

## Better Days by Dolores Marusarz

### Raising a special needs child is difficult, but just try doing it 30 years ago!

My first child, Richard “Richie,” was born in 1970. The first time my mother laid eyes on him, she said, “There’s something wrong with this baby.” It hurt to hear that. I had no doubts about him; he was perfect to me.

Shortly after, though, I noticed his suckle was weak and he frequently choked while nursing. At 8 months, he could not sit up. He walked haltingly at 18 months. He had no speech at age 2.

Then I had my second child. When David was 1 year, he was far more advanced than Richie at age 3. A psychologist tested Richie and consulted with me afterwards. She told me Richie qualified as a moron, his IQ was so low.

I was devastated. Even as the tears flowed, I watched Richie stumble around the psychologist’s office putting every toy he could grasp into his mouth, oblivious to everything else.

Only weeks before the news, our school district started offering special education classes. Richie began attending half-day classes with a small group of children.

The next time I took my children to the pediatrician, he advised me to institutionalize Richie immediately. He said Richie would never be able to walk or talk properly, feed himself, dress or wash himself, read or write, tie his shoes, or survive without constant monitoring, and caring for Richie would mean neglecting my “normal” child. He said Richie would be well cared for by the

state (at a time when horror stories were being reported about the institutions) and that he would be happier with “his own kind.”

When I told my mother, she said she knew about Richie all along and agreed with the doctor. She told me that in time, I would forget that I had him; I would be too busy raising David. Better to devote the time to a child who could be someone someday, she remarked.

My husband, in denial, insisted that someday Richie would be another Einstein. In time, my husband left us. This was a confusing and stressful time. Yet whenever I looked at Richie, I saw a dimpled little angel, sweet, innocent, and affectionate.

My sadness turned to anger. I wouldn’t send him to an institution. He would never be strapped to a potty chair.

Richie’s teachers offered hope and made helpful suggestions. I made sure that Richie was included in playtime with David. Having a child who was a model for Richie was tremendously helpful. He wanted to do the things David did. Their roles became reversed; the big brother learned from the little brother.

I decided to take an even more active, consistent hand in his training. I began tutoring him every day, four hours a day, for four years. Appealing to a variety of his senses seemed to work best, as he learned more quickly if he could hear the alphabet, see the letters, touch them (sandpaper letters worked well), repeat them, and taste them (alphabet soup).

His training included social behavior and simple self-care as well. We went to a museum, a free performance, or a new place of interest every single week, even in the worst winters. These experiences




made the bond between my sons even stronger.

By the time Richie was 10, he could read, write, dress himself (and almost tie his own shoes), and even paint pictures.

At that time, I had no car and traveled by bus around Chicago, where we lived. Richie always asked about the bus routes and the names of the streets. When he was 14, he began self-traveling and, almost like a savant, he learned every one of the many bus routes in the large city of Chicago. My mother was calling him to find out how to get places!

I believe that his exposure to a great variety of learning circumstances is what enabled him to prove his old pediatrician so wrong. Richie lives in his own home, not an institution. He still relishes daily bus rides to the malls, downtown, and to visit with friends he has made here in La Crosse, where we moved eight years ago. His latest development is a possible micro-business delivering small packages and paperwork for businesses and individuals in La Crosse.

What did I tell you? He’s perfect! 

*You may reach the author at  
doloresmarusarz@gmail.com.*