside Care Center with its pastel walls and pretty flowered wallpaper borders, is after all, a nursing home.

\*\*\*

"I like seeing Brandy's face when we come," Ginny says. "I feel really, really close to her. But I don't like to see her face when it's time to leave because then she is sad."

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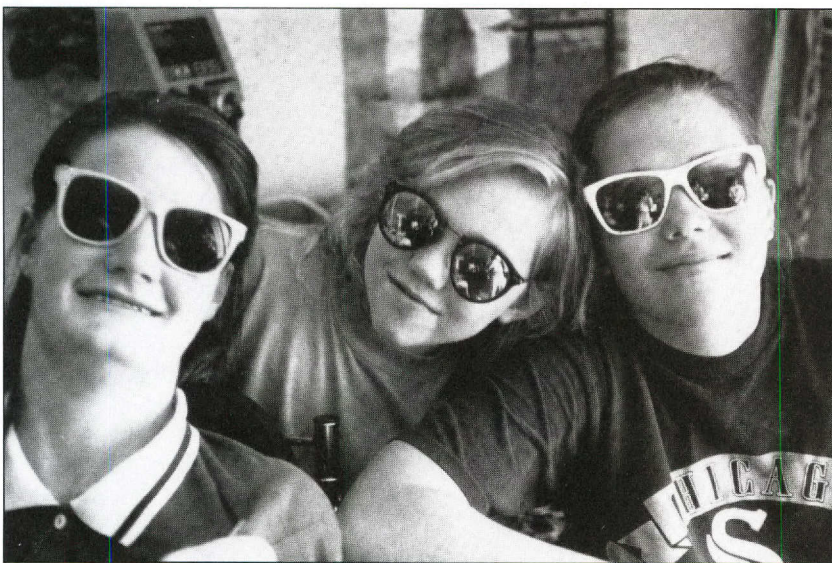
How do Brandy and I communicate? Oh, that's no problem. Brandy talks with her eyes," Ginny explains simply. What do they talk about? "Oh ... guys." These young Texans all love country music, and chat on and on about their favorite country singers and TV teen idol "hunks," with

90210's Brandon and Dylan at the top of the list. They devour teen magazines together, critiquing the hairstyles and fashions. Pets also provide a universal language; all enjoy it when Ginny and Amanda bring their dog and hamster, Buster and Peaches, along.

Amanda runs up, hugs Brandy and whispers, "Your hair looks pretty today." She goes on to ask, "Was school boring today or was it fun?" Brandy attends Estacado High School, and her mother shows off a scrapbook filled with photos of classmates and school activities.

Ginny likes sociology best -- she's considering becoming a 911 dispatcher, working through the sheriff's office like her mother -- but "I hate math." "So do I," her little sister replies, "I have to do *division*," and wrinkles her nose. "I like PE, though," she adds, and promptly shows everyone her cartwheel skills with great exuberance.

Amanda proudly notes, "I think it's cool -- I have an older friend."



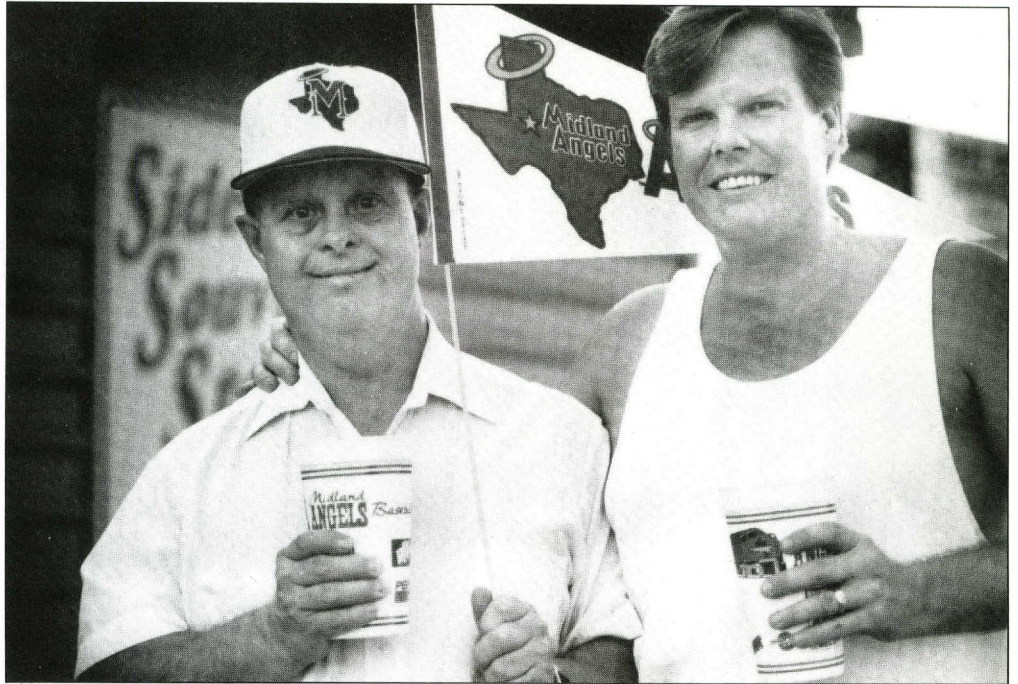
Today, although Debbie visits regularly and she and Brandy's mother, Pat, have become friends, it's Ginny and Amanda who stop by the nursing home most often. Reconnecting with Brandy may have begun as their mother's idea, but now the young girls' friendship is something all their own.

Pat explains that for Brandy, as for all teenagers, "her social life is very important to her." Although she is surrounded by other teens during the school day, once she goes back "home" to the nursing home all her companions are well over a half-century older. Having girlfriends come to visit means a lot.

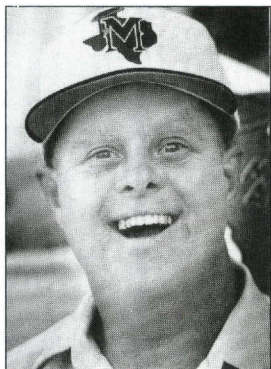


# John & David

... Midland



If there is anything that characterizes institutional life, it's regimentation: places to be, work to do, times to eat, organized fun and lights out. It's as typical of life in the military as of life in the state school where John grew up. John learned the routine well. So well that when he moved from a state school to his own home, his life fell into predictable patterns: A morning job at the local vocational center's workshop. An afternoon job at a laundry. His own laundry on Friday nights. As for his home life ... well, when you have nothing to do, that's what you do — nothing. Except for sitting on a couch and watching television, particularly sporting events.



David has lived in Midland all his life and has worked in his father's successful insurance business for the past eight years. Midland, David notes, is a quiet place. Conservative. Staunch Republicans. Low crime rate. A good place to raise a family. Weekends find families at the parks and children's soccer games. Church. The roller rink.

Outside of an interest in sports, both as a participant and a spectator, he admits to the usual suburban lifestyle, "working in the yard and walking the dog."

\*\*\*

"Last year I went to 'San Antone' with David and his wife, Sarah. We saw the Alamo where Davy Crockett got shot. We went on the rides at Fiesta Texas and had dinner on the river. We've gone on trips to Sea World and Six Flags too. My favorites were the bumper cars and those bumpin' boats. We also went to my favorite team's training camp; I shook hands with one of the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders."

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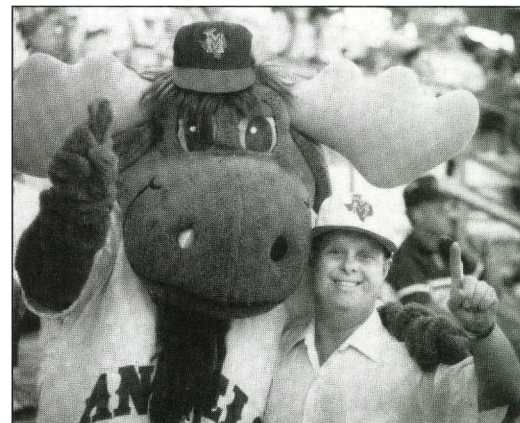
"I used to go to the Abilene State School. I played football there; my position was running back. I caught eight flying footballs. And once I made a touchdown."

John adds, "I also love to bowl. I have my own ball."

A sports fan through and through, John's favorite baseball team is the Midland Angels. When it comes to college football, he's for the Texas Tech Red Raiders. "David and I usually go up to Lubbock once a year to see the Raiders play." The rest of the time, they watch sports together on television.

"We usually always root for the same team," notes John.

"He's got good taste," grins David.



# and Sarah

For the NCAA basketball Final Four, John shared in the fun at David's and Sarah's home. David made Mexican food.

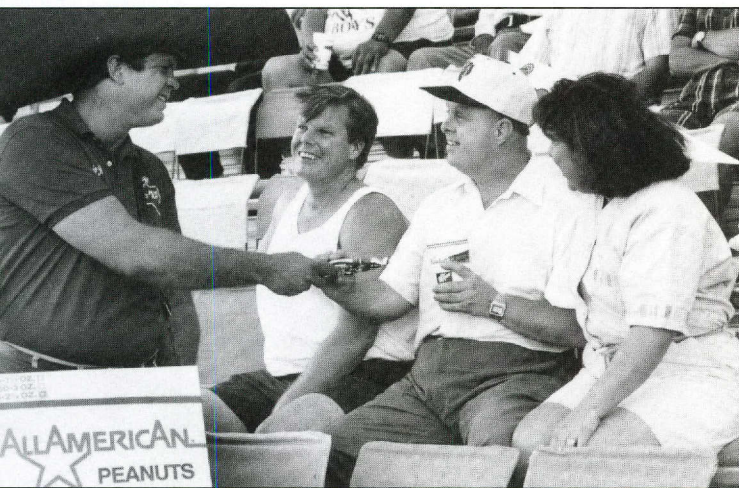
Soon afterward John reciprocated by having David over to his place for hot dogs.

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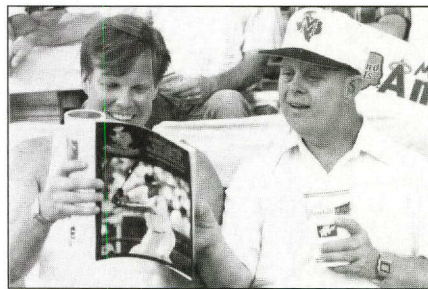
"I call David once a week."  
"I'm always glad when you call."

John always chats for a while whether it's Sarah or John who answers the phone. Then he asks to speak to the other to say hello. He's an equal opportunity friend.

\*\*\*



"John is not in a hurry to go anywhere," Sarah notes. "He's extremely polite and pleasant, just a nice person to be around. And, planning outings together also gives David and me the opportunity to do things we might not otherwise do."



Every friendship has its rough spots, though.

"Sometimes John and I would make plans, then he wouldn't show up. For a long time I just didn't say anything; after all, he hasn't had a lot of friends and may not know the 'rules.' But the truth was, it hurt my feelings. Finally, I told him so. He just hadn't understood that before ... that it would make a difference to me whether we got together or not. From then on, he has seldom cancelled our plans, and if something does come up, he always calls."

\*\*\*

Once the friendship between John and David developed, it also grew into a friendship among John, David and Sarah. A trip to Stanton for a craft fair/flea market (Sarah's suggestion) is on the activity calendar, plus a fishing trip to Ruidoso (not Sarah's suggestion).

\*\*\*



"John reminds me to stop and smell the roses," David observes.

"I get so caught up in the daily rush. Then John calls and I remember: It's the little things, like friendship, that make life worth it."

# Carol & Del

... Arlington

*They lean together  
and speak softly,  
smiling, nodding.  
They are closely attuned  
to each other and to the  
brilliant colors which  
fill the wall before them.*

Today they have returned, as they often do, to a favorite place -- Fort Worth's famous Kimbell Museum, the scene of their first outing together. There is so much of beauty to discover and so much to talk about together.

Del is a striking dark-haired woman, poised and gracious. Both friends are beautifully dressed, Del in dramatic black and white, brown-haired Carol in subtle pastels. They seem equally knowledgeable about art. Carol is a museum volunteer.

