

Mary Jane Ponten



**When
Today
Becomes
Tomorrow**

When Today Becomes Tomorrow



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Table of Contents

1. Why me? Why Not Me? 4
2. Laugh A Little, At Yourself, That Is. . . . 7
3. Good, Great and Perfection. . . . 10
4. Me, Accepting Me. . . . 13
5. You Want to Talk "Frustration?" 16
6. The Comfort Zone. . . . 18
7. Horror Stories. . . . 20
8. In Transit. . . . 23
9. It's A Family Affair. . . . 25
10. The Livin' End. . . . 27
11. A Woman's Prerogative. . . . 30
12. Tomorrow Has Come. . . . 32
13. Then There Was China. . . . 35

Foreword

Midnight Moments

There comes a point in every twenty-four hours called midnight. At that moment today becomes yesterday and tomorrow becomes today. In the life of every person who is out of the ordinary, the flicker of hope, the beginning of accomplishment becomes what I call a "midnight moment."

In the life of every out of the ordinary person the flicker of hope - - the toy picked up for but a split second now seen as the first effort at coordination; the garbled sound later recognized as the first attempt at speech - - these acts seen only in retrospect can be determined as midnight moments.

This is in no way intended to be an auto-biography, neither is it a text book or manual for complete care or self help for the person who has cerebral palsy. It is a collection of thoughts and ideas from my life and experiences. I trust it will be of encouragement to the teenager who has cerebral palsy or any of a number of disabling conditions, and/or the parents of a child with it.

The thoughts in this book are arranged by subject not chronology.

Were my mother and father able to add a note here, I think it would be to encourage you to get the finest support team available, listen to them, and then in all things listen to your own heart.

It is my hope that you can find some blessing, comfort or encouragement from the following pages.

After the completion of accomplishment, you have found the "tomorrow" so long waited for; and the "today" has become tomorrow's promise.

Mary Jane Ponten

CHAPTER 1



Why Me? Why Not Me?

Perhaps the question that is asked the most, spoken the least, and answered seldom is: "Why me?" Why did this happen to me? Am I being punished? Were my parents really bad people? What kind of a God would allow this to happen? Why was I born with this disability? Why me? Couldn't it have happened to someone else just as easily? Why didn't it happen to someone else?

It is the biggest question you will ever ask or face, and the hardest one for which to find an answer. My doctor always told me it was an accident of nature. It just happens sometimes. That satisfied me at first. After a while that wasn't much of an answer; certainly not a logical reason.

Back when I was a kid growing up, parents were blaming each other for the "deformed child" at such a high rate that by the time the child was five years old roughly two out of three families had split up over the issue of who was to blame for the child's condition.

Fortunately, we have come a long way from that. At least now the parents are not blaming themselves or each other because their child was born with cerebral palsy. But they are still asking why! And we, the children, are asking why.

I'm not a doctor, but I know there is no clear-cut answer. Most of the time we don't know what causes it. We know many things that don't cause it. God, sin, hate, are among that list. It's not

a disease. It's not contagious, nor is it passed on generation to generation. Your doctor can tell you a few things that might cause it. Lack of oxygen, the RH blood factor and premature birth are among the things that may be the culprits.

We can't really blame it on anything or anyone. So can we drop the search for the how and address the question of "why?"

No, I don't have any magical answer. Let's rid our minds of some of the most asked questions. Did my parents sin? Is that why I have cerebral palsy? If that were the case, everyone in the world would be born with it or something as bad or worse. All humans have sinned.

Was I destined to be so bad that God was punishing me ahead of time for all the bad things I might have done? Again, this would have to be everyone in the world. Look around you.

I hate to say this, because in my mind I have a more logical explanation, but actually, getting born is like a game of "Russian Roulette". Anything can happen.

When you can free yourself of trying to find the cause or lay the blame on something or someone, you are able to free yourself to start accepting what has happened and get on with the job of living life as fully as possible.

I have to put in my plug right here in favor of God. I have faith to trust Him that He knows what is best for each of us. Without Him I could be a bitter old lady. With Him I can live my life fully and completely because I can rest in His wisdom as to what is best.

