

# Rising Above Limits and Labels

I fulfilled my dreams in spite of a diagnosis of cerebral palsy.

BY SHANNA MCCOY

**M**y mother was the kind of woman you didn't want to say no to. When a pediatrician told her that I would never read, walk, or talk, my mother responded, "My daughter will be walking by the time I'm through." It took me a long time to even sit up and stand on my own, but two and half years later, my mother was right. I was able to walk.

At the age of 18 months I was diagnosed with cerebral palsy. The cause: severe brain trauma from a forceps injury during birth. No one volunteered this information; a receptionist accidentally left my medical records on the desk and my mother decided to look through them.

But I never really accepted the fact that I was "Disabled" with a capital "D." As a child, I convinced myself that I was an ordinary girl who possessed some extraordinary gifts.

Other people didn't see it that way. I was teased daily by other children in the small town in Arkansas where we lived. On the first day of first grade, I heard the teacher say to my mother, "She belongs in the retarded class." My mother boldly replied, "She belongs in *this* class." As the days progressed, I realized I could read better than any other kid in that room.

Every day after school, I exercised, practiced reading, did my homework, and learned to walk—with the help of a 20-pound metal day brace and a 40-pound metal night brace. From the age of four to 13, my mother and I went through the same grueling ritual with the braces. We fought constantly. Often I would wait for her to fall asleep so that I could take the night brace off. In the morning, when I realized my mother had put it back on me in the middle of the night, I would throw a temper tantrum.

Even though I had cerebral palsy, I still had to perform

daily chores around the house. And although it took me a long time to complete simple tasks, I thrived on the feeling of independence and accomplishment this gave me.

I moved on to the second-grade, then third, fourth, and fifth—in spite of the fact that my teachers and classmates often treated me unfairly and with cruelty. One teacher said to me, "Instead of your mother putting pretty bows in your head, she should have given you a brain." My fifth-grade math teacher said she wasn't going

to treat me special just because my mother insisted on "window dressing a retarded kid." For nine long years my mother met with teachers, school board officials, and principals demanding that I not be judged unfairly on the basis of a physical disability and labelled "retarded."

In junior high and high school, I began to make the honor roll. I joined the marching band and became heavily involved in speech and drama classes. When I was accepted into college, I was overjoyed. I had finally made it! Or so I thought.

During the winter of 1990, my mother passed away. I was devastated and told myself I couldn't finish college. But I reflected on her confidence in me over the years and finally earned my degree. It was the fulfillment of a childhood dream.

I have a child of my own now, a very bright 11-year-old boy named Justin Tyler Abraham. Doctors had told my mother that I would never be able to have a child, just as I would never be able to read, walk, or talk. Justin is a reminder of my mother's words—and her love. NN

*From 1993 to 1995, Shanna McCoy served on the Governor's Developmental Disability Planning Council for Arkansas, and is still a member of the Arkansas Disability Coalition.*