\*\*\*

*Two years ago, this picture  
would have looked  
very different.*

"My life was heading nowhere. I was on the road to destruction. I never had a problem with drugs and alcohol, but I had a lot of emotional and social problems. I was angry and didn't know how to control my anger. I got real sick and ended up in four psychiatric hospitals.

"Everything turned around when I met Del. She has shown me a different way of living life.

"She has taught me there's a way to be happy."

\*\*\*

Carol has cerebral palsy and a chemical imbalance which contributed to her feelings of anger, short-term memory loss and depression.

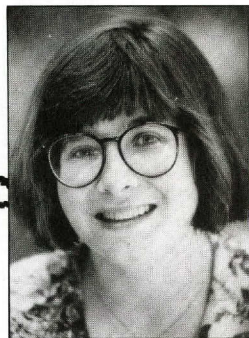


Her father was killed by a drunk driver when she was a little girl, and her mother struggled to raise three daughters alone. Carol got through high school, but in her early 20s life just seemed to fall apart. Finally, she was hospitalized.

With treatment, gradually Carol improved. She came home. But

there she remained very isolated and needed, as her mother put it, "to get a life for herself" outside the house. Yet the prospect of reaching out and making new friends was a frightening one for Carol. Shy and self-conscious, she had never made friends easily.

\*\*\*



"I used to react to things emotionally. Del has taught me to stop and think about it first -- to look at a situation from all sides."

Clearly, this friendship holds meaning for both women. "I know Carol will always be there for me," Del says quietly. "I hope we'll be friends for a long time."

\*\*\*

Carol was not the only one with apprehensions. Del had her own. "I was nervous. I didn't know whether she would like me ... whether we would get along."

"I was new in town," Del recalls. She is a HUD administrator. With a promotion had come relocation to Arlington and a heavy travel schedule. Newly divorced and missing her grown son in California, Del was ready to reach out to people in her new community.

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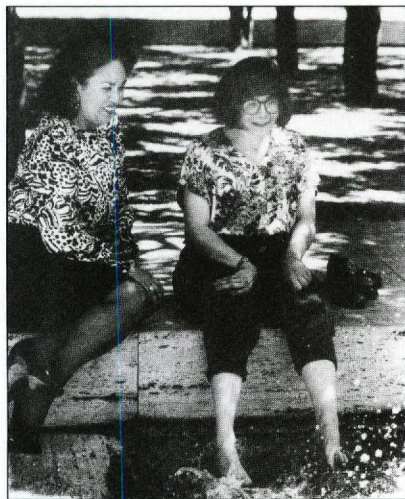
Carol and Del reminisce about the day they were first introduced. Both were tentative at first, feeling their way. But when they discovered they were both originally from San Antonio, "something clicked."

"Del and I ended up laughing," Carol recalls. "Then I began to relax. It turned out not to be threatening at all once I knew I could laugh with Del and we liked basically the same things."

Carol and Del quickly discovered shared interests, especially in the arts and cultural activities. They both love dogs. Outings and visits to each others' homes opened the door for long talks.

A friendship began.

\*\*\*



Del believes in being a part of the community she calls home -- and her spirit is contagious. Once she realized how much Carol enjoys the visual and performing arts, Del encouraged Carol to do something she had never done before in her life. Volunteer.

Actually, those weren't the words of encouragement Del used -- they were more like, "Go for it!"

And Carol did. Now she is active with Theatre Arlington where she copies scripts, puts out tablecloths for receptions and works in the dressing rooms as a volunteer. That has led to her taking acting classes at Ability Theatre of Dallas, a theater company for adults with disabilities. She also volunteers at the Arlington Museum of Art.

\*\*\*

What do they like best about each other? "Her sense of humor," says Del, "and her honesty. Carol is very open."

Carol too says, "What I like best about Del is her honesty. She has been a good role model for me."

"With Del, I've gotten out more. I've learned a lot from her about what the real world and people are really like, and about how to get along well with people."

"In high school, I had low self-esteem. I was much more shy. Now, I'm outgoing. I'm assertive!"

hope to have lots of friends, go my own way, and do what I want to do.

"Now, at 24 years old, I'm discovering who I am as a person."

How does Carol see the future now? "I don't know what will happen to me. I think it will be mostly good. But if it's bad, I will be able to deal with it without falling apart at the seams."

"I don't know whether I'll get married. I don't want to be in a hurry. For now I



*"Del is a caring person. We like to do a lot of the same things. And I can talk to her about just about anything."*

- Carol

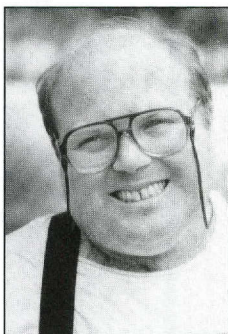
# Tom & Clyde



... Houston



Knowing the score is important to Tom. This avid fan of the Houston Astros and Oilers reads the sports pages and watches games on television. He also runs the scoreboard during football season for Klein, his high school alma mater, where he has worked for the past 13 years as a custodian.



The score was even displayed on his chest one sunny afternoon as he visited with his friend Clyde in Tom's Houston apartment. He was sporting khaki shorts, white athletic shoes and socks and a T-shirt celebrating the Chicago Bulls 1993 National Basketball Association ThreePeat.



Clyde, a man whom friends describe as "having a heart as big as Texas," shares Tom's interest in sports, as well as his favorite teams, the Astros and Oilers. But his knowledge doesn't compare with his friend's. Clyde's wife, Pamela, occasionally joins the two sports-bonded males at Astros games. "She and Tom do most of the talking," Clyde noted. "Pam is interested in baseball and Tom can explain it to her."

Clyde is an assistant chaplain in the county jail, in addition to being an architect. But until he met Tom, Clyde had never been around people with disabilities. No problem. When he met Tom for the first time, he just pulled up a chair and they chatted about work, money, sports.

\*\*\*

Their relationship has grown to the easy kind of bantering you'd expect from old high school buddies.

Differences? "I'm way taller and a good deal older, but we do have the same barber," quips Clyde, noting the increasing retreat of their respective hairlines.

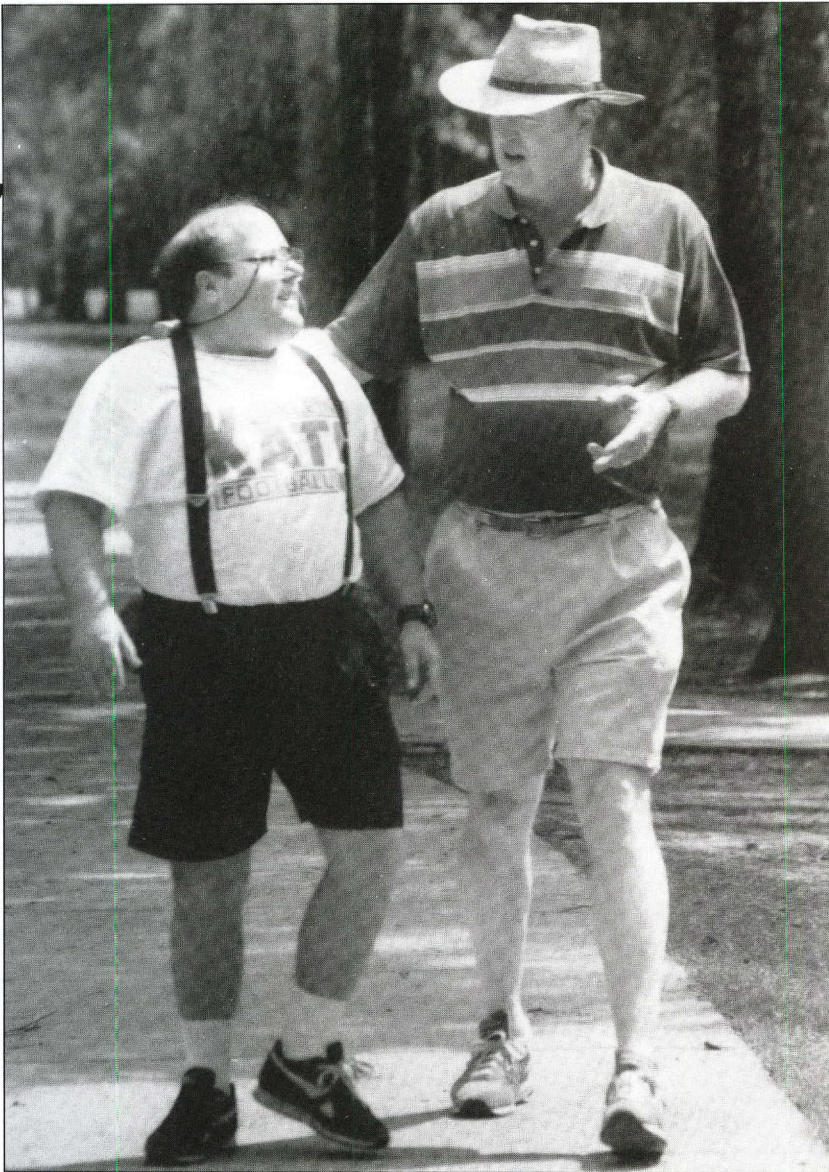
Clyde says Tom's ability to reach quick decisions and "his fantastic memory" are additional differences. "I write things down, but Tom keeps them in his mind. He's far superior in that regard and in some other areas of intelligence."

It's Tom's role to call Clyde the day before they've planned to meet to remind him of the day, the time and their plans.

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*My* friendship with Tom has been humbling. First, to find out he's smarter in a lot of things than I am. Second, Tom has the courage, fortitude and patience to stay in situations I, myself, would have walked away from."

Clyde has some new insights about what friendship really means. "Mostly I have associations rather than friendships, associations for what I might get out of them (as in business referrals). With Tom, I have a friendship, plain and simple."

He adds, "I've also learned that friends don't keep track of whose turn it is to invite whom.

"Real friends don't keep score."

As for similarities, Clyde notes, "We're both dashing, good looking and attractive. And we both enjoy going out to eat" -- so much so that they've decided they had better alternate walking with eating out together.

At Bear Creek Park they stride briskly along the walking trail, enjoying the scenery and talking. Then Clyde shows Tom how to perfect his golf swing.

"There — you got it!" exclaims Clyde. "Right on, brother," replies Tom.

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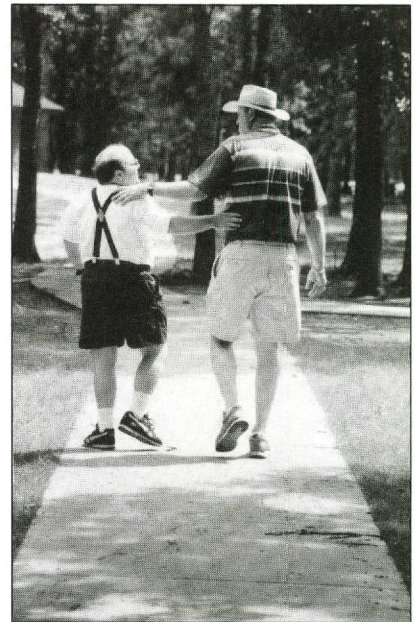
Besides eating out and walking, Tom and Clyde do what friends often do — discuss problems.

"At the high school, some of the teens tease him. They don't treat him with respect and sometimes Tom loses his temper." They talk situations such as that through and have come to the conclusion that with his 13 years of service with seniority and benefits, Tom has a

great deal invested in making his job continue to work. At the same time they recognize the validity of Tom's feelings and know that teenagers will be teenagers. "Sometimes I wish I'd get transferred to an elementary school."

As they share feelings and problems, their friendship grows stronger.

