

## Sara: The Flower Girl

Vickie and Don Henley welcomed their beautiful baby daughter, Sara, into their family during April, 1983. Sara was a healthy, robust baby just like her big sister Megan had been when she was born. Four days after Sara's first birthday she had a reaction to her DPT vaccination which caused a devastatingly high fever. Sara suffered a slight stroke and went into a coma for 8 days. Her medical condition was every parent's worst nightmare and the fear that their beautiful baby would not survive consumed Vickie and Don. The medical professionals gave them little hope and warned Sara's parents that if she did survive, Sara would probably remain in a vegetative state even if she was able to come out of the coma. Tough little Sara did survive and as do so many other children with disabilities, Sara proved her doctors to be wrong about how her life would unfold.

Sara's parents brought her home from the hospital with severe weakness on her left side, and with the daunting knowledge that Sara had lost all of her developmental skills. Vickie and Don entered the world of early intervention, getting to know all the therapists who would help Sara learn to walk and speak again. At age 3, there was a whole new world of special education to learn about. Like so many other parents, Don and Vickie experienced the trepidation of putting their precious little toddler on a school bus and trusting strangers to safely transport Sara to a school in a neighboring school district 40 minutes away from home. In the Henley's small town there weren't enough other children with disabilities to have a classroom in the home district.

Sara continued to attend a special education classroom in an out of district placement through third grade. During her fourth grade year, Sara's parents became concerned about some transportation problems and called their Parent Training and Information Center for assistance in solving the problem. From the parent center, Vickie and Don learned about special education rules, rights and responsibilities – things they hadn't known anything about. After hearing about the least restrictive environment requirements in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Vickie and Don began to imagine the possibilities for Sara to attend her local school in their home district in their own community where Sara's sister attended school. Vickie and Don attended educational workshops offered by the parent center and began to learn and understand their parents' rights as well as the provisions of the IDEA rules. As they studied and learned about inclusive education and met and talked with other parents, Don and Vickie realized that Sara wasn't recognized in her own community. Sara didn't have neighborhood friends and didn't get invited to birthday parties. They knew they wanted this to change – they wanted Sara to attend a regular education classroom in her home school.

Armed with all their new knowledge, Vickie and Don met with their school administration and asked them to allow Sara to attend the local school. The administrators were reluctant; they had never before attempted to educate a child with Sara's type of disabilities in their own district. Children with learning needs similar to Sara's were always bussed to a special education program in another district. Fortunately, a warm and caring fourth grade teacher dedicated to educating all the students in her classroom, spoke up and admitted that she had never before taught a student with the type of learning problems shown by Sara, but that she

was open to having Sara in her classroom and trying her best to teach Sara. Vickie promised to share her own knowledge of how Sara learns and to work closely with the teacher to adapt and modify the 4<sup>th</sup> grade materials so that Sara could benefit from the classroom instruction.

Sara became a trailblazer - the first child with intellectual disabilities to attend general education classes in her district. Her parents noticed huge changes in Sara immediately. She was eager to leave for school each day and was excited about going to her new classroom. At the supper table, Sara began to talk about topics that Vickie and Don never dreamed she would understand, let alone be able to participate in conversation about them. Vickie maintained a strong partnership with Sara's teacher, problem solving and developing supports such as modifications to the curriculum, visual aids, study guides, adapted content, and altered test formats. Using that array of supports, Sara proved that she was learning what other fourth graders were learning.

Sara's move to high school opened up new fears and worries about what would happen after graduation. Transition services were another whole new arena to learn about. Once again Don and Vickie had to educate themselves and explore new possibilities. Vickie learned about a nearby school district that had developed a modified curriculum for driver's education and was willing to share it with Sara's school. She became the first student with disabilities in her district to complete the driver's ed course. Sara's parents started practicing with Sara by teaching her to drive a golf cart to learn about turning, backing and following a route. During Sara's extended school year services in the summer, she worked on learning road signs and the coursework. After all the preview learning, Sara was then ready to take the behind-the-wheel training with the rest of her classmates.

During high school, Sara took home economics classes and became interested in child care. In her senior year she worked half days as a classroom aide in a pre-school classroom and earned her first paycheck. After a year of experience doing child care, Sara decided that was not her career choice and became interested in computers. By that time she was 19 years old and ready to graduate so she tried to pursue her computer interest by taking courses at a community college. The admissions office informed Sara that her scores were too low for her to be admitted as a student at the college. Meanwhile, Vickie was attempting to get assistance for Sara through the Department of Rehab Services for supported employment opportunities. During this time period the entrepreneur of the family made a big decision. The month before Sara's high school graduation, her sister, Megan, took the plunge to start her own business and opened a flower shop. While Vickie was working hard to try to get Sara into college to pursue her interest in computers, and then trying to obtain community employment services from the vocational agency, Sara began thinking about a different direction for herself. One day while driving past her sister's floral shop, Sara told her mother, "I want to work there."

Megan welcomed the opportunity to mentor her younger sister and to work with Sara in the shop. Sara began working at restocking, cleaning and assisting with whatever tasks needed to be done while Megan designed floral arrangements, arranged store displays, and selected furniture pieces and gift items to stock in the shop. Sara carefully observed everything that her

sister worked on and after a period of time asked if she could begin to create floral arrangements. Megan now reports that Sara is the number one fresh flower arranger and that Sara creates about 90% of the arrangements for the business. Sara also learned to operate the cash register, make change, wait on customers, create balloon bouquets, answer the phone and take customer orders. Vickie recalls that "even as Sara's family, we didn't have high expectations for her". Vickie and Don learned how important it is for parents to believe in their children, to ignore the negative predictions of some professionals, and to always presume competence so as not to mistakenly hold back the potential of people with disabilities or to limit their opportunities to show what they can accomplish. Vickie cautions other parents, "Families should always be on their toes and not dampen down their expectations for their children. Give them the opportunity to try many different things".

Sara says that she wishes she could have had more work experiences before leaving high school and that she could have tried more than one kind of job. She reports that earning money made her more confident. Her favorite part of her job is making fresh floral arrangements. She says, "I like to make them bright and colorful and make people happy." Megan has a truly dedicated and loyal employee as Sara hasn't missed a single day of work in the eleven years that she has worked at the floral shop. She has even declined the days off that Megan has offered to her.

The Henley family enjoys Don's hobby of collecting and restoring antique cars and Sara is no exception. After many years of saving her work earnings, Sara told her dad, "I want to buy an antique car". After some internet research, she found the perfect car – a 1957 pink Thunderbird with a white removable top. With the help of her Dad, Sara researched the original interior and Don restored the car to that condition. Sara loves to drive her antique car on cruise nights and says that her pink Thunderbird is "a guy magnet".

Sara's family believes that her life would have had an entirely different outcome had Sara remained in a self-contained special education classroom in a neighboring school district all those years ago. They attribute Sara's presence in her home community plus her access to the general education curriculum and social experiences with her general education peers as the factors that enabled Sara to develop the skills she is using today in her dream job.