In Psalm 139:13-16 (That's in the Bible) David reminds us that God knew us while we were hidden from others – still being formed. God doesn't make mistakes: He creates people. Don't get carried away and start to blame God for disabilities which occur before or during birth. Rather understand that He knew all about our formation and made His plans accordingly.

So relax. Sit back. Say to yourself, "Okay, so it has happened to me. I have cerebral palsy. I'm not the first and won't be the last to have it. It doesn't really matter why or how I got it. The fact is I have it. What I am going to do with the rest of my life is up to me."

You can be either bitter or not bitter. You can make yourself and everyone around you miserable and soon no one will want to be around you. You'll be alone, and you'll still have cerebral palsy. That is an option. The choice is yours.

Or you can decide that you are going to accept and make the best of who you are and what you have. You'll learn to do everything you can for yourself. You will learn to live without bitterness in your heart. Believe me, if it's in there, it will come out – somehow, somewhere, sometime. It will pop up its ugly little head and strike out like a rattlesnake. While you're at it, you might as well forget about feeling sorry for yourself. Self-pity is almost as ugly as bitterness. They are sort of like "kissing cousins". They feed each other and feed on each other.

I'm sorry. Did I make it sound like it was easy to get rid of bitterness and self-pity? I surely

did not mean to. As a matter of fact, the best way is never let them get hold of you. But in either case, it takes a very strong will and much effort to stay away from or get rid of bitterness and her cousin, self-pity. This set of cousins is worse than cocaine. They are totally addicting to the user.

No one else can make this effort for you. No one else can make these choices for you. It's sort of like all that therapy you have had ever since before you can remember. Most of your therapy is repetition of the good moves. Well, this conscious effort is repetition of the good attitudes and thoughts. That way your mind forgets how to use the bad vibes of bitterness and self-pity, just like your body and your voice are forgetting how to move incorrectly every time they move the right way.

I know this is a pretty deep subject, but try some of these basic exercises and see if they will work for you.

Stop searching for answers to the unanswerable question of why.

Let go of any bitterness you may be holding on to because this has happened to you.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself and don't let self-pity get started in your mind.

Determine to go as far as you can and be the best you can at whatever you do.

Above all be sure to have a good time. Oh, didn't I mention that earlier. One of the best ways to defeat bitterness and self-pity is to have a good feeling about yourself. Enjoy life. Like yourself. CAREFUL NOW – don't get wrapped up in yourself and become a spoiled brat or snob. Nobody, but nobody, likes him or her. You know that!

CHAPTER 2



Mary Jane (right) at Lake Michigan In High School

Laugh A Little – At Yourself, That Is

A few years ago we had a second car, once a very proud, very new, right off the show room floor '76 Ford Maverick. It had aged and gone through the rigors of teaching two teenagers to maneuver defensively through our city streets. Now it was relegated to the “only if you have to use it” car that I, as Mom, was destined to use all too often.

It had been bounced off curbs until the rims of the wheels were less than cylindrical in shape. Anything over 30 MPH was a death defying experience.

At the time I was working at NavPress. Always willing to give a lift to any of my fellow workers, I had again opened my mouth and offered to give two girls a ride home.

Coming down Fillmore Hill where you seem to go at a 45-degree angle, the car picked up speed and soon was going well over a slow crawl. As the speed increased so did the vibrations, and the noise! It felt and sounded like the old girl would surely fall apart at any second.

Knowing I had the car under control, my trained ear oblivious to the rattles, thumps, thuds and groaning of my little white bomb, I drove merrily down the hill.

“Janie! What is WRONG WITH YOUR CAR?” Glenda shouted in terror.

“Oh nothing.” I replied. “It’s just got cerebral palsy like the rest of the family.” I laughed. This sent the girls into roaring laughter. They forgot all about their fears.

And why not make a joke about it? Cerebral Palsy is not a dirty word to be hidden in the closet. Indeed my husband and I both lived our entire lives with the fact of cerebral palsy. People who know us never knew what to expect from us, and still don’t. It’s sure a lot more fun than pity.

Sometimes the jokes have absolutely nothing to do with cerebral palsy. They’re just funny. For instance there was the time I had an operation. The big one! My second mastectomy—that’s where they make your chest EXTRA FLAT. Yes, I’ve had cancer twice.