\*\*\*



# Anita & Wendy

... Midland

*"You may wonder where I came from."*

*This is my homeland. I was born and raised here. My parents came in 1967 from the State of Chihuahua. There's work here. They didn't have residence papers and they do not speak English.*

*"My childhood was a little different from the ordinary. My first birthday party was when I was ten. I was shy and afraid. I always hid under the table.*

*"I was happy, but I was selfish in my heart. I didn't go out with friends or all that stuff. I watched TV.*

*"My parents divorced when I was 14. It was painful. Very painful. I couldn't forgive my parents. I felt lonely. My friend Wendy's parents divorced when she was about the same age. The feelings we had were alike."*

\*\*\*

*On a sunny afternoon at their favorite park, the two friends talk quietly, with easy affection. Wendy admires Anita's new nail polish. Anita has beautiful hands and takes pride in taking good care of them. Then Wendy's little girl shows off a duck mask she made out of construction paper at school that morning. After Anita compliments her, the child dashes off toward the*



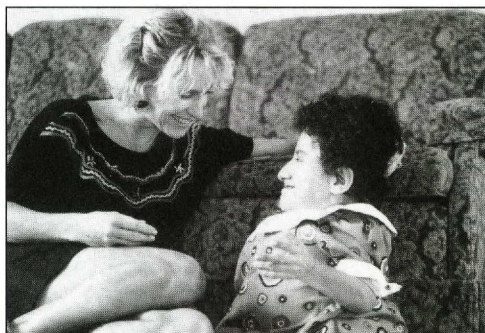
*playground equipment. The two women keep a watchful eye as they talk. When the bundle of energy returns, Anita laughs, "You're wearing yourself out!" Wendy agrees, "She'll sleep well tonight."*

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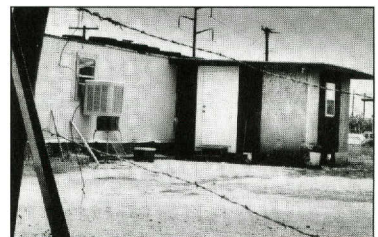
*Anita says, "I want to learn to do things for myself. I'm determined to do things on my own like everyone else does."*

*Wendy recalls, "I liked Anita right away. She was just so spunky; she just had a spark. You could just feel it, sense it, that this person had a lot to offer and needed to be out having a life to enjoy."*

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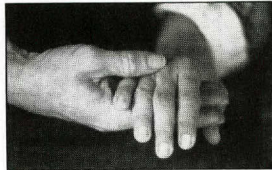
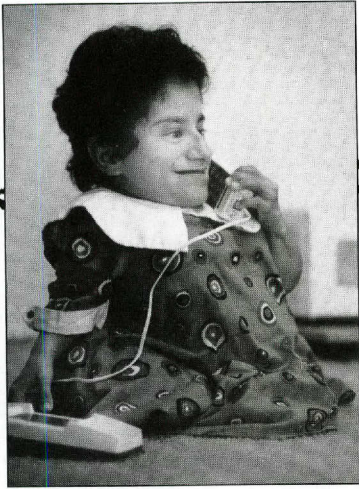
*Anita was born with osteogenesis imperfecta. Doctors predicted she would not live to adulthood but she surprised them all and today her condition has stabilized.*



*Two years ago Anita was living 13 miles outside Midland at the end of a dirt road in a wooden structure built onto the trailer where her father and stepmother live. It had a bare wood floor and contained a pallet, space heater, small TV, radio and her Bible.*

*Anita confided in a family friend that her goal was an apartment and an independent life of her own. The friend made some phone calls, and in time, doors began to open.*

\*\*\*



Wendy recalls, "Anita asked me if I would be interested in kinda helping her get into her apartment. So that's the way it started. I wanted to be there to just help her get going. She didn't know what to expect but she was excited about giving it a try on her own.

"She's figured it out real quick."

\*\*\*

Late one afternoon Wendy started to leave Anita's apartment — an apartment the two of them furnished with help from the Salvation Army and which Wendy blessed with the housewarming gift of a plant.

As her friend paused at the door to say goodbye, Anita asked her to turn off the lights. Why? Anita explained that she wouldn't be able to reach the light switch when it was time to go to sleep, so, she was simply going to have to sit in the dark until then.

Wendy and Anita soon fashioned an apparatus involving a yardstick with a hook so Anita could turn her light switch on and off. They also got a new table lamp and placed it on the floor near her mattress, where both are easy to reach; now Anita can sit and read her Bible in bed.

\*\*\*



"Wendy and I both like to sing. I sing to the Lord. It comes from my heart."

Wendy recalls, "I used to sing in the church choir when I was growing up. Alto. Everyone was so nice and accepted me even though I don't have a very good singing voice."

\*\*\*

When Anita first moved into her apartment, the kitchen faucet suddenly came on by itself in the middle of the night. She could neither reach the faucet nor see in to the sink to determine whether the stopper was in or out. Would the flow produce a flood?

Alarmed, she called Wendy, who lives just 10 blocks away. Her friend quickly arrived and turned off the water.

Back then, Anita recalls that she was scared. "I sometimes stayed awake till 3 a.m. But I got determined. 'I've got to press on.'"

"I used to call Wendy every day." But each accomplishment has given Anita more independence and self-confidence.

Today, her scary times are in the past. Now when Anita and Wendy call each other, it's either just to talk or to make plans: where to go for lunch, shopping, or their next social outing.

"Anita is very independent now. She has really blossomed. I don't feel like she needs me as much; now it's turned into much more of a fun thing."

\*\*\*

Wendy reflects, "Our friendship is not a *have to*, it's a *want to*. I want to be there; I want to be with her. I feel my life has been enriched by knowing Anita. I feel lucky to know her.

"I feel like she's part of the family."

\*\*\*

*And they share memories ...*

"Remember the time we wanted to go to Rose's for lunch." "And we had all the problems getting the wheel chair into the car." ... "That Valentine party at my house when you were the hit of the party." ... "Oh, when I came over and the kids and I got into the pool with that swim ring. We laughed and splashed around like we were all a bunch of little kids." "And the last time you were over when you and I lounged in the Jacuzzi while my husband and the kids were swimming in the pool — and you squirted everybody with a water gun." ... "We did Anita's and Katy's birthday parties together." "Yes! We went to Mr. Gatti's, wore hats, looked silly and had cake." "We had fun!"

\*\*\*

Anita says, "My story is very long but I tell you the truth. My own life was bitter and sad, not too joyful. In the midst of that, I knew I had to press on, I had to continue on and be determined, and not be afraid. So that's what I did.

"I got out of the depression, anger and resentment when the Lord began to deal with me.

"Of course, it was the Lord who said, 'These two are going to be friends.'"

Wendy notes the positive changes she's seen in Anita's outlook. Anita replies, "It was the Lord all the time, Wendy."

Anita pauses and adds, "But in those early months, Wendy, you gave me my start."

# Christine & Jami,

... Houston

*"This is the happiest day of my life."*

Jami and Christine first met on a Saturday afternoon nearly two years ago, at the White River Group Home where Christine lives. They liked each other from the start. Jami recalls that Christine was getting ready to go to a dance, and the two girls planned her "look" together — outfit, hair, perfume and just that right shade of nail polish. As Jami painted Christine's nails, they talked and laughed and made plans for their next time together.

As Jami left, Christine said, "This is the happiest day of my life."

\*\*\*

Later Jami said she could tell Christine had no family because her room was so bare. And she was upset that Christine had few clothes and many of them were tattered. People went shopping *for* her, which is very different from having someone to go shopping *with*.

That first fall, the two girls went all over town together. Yes — they went shopping, picking out clothes together. They also went out to eat ... to a concert ... to the mall.

At Halloween they decorated Christine's room and fixed up a Cat Woman costume for her.

\*\*\*

Debbie and Bill are Jami's mother and stepfather. Like many parents, they've found that some of their children's friends gradually find a unique place in their home and in their own hearts as well.

Bill explains, "Jami talked a lot about Christine, then she started bringing her to the house. We knew Jami would



be going off to college soon. We thought this friendship would be a more casual thing ... but we found ourselves getting emotionally involved.

"Jami is a very determined young woman. One day she came home and declared, 'Christine will never spend another holiday alone!'"

"This helped both of us to commit to Christine and recognize her value and her gifts to this family. We give to her, but she gives far more to us in return."

Christine calls him "Mr. Bill." He owns a company and travels frequently between Houston and the east coast.

\*\*\*

At Thanksgiving Christine joined the family get-together at Jami's grandparents' farm. "She and Granny really hit it off!" Debbie reports.

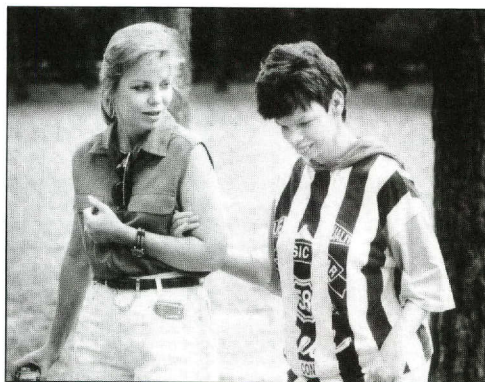
"We had lots of good home cookin'. We had pumpkin pie," recalls Christine, with a happy smile. Seeing the cows, chickens and horses was a highlight for Christine, an animal lover from the city who had never before been to a farm ... or to an old-fashioned family Thanksgiving celebration.

Granny later made Christine a festive Santa shirt. She wore it proudly throughout the holidays. "Granny made it for me. Jami's Granny," she told everyone.

Jami was true to her promise: Christine never has spent another holiday alone. At Christmas, her stocking is hung in the living room with everyone else's.

What a contrast from all those years before. The group home staff describe how hard it is when everyone but you is packing to go home for a holiday. Now Christine too has something to look forward to and somewhere to go, with people who love her.

\*\*\*



# Debbie and Bill

"Christine is part of our family. This evolved. It just happened. It was not planned. But when Jami said that Christine would never spend another holiday alone ... since then the birthdays, the holidays have been spent with us."



Debbie describes how "Jami had a birthday party for Christine where Christine invited her own friends, including her boyfriend."

\*\*\*

"Christine has become part of our family."

"To be honest, 20 years ago I might have been embarrassed in a nice restaurant with Christine," comments Bill. "People are changing their attitudes and beginning to think of inclusion and acceptance rather than pushing people away."

"As I talk to people about things like this, most of them agree with me. And I often find people who have someone like Christine in their own families."

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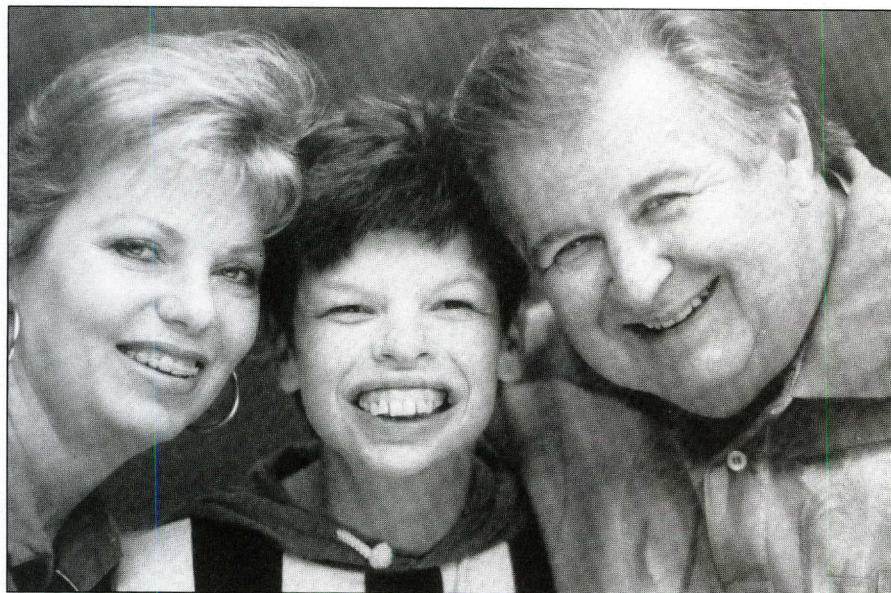


Meanwhile, Christine's friendship with Debbie and Bill has grown even stronger. They take her out for special occasions, stop by to see her often, and have her over for quiet times at home. She goes with them on vacations. And they continue to advocate for her when needed ... just as they would if she were their own daughter.

\*\*\*

Bill reflects, "Christine has become part of our family. You feel the joy that she has and how little it takes to make her happy. It doesn't take *things* — just a smile, a hug, or just being with her. And that brings back the humility and the happiness you might have lost."

Christine, listening quietly, adds, "I'll be a happy woman in my whole life."



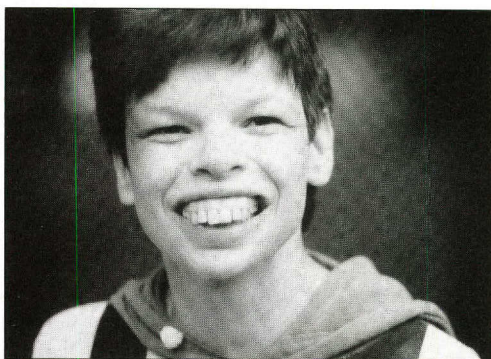
Though the party was "a huge success," the family was worried. Christine just didn't seem to be feeling like herself. They became concerned about her health care.

Over the summer Jami spoke with several of the professionals involved in her care and arranged for a second medical opinion. Jami became registered as her legal advocate.

Their friendship with Christine also has moved both Bill and Debbie to take on an advocacy role in the community.

The time came, as they had known it would, when Jami was to leave home for college. She and Christine knew they would really miss each other.

Now, both look forward to spending time together during Jami's school vacations, and of course, on holidays.



# Travis & Reggie

... Arlington

"We're best buddies."

That's how Travis and Reggie describe themselves -- and sure enough, their easygoing friendship seems to fit the image. They talk on the phone each day and get together at least once a week to do typical guy things -- enjoying burgers, shooting baskets, catching a movie, going out with friends, checking out the new sporting goods store at the mall. Nearby Six Flags Over Texas is a favorite summertime spot. Travis and Reggie both keep up with current events and sports in the news and never fail to compare notes on what's up with the Dallas Cowboys.

Both young men are strong athletes. Though Travis also played baseball, track and soccer, football was #1 for him. He played varsity defensive tackle for football powerhouse Sam Houston High School until a knee injury during his senior year put him on the sidelines. Now Travis' career goal is to become a physical therapist specializing in treating sports injuries. He just finished his freshman year at The University of Texas at Arlington, majoring in biology. (That and another strong interest -- "I like kids" -- led to this highly-motivated young man volunteering as a guide at the zoo.)

When it comes to basketball, however, Travis concedes the court

to Reggie. Reggie's team just finished a winning season with Travis always among their cheering fans in the stands.

Reggie also runs track. Before his last meet, Travis helped coach him on the fine points of his technique in the running long jump. Reggie rewarded them both with a third place finish.

"We both enjoy bowling and Reg is pretty good. He beat me a couple of times, then the last time he let me win."

"No I didn't," assures Reggie.

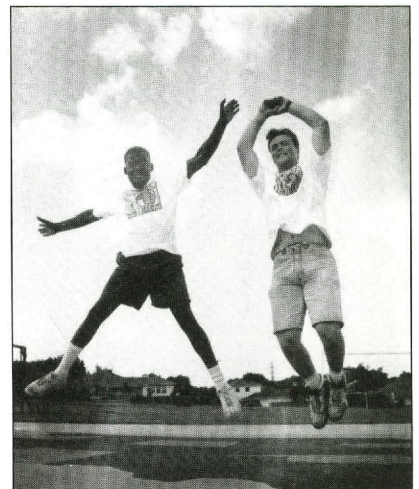
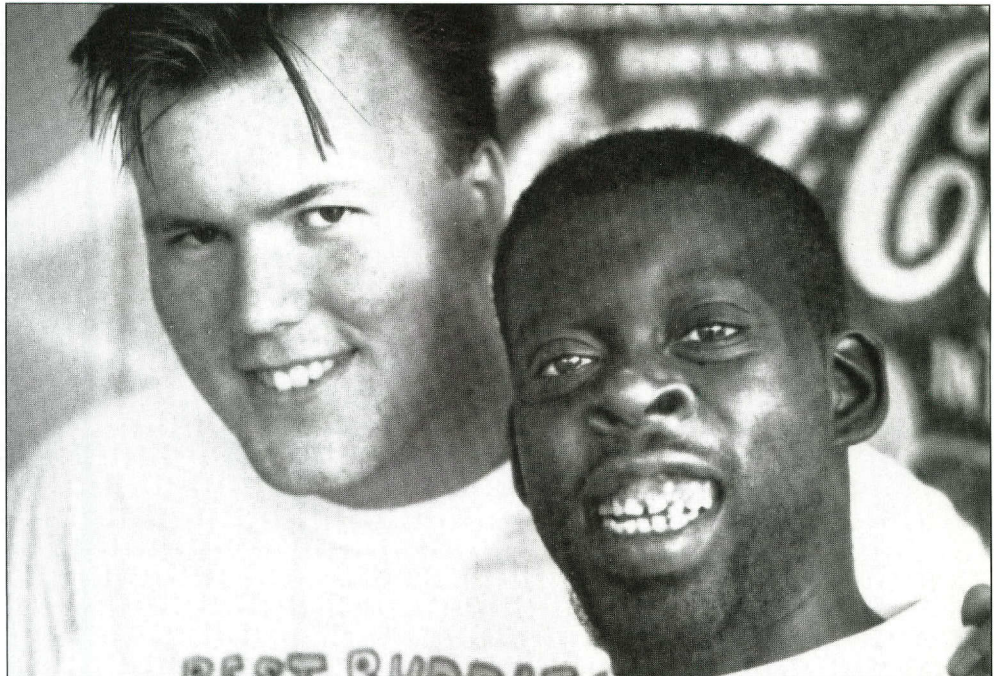
Travis replies with a bemused smile and a look that says, "Well, maybe..."

\*\*\*

Their family backgrounds hold strong similarities. Both were born near their current homes -- Reggie in Fort Worth, Travis in Arlington. Each is the only boy in a large family of sisters. All their older sisters have small children, so both are proud uncles! The two friends are frequent and welcome visitors in each other's homes.

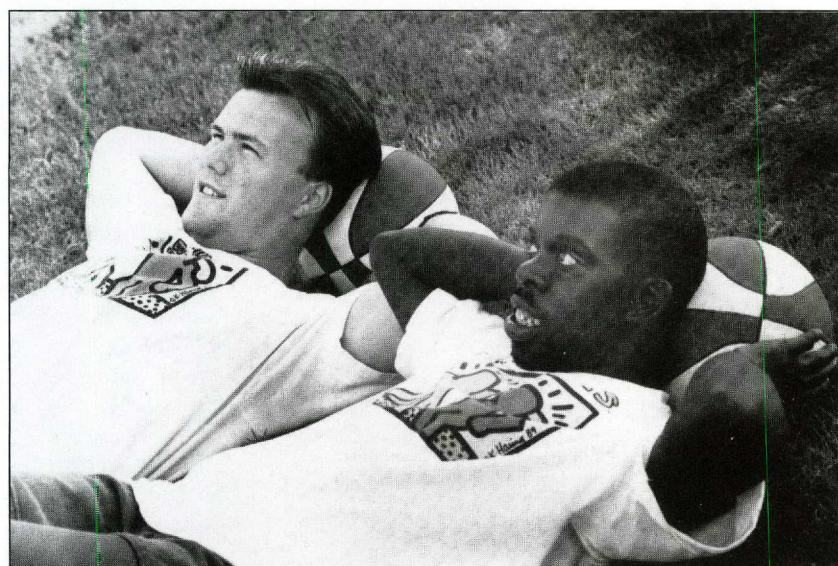
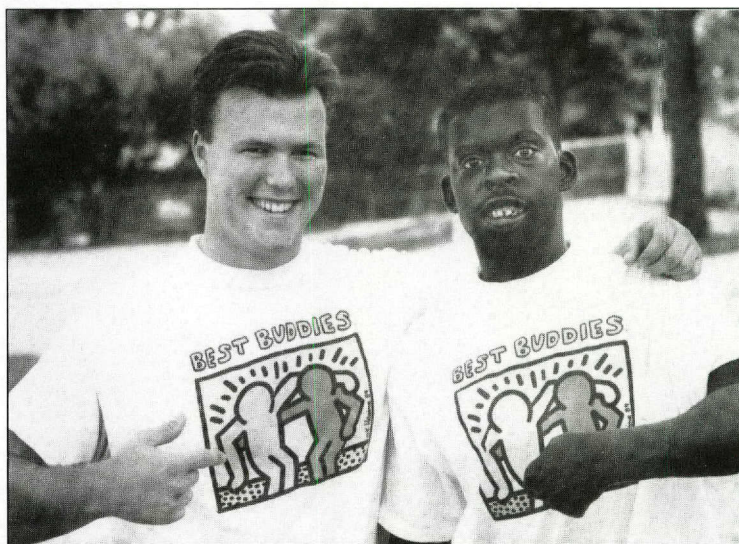
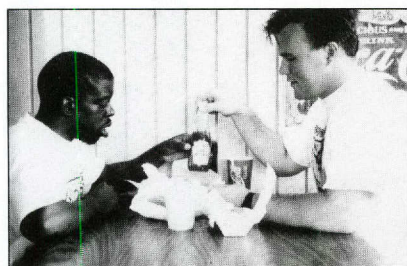
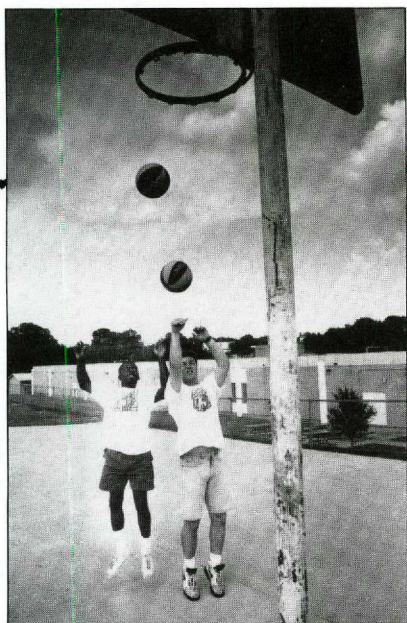
Travis is especially fond of his little sister. He is saving money so he and their dad can take her on a Disneyland summer vacation.

\*\*\*



In addition to attending school, Travis works part-time at the local community center. Reggie works in a workshop which does contract projects for local businesses.

Like Travis, Reggie is saving as much of his paycheck as he can, but with a different goal -- his own apartment. Right now he lives with a foster family and takes the bus to visit his mother in Fort Worth on the weekends. When he was younger, he lived at the Fort Worth State School.



Travis' grandfather lives on a farm. Reggie had never been to a farm before, so his first visit there with Travis was an outing they especially looked forward to -- and today Reggie still talks about it as his favorite thing they've done together. They rode the horse and went fishing. "I caught *two fish!*"

Travis' girlfriend and Reggie have gotten to be friends too. They often go out as a trio on weekends. One recent Saturday afternoon, they all worked together on a car wash fundraiser for a youth organization they all belong to.

\*\*\*

While hamburgers are their all-time favorite food, they also enjoy seafood. "Everyone knows Reg at Captain D's; he's so friendly and goes up and talks with everybody," says Travis.

Shy until he gets to know someone, Travis envies his friend's ability to be comfortable in social situations. "Reg meets new people more easily than I do. So in a situation where we're meeting strangers, I'm glad to let him take the lead. Reg goes up and does all the talking when I don't want to. He's never afraid to ask questions."

Travis grins and adds, "He's always asking girls for their phone numbers!"

According to Travis, Reggie also has a better sense of direction. One night they decided to try ice skating and wandered all over Fort Worth until Reggie figured out where to find the rink. Neither knew how to skate, but as usual, that didn't slow them down.

\*\*\*

They laugh and joke together and share good times. These two friends have an easygoing camaraderie and natural rapport.