Back in the room after a while in recovery, my husband who worked on headquarters staff for a mission organization, along with two of our best friends, Les and Ginny also with the same organization, and our youth pastor and his wife, Don and Barbara, were standing around my bed to offer whatever comfort would be appropriate. They were all so serious.

“Does anyone have a Bible?” I managed to gasp.

Remember who I was talking to! “Yes, I have one right here,” Les assured me. “Is there something special you would like to hear?” He was so sweet and so concerned.

“Yes,” I replied. “But it’s got to be the King James. I like that the best.”

Les assured me it was indeed the King James Version of the Bible.

Now you must remember that I was not fully alert. My eyes were rolling around even more than they usually do. So between gasps I asked him to turn to the last chapter of the Song of Solomon.

When he found the chapter I gave instruction in a low gasping whisper. “There’s a verse,” I said, “that goes something like this.” I broke for a few breaths and then continued. “It says, ‘We have a sister...’”

“Yes, I have it. Here it is.” So Les in his most sympathetic spiritual voice began to read. “WE HAVE A LITTLE SISTER AND SHE HAS NO BREASTS.”

After a few moments of total silence the whole room broke into absolute hysterics. A nurse came running in, she thought we were crying. Indeed, we were laughing so hard the tears were rolling down all our faces. Poor woman tried so hard to comfort us and assure everyone that I was going to be fine.

We finally got control enough to show her what we were laughing about. She shook her head and left the room. A few minutes later she came back into the room and asked if she might borrow the Bible. We showed her where the verse was. I honestly lost track of how many times that night we heard laughter from the nurses station as first one and then another was told about this crazy woman and her antics.

Life is too short to be so serious that one misses the richness of humor. That is true of anyone. But personally, I think it is truer of someone like me who looks, talks or acts physically out of the ordinary.

Learn to laugh at yourself, with yourself, and with your friends. Find things to laugh at and don't miss a chance to do it.

But don't ever poke fun at someone else who is at all sensitive about themselves for any reason. Rather, let them see that you can laugh at yourself.

CHAPTER 3



Sally (Alice Mae) and Mary Jane in the early 1930's.

Good, Great, and Perfection!

You had been getting 75's and 80's on your spelling tests. A few weeks you worked hard and got 90. The teacher wrote on your paper "Good!" The next week you worked harder and got 95. She wrote "Great!" A few weeks later you not only got 100, but you got the two extra credit points also. That was Perfection.

All of life is that way. Standards and expectations are set for all of us every day. They are not there to frustrate us (even though they sometimes do), but to give us a goal, or in some cases a standard.

I must have been about eight and a half when I got my first bike. All my friends knew how to ride bikes, but I was still on the tricycle. (I didn't know I should have felt lucky to be able to ride a tricycle. No one bothered to tell me that as a "handicapped child" I mustn't think about a bike. It was way too dangerous.) So I asked for a bike for Christmas. That was the year all my friends got their first big two wheelers. My sister got her big bike and I got a small two-wheel bike. Talk about thrilled! I could hardly stand it!

I took that bike and walked it over to my best friend, Elsie's house, half a block away. Down

the alley, into her back yard. It didn't matter that I couldn't ride it yet. Santa had enough confidence in me to get me one. Then the work began. This was back in the dark ages before training wheels were invented.

Every nice evening that spring, Daddy took me across 71st Street to a stretch of sidewalk along the Oakwood Cemetery wall, and we would ride my bike. Daddy held tight to help me get the feel of balancing. He would let go for brief moments. Those moments gradually became longer and longer. All of a sudden, one day I was riding. I went a whole block before I knew I was alone. What a feeling! I could ride my bike! It was great!

As far as I know the law of gravity had not changed for me. Indeed many times after that I proved the law of gravity, first with a large bump on one side of my head and then with a large bump on the other side of my head. I kept flying over the handlebars. Did that stop me from riding? Not on your life!

Gravity set the standard for me. If I defied it, I fell. As a matter of fact, that's the way it is in walking, riding in a wheelchair or on a horse. Either you obey the law of gravity or suffer the consequences.

In swimming there are standards, too. That's another thing I love to do. If you open your mouth underwater, you don't get a mouthful of air. Do it too often and the lifeguard will be coming to rescue you. On the other hand, my husband was absolutely terrified of water – as far as swimming. He loved fishing, boating and the rest. But swimming – forget it. The moment he would try to put his face in the water, it was all over. He became totally spastic and could not move anything. His mother had unintentionally taught him such a fear of water that he never got over it. So he never learned to swim.