With their youthful enthusiasm, fun is the focus, and just about anything is fun.

"Reggie likes *everything*," says Travis.

Reggie adds, "Travis and I, we're best buddies."

# Elia & Suzanne



... El Paso



Pass them in an aisle in the grocery store ... see them at a table in Luby's or shopping at JCPenney ... what might catch your eye is their obvious mutual affection or maybe how striking they look together. One has dark hair and sparkling eyes; the other, silver hair and an expressive face with a warm smile. They both gesture a lot when they talk.

All in all, however, seeing these two women together seems like the most natural thing in the world.

\*\*\*



"I was nervous about meeting Elia," Suzanne reveals. "What if the signing I'd learned wasn't good enough to communicate with her? Here was a lady deserving of respect, and what if I did something wrong?"

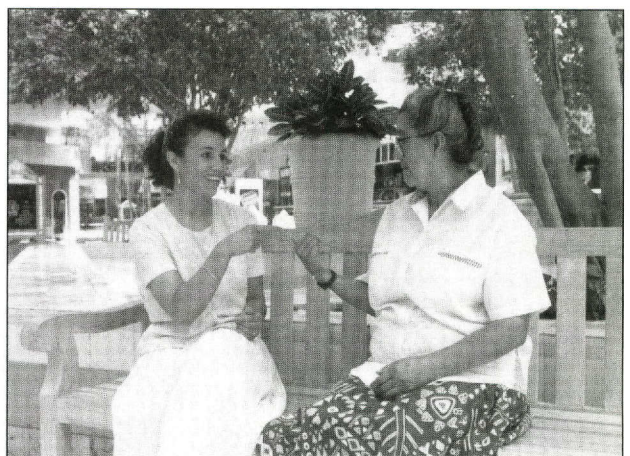
Elia also had concerns. "I was not used to being around people," she explains. "When they told me they wanted me to meet Suzanne, I wasn't sure. After seeing her picture where she was all dressed up like a businesswoman, I was afraid to meet her. I thought she was a boss. And she looked like a person with a lot of money."

But at their first meeting, Elia immediately decided, "She's very nice." And Suzanne was drawn to her old-fashioned, gracious ways.

For Elia, after so many years of living alone and in silence, there was so much to share.

Though Suzanne was raised in Texas and Elia in Mexico, the two women come from a similar cultural and religious background. Elia learned both English and sign language as an adult and had often been embarrassed to "talk" to people. Distressed when someone else became uncomfortable if they could not understand her, Elia's way was to withdraw rather than "be a bother."

But she soon found, to her delight, that she and Suzanne really could communicate. They slipped quite naturally into a language of





their own, combining signing, other gestures, reading lips, and occasionally spelling something out.

Lunch together, quiet talks, shopping, a picnic in the park ... through these simple experiences, their friendship took root and began to grow.

\*\*\*

*"In my childhood, I lived in Mexico," Elia recalls. "I didn't go to school. Except for my brother, I was the only one deaf in my family ... in my village. I just worked at home — chores, laundry, cooking. My mom tried to teach my brother and me, but we were lazy, and it was boring. We worked on the farm with the horses, cows and pigs — just feeding them corn. That's mainly what we did.*

*"We were poor. My dad left. It was just my mom. She made our clothes. She tried to provide for us.*

*"We came here to El Paso when I was 21. I worked as a maid; my brother, Manuel, worked also. We earned \$6 a week and we sent money to our mother. It was hard, awkward, for me. I didn't know anybody.*

*"In 1952, I started learning to read and write English. That was when I started communicating. But, still I didn't have any friends. I got a job sewing at a factory. I worked there for 30 years and 10 months, but it closed down in 1989.*

*"After that, I was getting too old to work anyway, so I just stayed at my home. Alone ..."*

\*\*\*

Suzanne is described as "very enthusiastic — somebody who wants to do so much." She graduated from The University of Texas at El Paso and paused long enough for a graduation party ...

*"There were so many people there from Suzanne's family ... sisters, cousins, aunts, nieces and friends. I gave her a terry cloth robe to use after swimming," says Elia.*

*... and then went straight into the university's graduate program.*

\*\*\*

Elia saw "the perfect Easter dress" in a newspaper ad that first spring together. She and Suzanne dashed over to JCPenney to try to find it -- and they did! "It was the last one they had in my size," Elia recalls. "It was pink, and the sleeves were just right." They also found some shoes and had them dyed to match.



*"When I wore that dress to church on Easter morning, all the other ladies said, 'How pretty!'"*

\*\*\*

Mostly, Elia and Suzanne prefer life's simpler pleasures. "I cook for Suzanne. We have conversations, just about everyday things ... our plans and our dreams."

Elia is proud of Suzanne's accomplishments in school and often urges her to follow her dreams. And with Suzanne's encouragement, Elia has made some long-time dreams of her own come true ...

"Now it is important for me to learn how to do things," Elia explains.

"I now have a driver's license and a car. Before, I took the bus ... for 30 years.

"All my life, I've always dreamed of going to school. Now I am going to a class for adults who are deaf, at the college. My class is a place to go and socialize and to improve my math. The classes are on Tuesdays

and Thursdays. Then on Fridays, we all go to lunch."

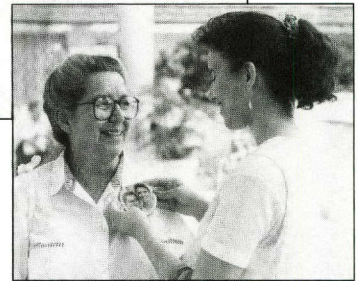
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*"Before, I had no friends," Elia confides. "I didn't know what to do. I was alone. Staying home is very boring. I used to watch soap operas two at a time — one in English and the other in Spanish.*

*"Today, it is great. Suzanne and I go out. We have fun. I really like it. I enjoy fun times. Now that I have Suzanne, I get to socialize. She is somebody I can have conversations with ... do things with.*

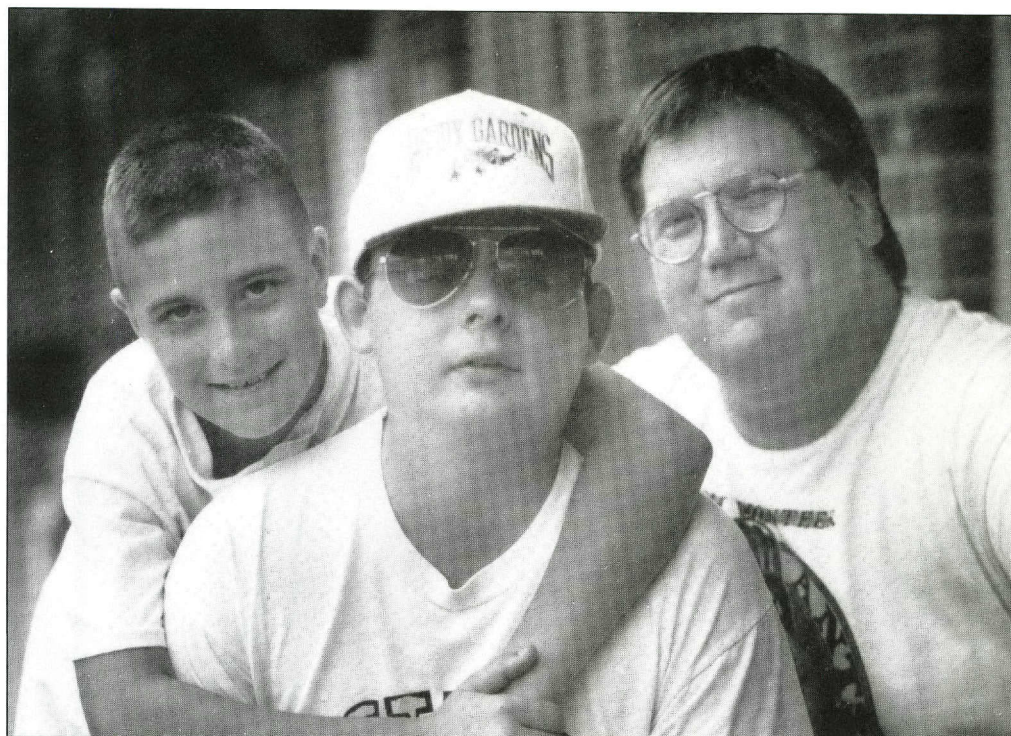
*"I'm different now. I feel myself improving. I'm trying! I'm going to school. I'm getting more involved at church. I'm learning. I'm finding different activities that I enjoy.*

*"This makes me happy."*



# Kevin & David

... Alvin



Some people slip into friendship as naturally as the tennis shoes, blue jeans, T-shirts and baseball caps both Kevin and David wear.

Kevin wears his new sunglasses with the determination of a man on the beach or a movie star fearful of being recognized. His attachment is so strong, he does not want to take them off when someone asks to take a picture of him.

Kevin's reason, it turns out, has nothing to do with style, image or shading his eyes. He wants to keep the glasses on because he purchased them on a shopping trip with David.

"I got clothes, shoes, shirts and pants. And I got these new sunglasses," says Kevin. Buying new sunglasses isn't exactly a new experience for Kevin, adds David. With the kind of verbal jab reserved for friends, David jokes, "You lost your last several pair."

Kevin simultaneously grins and grimaces. The glasses stay on.

\*\*\*



"Well, where do you want to go? Alvin? Houston?"

"How about the Pantry in Clear Lake. Good prices and good selection."

"Right, but the people are nice at the HEB, particularly the check-out girl. She's my favorite."

"Okay, HEB it is, but we've got to watch what we spend as well as how friendly the people are."

"Price and people. What's more important?"

"Both are, but only when you grocery shop."

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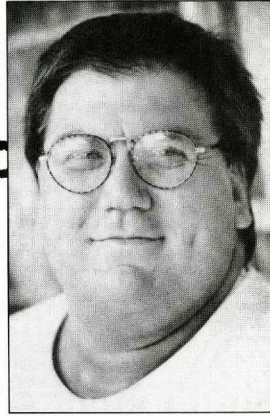
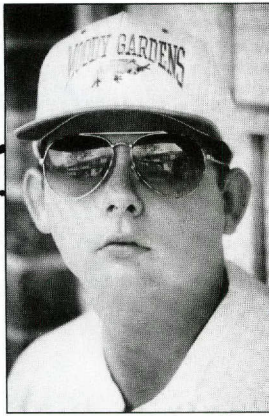
"*Star Trek* is my favorite TV show. David comes over to watch it with me. He and his sons like to come over to my house and watch *Star Trek*."

David agrees. "To go over and watch *Star Trek* and make fun of the people and their costumes, it's a fun thing to do.

"It feels good when I go over and the

guys are glad to see me. I feel good when I can come in and be tired or flustered and flop down on the couch next to them and just talk about whatever needs to be talked about. We tend to be relaxed with each other, and I appreciate that time to be relaxed."

\*\*\*



How would Kevin describe their friendship? He considers, then replies, "I like him. He likes me." The look of certainty in Kevin's eyes brings a smile to David's. For someone with a lifelong family history of abuse, being able to really believe you are accepted and cared about comes gradually. For Kevin, it has finally come with his friend David.

Once Kevin was suffering from an abscessed tooth and had to go to the dentist — an experience most people associate with a level of panic and pain comparable to torture. It would be his first trip to a place where they make you recline in a chair while shining a bright light in your mouth.

Kevin called David for help. David went with him to calm him and reassure him. Just something a friend does for a friend. Maybe. But afterward, David confided, "That wasn't easy for me. I don't do that kind of thing very well. I even have trouble when my kids go to the doctor."

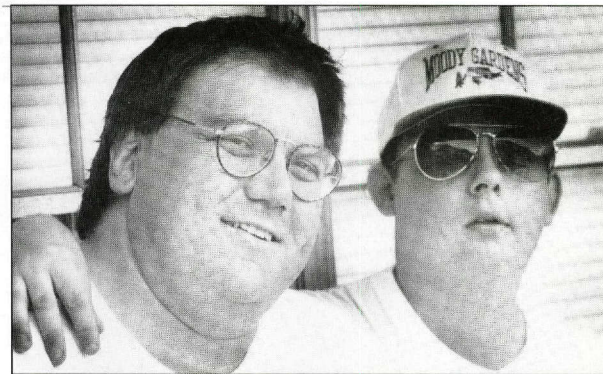
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David and his wife, Eileen, teach a Sunday school class that Kevin attends.

"I think that Kevin has found his own place in the church," says David. His own place includes the sanctuary, where he likes the "preaching and singing," the youth fellowship meetings, and serving coffee during the social hour after the service.

Kevin also likes that he can walk to the church from his apartment, and sometimes other members of the congregation stop and give him a ride.

\*\*\*



David is open, smiling — the kind of person you'd gravitate to if you found yourself in a room full of strangers. He teaches at a college and lives with his wife, two lively sons, Ben and Seth, a dog, Reg, and a cat, Tiger.

Kevin is a quiet, reserved young man who lives in an apartment with his uncle Howard who has similar disabilities.

They used to live on a bench in a park.

\*\*\*

Kevin and David have the kind of friendship that most people would

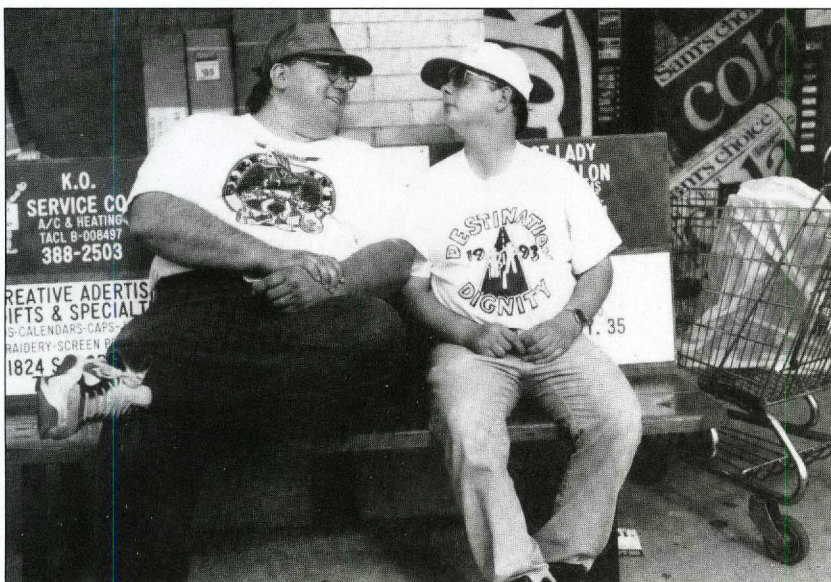
consider pretty ordinary.

They've figured out that the best times together are often the simplest. As David says, "What I like best about being friends with Kevin is not having to worry about playing a role. We are

pretty natural when we're together. Sometimes we dress up, sometimes we're raggedy.

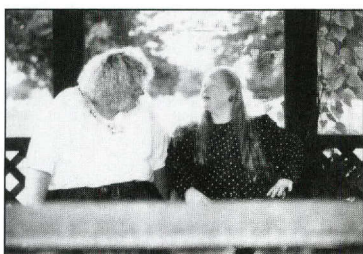
"Kevin is a lot of fun. If I've had a bad day, I really can turn it off by being with Kevin."

Listening to David, Kevin adds, "We have a good time."



# Debby & Dorothy

... Arlington



*"People assume we're sisters,"* says Debby.

They really do look like sisters. Their coloring. Their complexions. Their blonde hair (though Dorothy's is long and silky and Debby's is short and curly). Their eye color. Even their hands, their shapes, their walks. They both see it. It's part of their bond.

They are even the same age.

*"We're more alike than not,"* Debbie reflects.

\*\*\*

*"We're more alike than not."*

Dorothy hasn't always lived in a state school. For a while, during her childhood, she lived with a foster mother and foster brother Mike. Now, though, her foster mother is elderly and in poor health. Dorothy still keeps a picture of them, all together, on her bedside table. In the picture, 12-year-old Dorothy's arms embrace her foster mother.

Now that the Fort Worth State School is closing, Dorothy will be moving into the community in the Dallas area, near where Debby lives. They can hardly wait. As Debby notes, "It will be nice for me to be able to just drop by and watch TV with her or invite her over for dinner without all the red tape."

\*\*\*

"It's good for me to be around Dorothy because I'm shy and she's so outgoing. Dorothy can be such a clown!

"We both had a certain void when it comes to family. We've gotten into a 'sister role' with each other."

Debby is originally from Ohio but moved to Texas to go to college near relatives. Now she works in Fort Worth, where she and Dorothy met. The two felt an immediate rapport.

"I've seen a lot of changes in Dorothy in the time we've known each other. She has developed more mature relationships. She recognizes the needs of others."

\*\*\*

Dorothy enjoys visiting Debby and her roommate in Euless. Sometimes they all go out together; other times they relax at home.

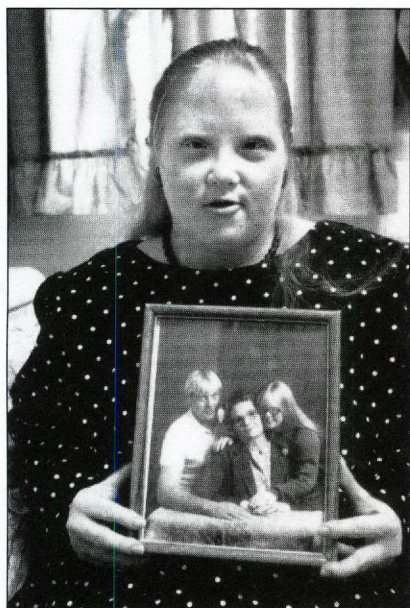
"Debby has a black and white cat with my last name: *Herman!*"

Dorothy notes little things that people who don't live in an institutional setting take for granted: "Debby told me I could be in her kitchen any time I wanted." She adds, "I'm the best cook! I make smokies with bagels."

At other times, they let someone else do the cooking. "On my 33rd birthday, I went to the Olive Garden with Debby." Dorothy shows off her pretty gold-colored bracelet, a birthday gift from Debby.

For basketball practice Dorothy loves to wear her Elvis T-shirt, a gift from Debby's mother in Ohio, who is looking forward to meeting Dorothy next time she visits Texas.

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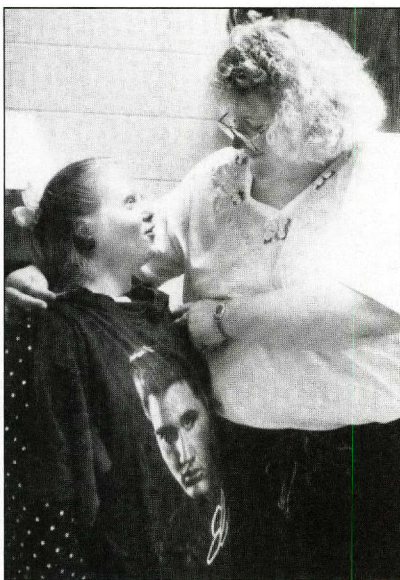


Visiting a new environment is not without its adjustments for Dorothy. "I like to go to bed at 10:30 and get up at 5 a.m. Debby likes to sleep in until 8." On Dorothy's first visit, she hopped out of bed at 5, as usual, and went to rouse Debby so they could start their day.

Debby took one look at the clock, groaned, and asked her friend to please go back to bed and check with her at 8.

Dorothy is adjusting. "Debby snores. I call her, 'Deb! It's time to get up!' And then she keeps on snoring. So, I just get my own breakfast."

\*\*\*



One night the two went to see the Texas Rangers play in what was Debby's first baseball game. This became evident when "Dorothy had to tell me to stand up when they played the National Anthem."

\*\*\*

What do they both like? "The Beverly Hillbillies," says Debby.

"And standing on our heads," adds Dorothy.

"Beautiful blonde people like us," declares Dorothy, "we've got *taste!*"

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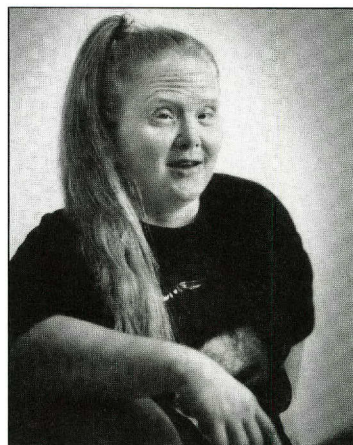
"Debby is my friend. She is my advocate. She takes me out places and I spend the night.

"I've got her first and last name, address, zip code and phone number."

\*\*\*

"Of all the people I know, Dorothy is the most non-judgmental, accepting person. She would like you no matter what.

"For her, it's unconditional."



# Morgan & Paula

... Austin



*F*lowers are almost a religious experience for me. Nothing else can ever equal the colors that God makes. Flowers always make me happy ... and I like to think they bring others joy too."

Paula, understandably, is a florist. Her showroom is her home, filled with arrangements and pretty accessories artfully arranged on every surface.

When Paula had extra flowers, she used to drop by a nearby nursing home to decorate the residents' rooms. On every visit, she saw Morgan.

Morgan would be sitting in his wheelchair near the front desk so he could watch people's comings and goings. One day he gave Paula a grin and said, "You're pretty."

Paula was charmed. The two have been fast friends and frequent companions ever since.

\*\*\*



*P*aula graciously welcomes visitors into her home and to her antique dining table. There, she and Morgan are making sugar cookies. She holds Morgan's hands around the pastry tube; he presses the homemade dough out onto a cookie sheet, roughly in the shape of hearts.

Paula moves easily from kitchen to dining room bringing in batches of Morgan's freshly-baked cookies, served on a plate painted with flowers. She coaches Morgan to hold out the plate and offer cookies to their guests.

Paula says quietly, "I cherish that wonderful feeling of childhood where there's a mother in the kitchen and something smells delicious."

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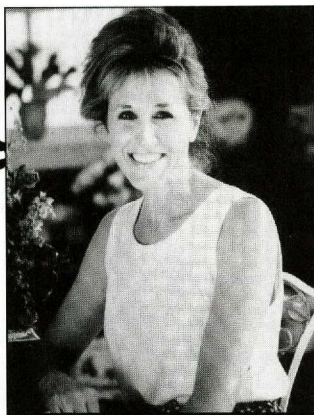
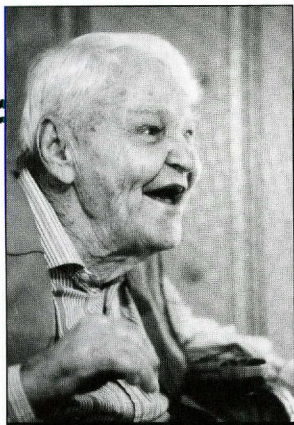
*W*hen Morgan was four years old, his brother took him to a state school. He lived there for over 40 years without ever seeing his family again.

Now, at 79, he lives in a nursing home. Paula visits him daily.

"I'm so touched by Morgan. They told me that whenever people would visit the nursing home, he'd always ask, 'Are you coming back?' as they left. It's only recently that he has stopped asking me if I'm coming back. I think he finally trusts me to know that I will."

\*\*\*





*Morgan* just comes alive when other people are around. You can't ignore Morgan. He's the most friendly, outgoing angel at the nursing home.

"Morgan's life *was* the nursing home — he had nowhere else to go, no visitors, no family. Not even at Christmas," says Paula.

She notes that since Morgan never experienced a "home" environment, he now loves to do the simplest things — like holding the hose when they water the flowers and wash the car. "He marvels at everything. I enjoy expanding his experiences."

When a new dog joined their household recently, they all declared it to be Morgan's — the first time he has ever had a pet.

\*\*\*

"Morgan, you're never sad. You never miss anybody. You never get mad. You never have a pain. Right?"

"Right."

"Morgan, I don't believe you."