You cannot defy the rules of swimming and be able to swim. Gravity, laws, standards and goals are set for all of us. Either we measure up or we don't do the stated activity. To walk, skip, hop, jump or run you must make your legs as well as the rest of your body obey the commands they are given. If they cannot obey, then you do not do that activity.

To illustrate personal standards – those not set in stone; let me tell you about learning to drive a car.

I was born and raised in Chicago. Therefore, when I was 15 years and nine months old I did, just as my friends were doing, I pestered Daddy for a driver's permit.

Now, Daddy had certain rules for driving. It was his car and either I obeyed his rules or I could not use his car. That seemed fair enough. It was a '38 Ford with the shift on the floor.

His rules were very simple:

1. Don't pop the clutch.
2. Don't stomp on the brake.
3. Don't jerk the wheel.

If I did not obey these rules, I could not drive his car. He owned the car. He set the standards for using it.

I learned to drive the car on the streets of Chicago, and I did it Daddy's way. My sister and I were allowed to drive as long as one of our parents was in the car with us, which on the south side of Chicago was probably safer for young ladies.

One small problem occurred. Dad seemed to be too busy to take my sister and I for our tests, even though he had time enough to renew the permits whenever they were due. Sally, my sister, turned 18 and somehow Dad found time to take her for her test. Seventeen months later when I turned 18, he miraculously found time to take me for my test. Of course, I passed.

They never told us we couldn't have our license until we were 18; they just did not make it possible for us to get it until that time. Pretty sneaky, I'd say.

When I went off to college, I was still holding my glass or cup with both hands. I found myself embarrassed by this. So I set a self-imposed goal of learning to drink with one hand on the glass and then the cup. Gravity had nothing to do with it. My parents' rules had nothing to do with it. This was a goal I set for me. Yes, for the most part I do use only one hand now. A few very flimsy paper cups sometimes give me a hard time even now.

Social acceptability will be spoken to elsewhere, for now we are talking about laws, rules, goals and goal setting. The more goals you set for yourself, the less others will have to do it for you. Set your goals high enough to make yourself reach high. If you don't quite make it, at least you have tried.

My goal – one of them – was to walk like everyone else. I did reach that goal. Another goal was perfect speech. No, I did not reach that goal. However, without that goal, I hate to say how bad my speech would be today. Personal goals are things you have control over. Set them wisely.

CHAPTER 4



Me Accepting Me

I was kicked out of my neighborhood school when I was in fourth grade. Why? Because I was handicapped and could not meet the expectations of the teacher. That was the same teacher who had forced the administration to keep me in kindergarten an extra semester – because I was handicapped.

How well I remember walking into that fourth grade room at Samuel Gompers School for exceptional children on the south side of Chicago. An entire school, mind you, from pre-school through 8th grade for physically handicapped children. There were four grade schools and one high school in the city of Chicago just for those of us who had disabilities.

Up to that point I knew I had been born with “spastic paralysis” – that’s what they called it back then. Now they call it Cerebral Palsy. I looked around that room. It was pathetic. All those crippled children sitting at their desks; some were even in wheelchairs.

“I don’t belong here! I’m not like THAT,” I said to myself. My doctor had arranged the transfer. I figured I would stay until the mistake could be straightened out or I would just have to prove to them that I didn’t belong there.

You see, until that day I really didn’t know I was handicapped. So this is the first issue we must face. As far as the outside world was concerned, I was handicapped. I looked it; I talked

as one who was handicapped, it was therefore assumed that I was handicapped. Quite a shocker. I was handicapped.

Little did I know that I would continue in that system through 12th grade. The quality of the work was the same as the other schools. The quantity had been adjusted to fit the needs of the children in the classroom.

But as far as I was concerned, I had been taken out of my element and degraded to a lesser circumstance. My neighborhood friends were still the ones I played with. My schoolmates for the most part I merely tolerated. It was necessary to be friendly toward them.

But the point I want to make is that it took a really traumatic event to make me face the fact that I was handicapped. However, as I observe and talk to other folks, parents and kids alike, I find that it is right around the age of nine to thirteen that one becomes aware of their own identity. If this physical or mental identity includes something that is out of the ordinary, we become alert to it and keenly aware that there is an area of distinction between us and the population around us.

In searching for self-identity and self-worth we first have to deal with that “handicap” whatever it may be. Recognize it and ACCEPT IT. It is a fact of life and will not go away by rejecting or ignoring it.

No one has ever been able to convince me that I am handicapped. I have a physically handicapping condition called cerebral palsy. I look funny. I walk just a bit off beat. I talk really weird. Fortunately, my mind has not been affected. But do these circumstances make me a handicapped person? Some would say yes. I beg to differ.

The handicapped person – be it child or adult – thinks first about the handicap and second about the person. It becomes an established habit for them to say, “I can’t do this or that because I’m handicapped.”

On the other hand, the well-adjusted person who has a handicapping condition will think of the event or activity and relate to it, then only if necessary, will contemplate the circumstances incidental to the physical or mental disability or challenge.

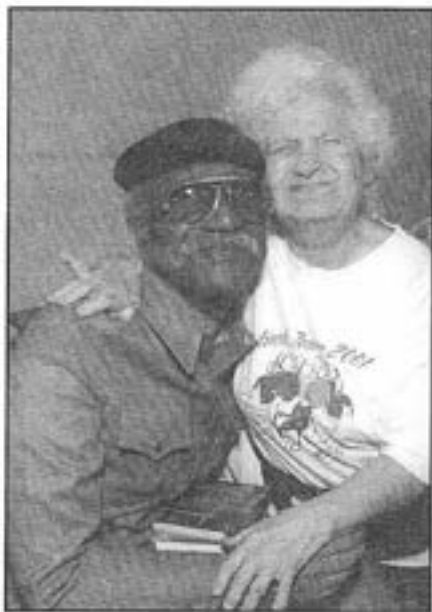
The person with a limited understanding would not attack a class in calculus. I most certainly would not consider singing a solo at church. Neither, may I add, would a lot of other folks who have no noticeable disability.

I am not so wrapped up in my disability that it is the first thing on my mind. I am a normal person with many interests. I happen to have cerebral palsy.

Once we have accepted who we are, we can then take the next step of adjusting to our life and lifestyle.

In the 8th grade I was voted the best-adjusted child in the school. Not only had I accepted who I

CHAPTER 5



Mary Jane in Cuba.



Mary Jane in China with Wheels for the World.

You Want to Talk “Frustration”

Try this one. You’re driving down the highway and the car next to you backfires. You have cerebral palsy, which means that your “startle reflex” is heightened. Do you:

- A. Slam on the brakes.
- B. Drive up the nearest telephone pole.
- C. Swerve into the car next to you.
- D. Grasp the wheel, let your knuckles turn white and just keep going.

If you have a valid driver’s license, I hope your answer is D, since A, B and C are unacceptable behavior on the road.

Or this. You’re taking a math test. The answer is 256.98. Someone drops a ruler on the floor and you end up writing 256666/////98. It’s a timed test, so you have no time to go back.

Do you:

- A. Leave it as is and tell the teacher what happened.
- B. Take time to go back and correct it.
- C. Put a line / to denote the decimal.
- D. Break into tears.

You don’t want to, but if you have cerebral palsy, you probably do D, “break into tears,”

was and what I had, but also I had developed - - with a lot of sensitive guidance - - a lifestyle, which greatly minimized my need to think about this condition called cerebral palsy.

Dr. Black, my pediatrician, had been guiding my growth and social development. Things I could do were encouraged. I tried everything. Choir and band were not encouraged, though I did take piano for a while. I play only for my own amazement.

In high school all the kids who had cerebral palsy were required to take "special typing" in 9th grade. I hated it with a passion. Not because I did not want to learn to type. No, not at all. Indeed as a junior I would have loved to take both typing and shorthand. I hated it because it set me apart as one of those awful creatures called C.P.'s.

The school felt that as a group our writing was so bad that typing was the only alternative for us. Once again we were lumped into a category because of the cerebral palsy.

It was so embarrassing that I didn't even want to go into the typing room during that period of the day. The whole school knew that was "dummy typing". To this day I am an absolutely terrible typist.