It may be that Morgan has taken the path of least resistance because there's a natural sweetness to his nature, and it has made people more willing to take care of him through the many years of institutional living. Now Paula encourages him about expressing his feelings and sharing his problems, but she's working against a lifetime of learning how to cope with circumstances.

"Morgan, you won't tell anybody when you're sad. Why not?"

"Doesn't make any difference."

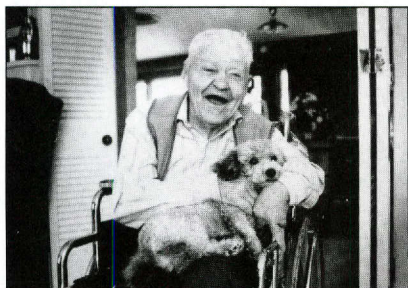
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As the visitors prepare to leave, Paula says, "Morgan's just the *best*. What's so sad is that there are so many other people at the home who don't have anybody.

"I'm lucky to have met Morgan. He's a natural."

The visitors reach the door. Morgan asks, "Comin' back?"

He adds, "Wish you would."



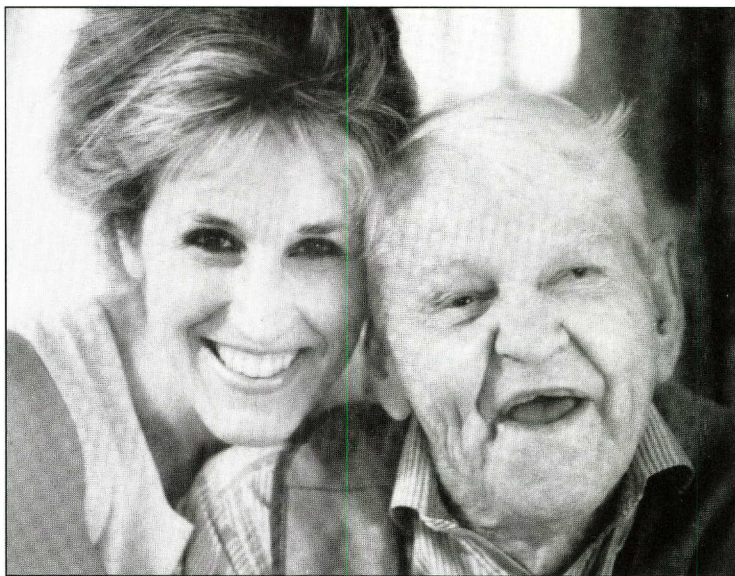
Paula mentions her husband David. Morgan grins. He interjects, "David! He's my man. He's a *good* man."

"You and David talk 'man things,' right?" teases Paula.

"Yep!" replies Morgan.

At one of the hunting and fishing shows David puts on, Morgan went along. "I caught four fish," he says. Warming up to the topic, Morgan continues, "I've got four trophies for bowling. Do *you* bowl? I'll beat you."

\*\*\*



Things most people take for granted are eye-openers for Morgan as Paula gently expands his range of experience. "Morgan had never talked on the telephone before. One day when we were together, we called my parents. They said hello to him on the phone and he cried."

\*\*\*

# The Runners

... Lubbock

Lawrence, P.J., Adam, Michelle, Johnny & Mike



## What draws people together?

*How are friendships born? For most adults, the starting point is a common interest ... shared activities and experiences ... being involved together in something each genuinely enjoys.*

*Like running.*

Even though the car radio in Mike's pale yellow Mercedes 240D is turned off as the Texas sunrise breaks across the road from Lubbock to Levelland, your mind hears Willie Nelson singing "On the Road Again." It's for times like these that the song was written. Just substitute "running with my friends" for "playing music with my friends" and everything comes into focus.

Johnny, with two bottles of spring water for himself and Adam, is already outside waiting when we stop to pick him up. Next we'll pick up Adam at his girlfriend's home.

Meanwhile, Michelle and Lawrence are picking up others in the Suburban; they'll meet us in Levelland.

The Running Club is on the road again.

\*\*\*

With her medical history, Michelle is probably one of the last people you'd expect in a running club. Born with knee problems, Michelle recalls, "My condition wasn't visible, but it was painful — and it kept me from doing some of the things I wanted to do.

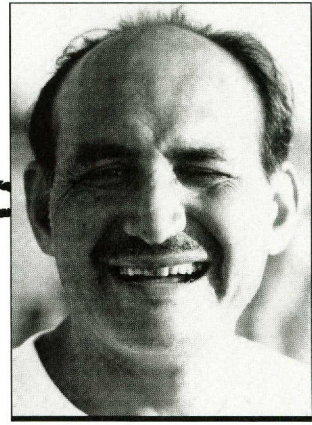
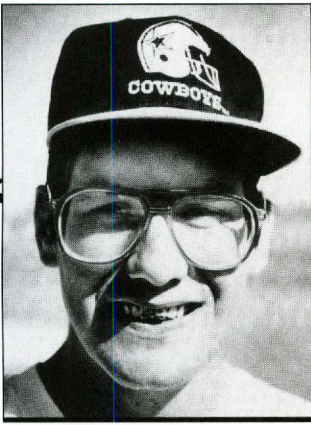
"Back when I was in school, anyone different was placed in a 'special' school setting where their difference was obvious to all. My own personal experience has made me sensitive to what people with disabilities go through. I believe they shouldn't be relegated to having segregated activities as their only option."

In college, Michelle had surgery to correct her knee problems. In the years since then, with considerable determination, she has developed into a strong long distance runner.

She joined the Running Club, moved up into a leadership position, and then began working toward her goal of having the Club welcome people who have disabilities as members.

\*\*\*





Lawrence walks with the easy gait of the athlete that he is.

Growing up in the small town of Idalou, Texas, didn't present a great many opportunities, particularly for a youngster with mental retardation. But a mother's love pushed for him to be mainstreamed, and the discovery that he could run, *really* run, opened up the opportunity to be included through athletics.

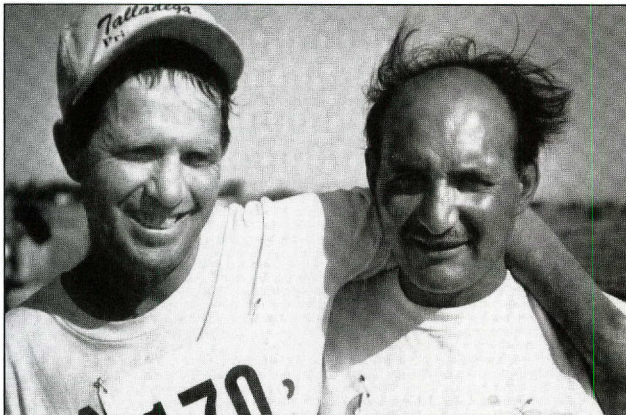
Lawrence became his high school's track star. His coach asked him to help train the younger long-distance runners -- including his little sister, who is also a fine runner ("Taking after me, I guess," he says proudly).

Following graduation, however, Lawrence's prospects were once again limited. And once again his mother inquired about the possibilities. Knowing Michelle was involved in running, she asked her about Special Olympics. "I knew that with his ability, Lawrence would be bored to death with Special Olympics. So I invited him to join my Running Club instead," says Michelle.

"Lawrence's fast time and friendly manner just blew the other members away. It took him about that long (snapping her fingers) to make friends," she recalls. Today, Lawrence ranks among the area's elite runners. He has become active in the Club's many social activities, as well as its races, over the past three years.

Equally important, having a championship caliber runner helped to open the Club members' minds ... and the door for Adam and Johnny.

\*\*\*



"This is a pretty sunrise, isn't it?"

Adam remarks. The Mercedes passes the entrance to Reese Air Force Base, some mobile homes, farmland, a cluster of oil wells, a knitting mill and a welding shop.

"My girlfriend cut my hair last night," announces Adam, taking off his cap.

"Hey, man, you look just like David Letterman," Mike teases.

"My lady is cooking for me tonight," continues an undaunted Adam. "When I left the house this morning she told me she won't let me come near her after the race until I wash that sweat off," he grins.

When Adam was nine, a BB gun accident resulted in the loss of an eye and brain damage. From that point, he grew up in state schools and facilities. Today he lives in an apartment and works on a highway road crew. Pointing out the window, he notes, "We used to clean up this whole stretch of highway."

\*\*\*

As the car continues toward Levelland, it's out there, in the far distance -- not visible, but felt: the state school. Adam reflects, "The state school? Well, it was all right. We had some good times there. But, you can't leave when you want to. I like it better in my apartment -- and now I can see my girlfriend as often as I want to."

It was at the state school that Adam first met Johnny, who was diagnosed as having schizophrenia as well as mental retardation. Now Johnny has his own apartment, but prior to his Running Club days, no friends or social life. Today, though, he attends a Baptist church, sings in the choir and participates in a single adults Sunday school class. He is also taking classes toward his G.E.D., starting a computer class and job-hunting.

Johnny's interest in running began in the Special Olympics where his favorite events were the 400 relay and the 200 meter run. Now, in spite of a knee injury that's slowed him down, he's running the mile. "I like to get up at 5 and start running. It's fun and something I really do for myself. But I also enjoy helping the other runners. I teach them how to do the stretches."

"Look, Adam," says Johnny, "we're getting closer to Levelland. That's where my kids are..."

Johnny's voice trails off with a touch of sadness. "I was married eight years. I've got two kids. My boy is 13 now, and my daughter is 17. They live with my former wife. My boy is *smart!* He makes good grades."

"Do you get to see your kids very often?" another passenger asks.

The telephone poles file by. Finally, Johnny says, "Once in a while ..."

\*\*\*

At the Levelland meet today, Johnny, Mike and Michelle will run the 2K and Adam the 10K.

"Lawrence is our strongest runner," notes Adam, "but he won't be running today. He did a daredevil thing -- went up this ramp on his bike, flew off and crashed. The doctor told him to stay off his knee for a while." But, he'll be out on the course holding the flag for the 10K.

"It's too bad we won't all be running -- *like in New York ...*"

## New York Marathon memories...

*They'll never forget the New York Marathon, an event for which the Running Club and its members spent months planning, training, and saving and raising money. They returned to Lubbock with no trophies, but with a lifetime's worth of memories. The view from atop the Empire State Building ... the New York Fire Department spraying a refreshing mist of water to run through ... the thousand sights and sounds of the city.*



Mike recalls, "Johnny was doing great until the group came to the 58th Street Bridge. Now that's one of those bridges like a metal web that you can see right through to the water -- and it swayed, vibrated, and bounced.

"Well, when we got to the bridge, Adam said, 'There are holes in this bridge,' and Johnny just stopped cold. He could not see himself crossing that bridge with nothing but steel slats between him and the water, way down below.

"So another friend in the Running Club, P.J., finally stood right behind Johnny — I mean *right* behind him like they had been glued together. She put her arms around Johnny's waist. She took one step with her right leg — and so did Johnny.

"And that's how they crossed the bridge — left, right, left — in a lock-step together."



PHOTOS -- CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT:  
On top of the Empire State Building ...  
Times Square ... a neighborhood deli

Johnny was also the highlight of another New York story. He “swooned” when he crossed the finish line in such a dramatic manner that an ambulance crew whisked him into their ambulance, ready to rush him to the hospital.

Fortunately, P.J. was there again — she’s a cardiology technician and the wife of a physician — and was able to scramble into the ambulance and convince them that Johnny was just clowning around.



Theatre district



Ready for the run

Off the course also had its share of adventure for the Texas runners in New York.

Texan-style, Adam and Lawrence startled the New Yorkers by starting friendly conversations with total strangers everywhere they went ...

Adam is still talking about a \$300 tab for the group at a New York restaurant and how indignant he was with a waiter when he found out there were no free refills for his ice tea.

They ate pork chops, pasta and prawns in one restaurant and experienced fine Italian dining in another. Getting there, however, was a problem.