Accept whatever disability you may have! Develop a lifestyle that minimizes your need to think about it. Simply live as much as possible as though it does not exist. You have then become a normal person who happens to have a physically or mentally limiting condition.

CHAPTER 6



Mary Jane's Father, Leo Duggan



And Mother, Susan Duggan

The Comfort Zone

It is not the job of the world at large to make me comfortable with them. I am the one who is out of the ordinary, as the majority sees it. Therefore, it is my job to reach out and make others comfortable with me.

Now I've given you the whole idea in a nutshell. So just sleep through this chapter. That is, unless you want to see how it might be done.

Prerequisite – you must feel good about yourself. That's a big word isn't it? It means, what is required before you attempt to do it. Like swimming. You're not going to dive off the diving board at the 12 foot end if you don't know how to swim, unless there is someone around there to catch you. I sure hope **THEY** know how to swim.

Feeling good about yourself is not just for us – that's for everybody. It helps if Mom, Dad, sister, brother, grandparents, and all the rest feel good about you. They can help you in the process of accepting yourself as a worthwhile person. However, their feeling good about you is not a prerequisite for you feeling good about yourself. It just makes it a little bit easier.

When someone has been put down, belittled, embarrassed or degraded in any way over a period

of time, they are going to have a very hard time feeling that they are worth anything. Indeed, if you tell a child he is stupid often enough, he may begin to believe it.

The adult parent, teacher, neighbor, or just “friend” of the person who has cerebral palsy can really make or break the self-esteem of that person!

Remember that fourth grade teacher I told you about who forced me out of “her” school? Well, it all came to a head over an art project. She had collected all the papers at the end of the day. Next day – time for art – her instructions were very clear, very simple. As she returned the papers to each child, she remarked, “If you did not get your paper back, it is in the waste basket. It was just scribbles anyway.” Only one person in the entire class had an empty desk.

I was crushed. My best girlfriend, Elsie, and I walked home together. She and I told my mother through tearful wailing what had happened. Mother’s response was, “I’ll take care of it.” She had seen it coming. Her first call was to the school and her second was to Dr. Black. The next day I found myself in another school.

From that moment on I knew I was absolutely horrid in art. I barely tried. But then, I had cerebral palsy so I wasn’t expected to do as well as the polio and cardiac kids. They had full use of their hands and were a lot smarter than I.

Then I get to high school and art was required, so I took it. A few tips from the teacher about blending colors and guess what? I had a prize winning painting hanging in the Board of Education building in downtown Chicago. I’m not a great artist, but I’m not all that bad either. How grateful I am to that art teacher who took the time to build me up and give a tip here and there.

I’ve heard people call their children “dummy”, “stupid”, “dumbbell” in the mere act of correcting them, or worse, just calling them to the table for dinner. I have watched these same children grow up; drop out of school, take low paying jobs or survive on welfare. Not all – but a great majority have believed what the adults around them have said and have given up trying.

CHAPTER 7



Mary Jane in college

Horror Stories

As some people have looked over this manuscript they have sometimes accused me of being too positive and not telling the whole story. Perhaps, it is because I have spent my life out-growing, over-coming and over-powering all these negatives.

But to be fair with those who are still wrapped up in feelings of bitterness, hatred, vengeance and all those other negatives, I shall try to remember a few stories of my own. I have a few from a younger friend who is still very much remembering and struggling with what to do about these feelings.

We had a sandbox in our back yard. I loved to play in it. One day a neighborhood boy, the son of a barber, came into our fenced-in back yard. He played a bit, then decided it would be fun to stuff sand into my mouth, eyes, ears and nose.

Daddy saw it from the porch. (We had a second floor flat.) He bounded down those stairs, grabbed the boy and called to mother, "Call the police. I'm so angry I may kill him."

Another time I was standing on the platform waiting for the commuter train to take me downtown. Some kids came up and saw me. They took out their peashooters and let go until I had welts over most of my body. When the train arrived I told the conductor whose response was, "That's too bad; just ignore them and they'll leave you alone."

A few years ago I was taken by surprise at the gas station. I was filling my tank when two teenage girls appeared. As they filled their tank their remarks aimed at me were, "People like that should not be let out in public." I was startled to find that an encounter like that could still make me angry.

A few weeks later I was teaching a disability awareness class in the high school in our neighborhood. I related this incident to the class. After class was over two girls sheepishly admitted they were the girls from the gas station. They apologized, I forgave, we hugged, and they went to their next class. Message sent and received!

Stories from someone else.

Steve was the first handicapped child to be mainstreamed into the New Jersey school system. It took nothing less than a letter from the governor of the state to get him into school.

Steve tells about the kids in school (back in the '60's and '70's). Sometimes they would put gum on the tips of his crutches or the arm pads of the crutches. Imagine the sticky mess that would cause.

Or, picture this. Steve could not go to the bathroom without help. Whenever he had to "go", the teacher would get on the loudspeaker. "Will the janitor please hurry. Steve Newstead has to go to the bathroom - - Repeat, Steve has to go to the bathroom. HURRY!" The whole school knew every time he had to go to the bathroom. How mortifying!

After Steve was able to get there by himself, some of the boys would go into the stall and lock all of them, crawl out and wait for Steve to come in. Because of his limited balance, he had to use the stall. Result—wet britches, home to change.

When he got the courage to report these and other outrages to the teacher or principal, the response was, "Grow up." "Ignore it." Or "What do you want me to do about it?"

These are a few of the fairly predictable responses from the non-understanding or frustrated world around us.

How could these responses be changed to be helpful rather than put-downs?

"Grow up" could become "These children are showing immaturity. Can you learn to reach out and help them understand what you are going through? Show them that you are bigger than they are. I'll try to help you learn how."

"Ignore it" might become "I'm sorry this has happened, but this is not really an earth-shaking incident. Can we overlook this one? We don't want them to think you are a crybaby. But I'll be watching to see who is starting all this and will quietly do what I can about it."

"What do you want me to do about it?" might be stated in this way: "There really is not much I can do about this situation at this moment. Rest assured I am watching the whole picture and

will step in when I can. Meanwhile, do you think you can try to make friends with the kids who are doing this to you?"

But then you must watch for the culprit or culprits and discipline them when they are caught in the act. It is NOT socially acceptable to treat someone, anyone, in a way you would not wish to be treated yourself.

Here in Colorado Springs the teachers in many schools have found a partial answer. Our Cerebral Palsy Association has a Public Awareness committee, which has a very dynamic school presentation. At present we reach approximately three thousand kids a year from kindergarten through college with the message, which tells the kids through words, and actions that we are just like them.

In the majority of cases we are able to break down the barriers so that it becomes "US" rather than the "WE/THEM" syndrome. Shouldn't this be the goal for all of us through our lives?

CHAPTER 8



Mary Jane in Chinese Bridal Chair

In Transit

The magic moment when today becomes yesterday and tomorrow becomes today occurs every twenty-four hours. This is a transition, which takes place every hour of every day somewhere on our planet earth.

When a child is born it is transitioned from the mother's womb to the outside world. Most children grow and transition from creeping to crawling to walking to running and then to all kinds of activities such as skipping and jumping.

The same child moves from playing at home to attending grade school, junior high, senior high, and college and on to the work force and/or homemaking.

To complete this life cycle we enter middle age, retirement, old age, and more than likely somewhere along that road, we will lose a life partner, either through death or divorce. Then there comes the final transition of personal death.

Our lives are filled with moments of transition. Some are small. Some are large. A few are gigantic.

Recently society has begun focusing on the idea of helping the disabled person transition from

school to work. So when you hear the word “transition” used by an educator or social worker, more likely than not they are referring to the process of passing from high school to either further education or the work force.

Through our local school district, I was involved in presenting a “transitioning work shop”. According to the guidelines given by the State Board of Education, I (as a person with a disability) was to answer a few, “well-chosen” questions regarding the who and how of my transitioning experience.

The leadership may have felt me just a bit impolite when I was informed of my part in the workshop. I almost rolled on the floor; I was laughing so hard. Please remember that I am 70 years old and have already successfully passed through all with the exception of one or two of the periods mentioned earlier. NOT THE FINAL ONE - YET!

Most of the other groups had young people who have their first jobs – and some, their own apartments. That’s when I decided I just could not do it their way.

When the leaders learned of the project I had going on in my home at that time, they asked, “Why don’t you tell about Steve?” I did a lot of that plus presenting the idea of life being full of transitions.