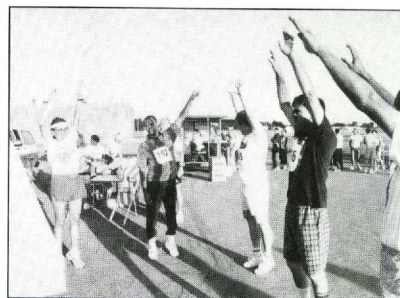
“We all love Italian food, and several local people recommended this one Italian place. So from the hotel, we caught a cab and asked the driver to take us there,” recalls Mike, Michelle’s husband and running partner. “After a wild goose chase ride, the driver still couldn’t find it -- though in the process we sure saw a lot of New York City! Finally, we got there, and it turned out to be worth the search -- one of the best meals of our lives.

“Afterward I got up to use the restroom — which was in the lobby. And, darn if that lobby didn’t look familiar.

“When I got back, I turned to our group and said, ‘Guess what? This restaurant is right here in our own hotel!’”

The Saturday morning sky is light when the Mercedes and the Suburban pull into the high school parking lot at Levelland.

Now the original trio of Lawrence, Adam and Johnny and their friends Michelle, Mike and P.J. are joined by other Running Club teammates -- men and women, teens through retirees, including some recent members who have disabilities.

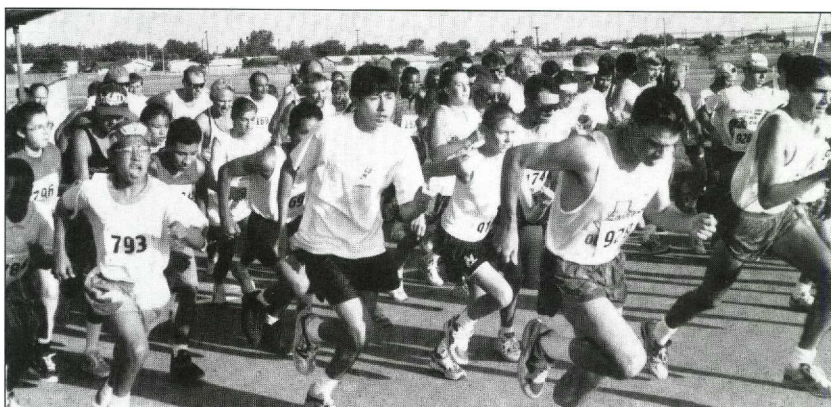


Twenty minutes before the starting gun, the athletes gather to stretch out and warm up. Adam, exuberant, positions his upstretched arms into a V -- "V for victory!" he declares.

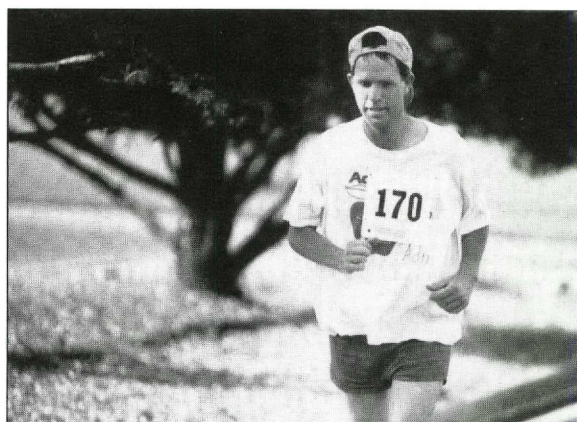
The group follows his lead, smiling and excited.

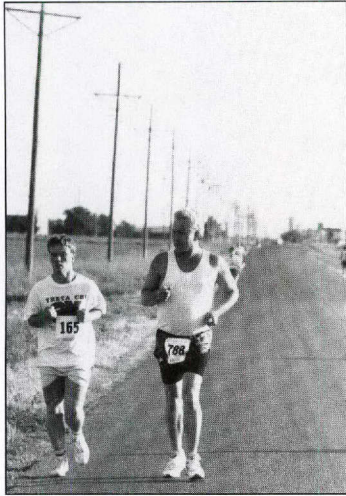
Just before the start, an official explains the course: at the first bend, those running the 10K are to turn left while those doing the 2K course turn right. There's some confusion among the ranks, so when the race begins, Mike sprints ahead and points Adam to the left, the rest of the group right.

Lawrence, holding a directional marker along the 10K course, waves encouragement.



Soon Adam blazes across the finish line and heads for the water cooler with "I never knew 10K was so far..." on his lips.





The last runner has crossed the finish line. The crowd gathers while officers of various running clubs announce upcoming runs and invite everybody to next month's social events.

Finally it's time for the awards. This has certainly been a successful outing for our group; almost everybody has an award to take home.

As the crowd disperses, there are lots of handshakes, hugs and pats on the back.

With minds still on the race and muscles feeling the impact of it, the group is, for the most part, silent on the trip back to Lubbock.

Then, suddenly, the warning light on the instrument panel flashes: *Low Fuel*.

Adam smiles. "That's okay, we can always run home if we have to."



# *Friends ...*

*Sincere thanks to all the Community Connections friends whose stories are featured in this monograph.*

*John Alford ... Midland*  
*Adam Andrews ... Lubbock*  
*Morgan Baugh ... Austin*  
*Theresa Brinkman ... Houston*  
*Del Brown ... Arlington*  
*Christine Coder ... Houston*  
*David Cross ... Alvin*  
*Kevin DuBray ... Alvin*  
*Danny Fagan ... Lubbock*  
*Reggie Hall ... Arlington*  
*Dorothy Hermann ... Arlington*  
*Debbie and Bill Hiddeman ... Houston*  
*Debbie and Amanda Iseli ... Lubbock*  
*Michelle and Mike Jones ... Lubbock*  
*David and Sarah Keys ... Midland*  
*Travis Kuhn ... Arlington*  
*Tom Lanphear ... Houston*  
*Wendy Logan ... Midland*  
*Johnny Martinez ... Lubbock*  
*Suzanne Mendoza ... El Paso*  
*P.J. Mitchell ... Lubbock*  
*Elia Moncado ... El Paso*  
*Lawrence Nelson ... Lubbock*  
*Debby Norris ... Arlington*  
*Clyde Pope ... Houston*  
*Brandy Pulliam ... Lubbock*  
*Jami Ryan ... Houston*  
*Carol Schonerstedt ... Arlington*  
*Bobby Scott ... Austin*  
*Shelby Staggs ... Lubbock*  
*Ginny Stander ... Lubbock*  
*David Tobey ... Austin*  
*Paula Todd ... Austin*  
*Anita Villa ... Midland*  
*Susan Walz ... Houston*





## *Author's Acknowledgments ...*

This monograph reflects vision, dedication, openness, much good work, and a high level of cooperation among many remarkable people.

*Sincere appreciation ...*

... to all the people whose friendships are described here.

Thank you for letting me come into your lives and tell your stories.

Thank you for quietly showing me all over again that of course it's life's richness and connectedness, and not the disabilities, that matter.

... to the staff of the seven Community Connections projects.

You are the "match-makers," finding people with common interests and bringing them together in friendship.

... to everyone on the Texas Planning Council for Developmental Disabilities and its staff, for envisioning Community Connections and making it a reality in the lives of countless new sets of friends all across the state of Texas. Special thanks to Jopie Smith for launching, supporting and mentoring the seven projects, for ensuring that their stories of friendship will live on through this monograph, and for all your valuable guidance; to Lucy Walker, for your meticulous editing, generous gifts of time, and positive support; and to your colleagues Mary Jo Magruder and Dee Sportsman, for your insightful reviews of these stories. Your dedication to the goal of highest quality of life for people with disabilities, and your expertise in how to bring this about, are inspiring. I have learned so much through our work together.

... to David Edmonson, for your exquisite photographs and your respectful admiration for the people in them. Special thanks for all the time and teamwork "above and beyond" -- and for helping me turn our "weaving friendships" idea into the monograph's cover art.

... to John Hamill, longtime Tulsa colleague, whose gift for storytelling helped me bring these friendships to life for readers.

... to Moving Image Production, for allowing the use of quotes from the video you are making about Community Connections.

... and finally, to Roy Underwood, my husband and partner, for your help and your constant support in a thousand ways ... and to our children, Todd, Melanie, Amy, Mary and Annie, who now share with us a heightened sensitivity to society's perceptions about disability issues as a result of our having been so immersed in this project. We have all been enriched.

For me, as for so many people involved with Community Connections, this work has become a labor of love. My hope now is that readers will gain a deeper understanding, just as I have, of one simple truth: people with disabilities are people first. As Debby in Arlington said, "We're more alike than not." And as Gail in Midland said, "Most of us grew up not knowing people with disabilities -- and we've missed out."

There are people in every community who would welcome new friendships. Let's find one another.

*Sharon Clark*

Clark & Associates, Dallas



## *Photographer's Reflections ...*

As a photographer, I'm often asked, "What are you working on that's exciting?" Frankly, after shooting for over twenty years, it's sometimes hard to come up with an answer to that question. But over these last few months, it's been easy. I talk about traveling around Texas photographing people who have mental retardation or other disabilities with people who are not out to save them or rescue them, but who are just simply and honestly their friends. And in almost every case, it's been the person designated as the community friend who has said they're the one who has benefited most from the relationship.

It's easy to be critical; it's popular these days for people to complain about how our tax dollars are used or misused. But lately I've had to confess to people that I think our state is actually doing something wonderful. I'm absolutely excited to know about these Community Connections projects and to have seen, first-hand, the lives that have been changed .... to see people who have mental retardation *blossom*. I say that in a personal context because of my relationship with Steve, a friend I've had for over 35 years. I've struggled sometimes with how best to keep our friendship just that -- a true friendship, with give and take -- rather than slipping into other roles, such as doing things for him that it would be better for him to do for himself, or "helping" him rather than just enjoying him as part of my family circle. This is part of the reason I was so interested in working with Sharon on this project. In the course of doing these fifteen photo shoots in seven communities, I've learned a lot through being with these friends and bugging the staff with my questions. I've been able to come back and implement what I've learned to enrich my own friendship with Steve.

The other thing I noticed that was very interesting to me was that many of the friendships I saw were with people I consider highly-driven. Many of them spoke of how they've learned to slow down and smell the roses, as a sidelight benefit of these friendships. I've learned myself, through being with Steve, that there's no way to go fast with someone with mental retardation -- a valuable lesson because I've realized I was going too fast in life anyway.

As a photographer I was taught many years ago to look at people's eyes. When I first meet somebody I often see a twinkle in their eyes, but then by the time I start to take the person's picture, it's gone. Community Connections friends, though, had twinkles in their eyes that never died. I saw people who had literally blossomed. I saw real warmth in these relationships; both people still had the twinkles in their eyes when they were planning for the next time they would be together. Through my camera lens I saw their sincerity and I knew Community Connections was working.

This work has turned into a labor of love. That's exciting for me, as very few things are after twenty years. I'll bet a dozen times I've been able to tell people about what Community Connections is doing. Most people are actually surprised; they had no concept a project like that existed. But everybody seems to know somebody who could benefit from it.

*David Edmonson*

Edmonson & Father Photography, Dallas



## *How to Learn More ...*

Please contact the Texas Planning Council for Developmental Disabilities or any of the seven organizations that developed Community Connections projects.

**Texas Planning Council for Developmental Disabilities**

4900 North Lamar  
Austin, Texas 78751-2399  
(512) 483-4080

**Arc, Unit 1688**

P.O. Box 1484  
Alvin, Texas 77512  
(713) 482-8308

**HRA**

1325 E. Abram  
Arlington, Texas 76010  
(817) 275-3369

**United Cerebral Palsy Association/Capitol Area, Inc.**

9027 Northgate Boulevard #101  
Austin, Texas 78758-6453  
(512) 834-1827

**El Paso Center of the Deaf**

1005 Yandell  
El Paso, Texas 79902  
(915) 544-6032

**Arc of Northwest Harris County**

P.O. Box 842103  
Houston, Texas 77284-2103  
(713) 957-1600

**Lubbock Regional MHMR Center**

1210 Texas Avenue  
Lubbock, Texas 79401  
(806) 766-0282

**Midland Arc**

2701 "A" Street  
Midland, Texas 79705  
(915) 682-9771