Steve, a thirty-year-old man with cerebral palsy, wanted to move out of his parents’ home. Though he was a college graduate he possessed few of the living skills and confidence needed to have an apartment of his own.

The first weekend Steve was with me he needed to do his laundry. Very carefully, under supervision, he sorted his soiled clothing, learned how to use the washer and dryer. Then I turned him loose.

He thought that was his work for the day. Imagine his surprise when I announced, “It’s cleaning day, and I’m not about to clean your bathroom.” He was given the equipment and instructions. A few hours later I inspected his work. He had done a good job.

When we were four months into the experiment, Steve was about ready to get his own place. We had frank talks about everything from cookie-making, marketable skills, and personal hygiene.

Steve got his first paycheck. We still needed to work on budgeting and the handling of the checking account he had just opened. BUT HE IS MAKING IT ON HIS OWN.

From birth to death we are in transit from one phase of life to another. If one needs help and another doesn’t, that’s just fine. It is available, but not just as an easy way out.

Your school district or social service organization can help to determine if help would be appropriate for you or your family.

CHAPTER 9



Mary Jane and Bud (1962)

It's A Family Affair

"In the Beginning" there was a four-pound, four-ounce baby girl who was named Mary Jane. Named hastily so there would be a name to put on her gravestone.

Big sister, Alice Mae, had been named after the two grandmothers, Ida Mae and Sarah Alice. I guess I should be glad I didn't end up Sarah Ida or Ida Sarah – both pretty names. Together? Thanks, but no thanks.

The beginning seemed bleak. "This baby is too weak to live" was the consensus of opinion from the medical community of the early thirties. But at ten days she was still alive, so the doctors agreed that the mother could take her home and "enjoy her as long as she lives."

Even the doctors can't always be right. At the ripe old age of three, they agreed that the child would live, but that she would neither walk, talk nor think. One specialist described her speech as a "crowing sensation".

Let me assure you that Mary Jane does walk, she does talk and unless this computer is working itself, she does indeed think.

Most of the rest of these pages have told thoughts and ideas that have been developed during sixty-plus years of living with the help of parents, doctors, therapists and family. But just for a

few moments I want to tell you of my big sister.

During those growing up years, while I was struggling with having cerebral palsy, therapy and all that goes with it, Alice Mae, or Sally as she has always been called, had her own struggles.

We were only seventeen months apart. She tells of the neighbor women who told her she was a mean sister for not picking me up when I had fallen at play.

“My mother told me to be sure she did not hurt herself, but she is to get up by herself. I’m not allowed to help her if she can do it for herself.” Sally must have been terribly bewildered by the critical attitudes of the adults around her.

When kids made fun of me, she hurt as badly as I did; sometimes even worse, I’m sure. It’s not easy being the sister or brother of a child who looks or acts other than in the normal way.

It is a family affair. Let the family be involved. As my sister often said, she did not have cerebral palsy but she grew up with it. It was an everyday fact of life with her. Almost everywhere she went “little sister” was there and a constant reminder that life had not been kind to her.

It is important that we deal with the siblings of the disabled child. Their needs are unique. I am not qualified to speak to this issue. Get help. Seek counseling, if necessary, as you assist them in dealing with this as a part of their lives.

Another aspect of family deals with the children whose parent or parents have cerebral palsy.

Our children grew up with cerebral palsy as much as if they themselves had been born with it. As they grew, they allowed their friends time to get to know us as “just people”.

Susan, in the 5th grade, had the opportunity of a lifetime. Mr. Sellers was reading a story to the class about a boy in Australia who had cerebral palsy. Mr. Sellers mispronounced “cerebral” much to Susan’s consternation. A raised hand recognized by the teacher brought forth this comment: “It’s cerebral not *ce-ree-bral*.”

“If you know so much about it, why don’t you tell the class,” was Mr. Seller’s response. He had already met me and knew exactly what he was doing.

At this point, Susan launched into a twenty-minute exhortation on: what it was, how you get it, and how you act when you have it. She ended with, “By the way, both of my parents have cerebral palsy and I am very proud of them.”

Cerebral palsy, as well as other physically handicapping conditions, does not affect just the one who has it, but it affects the whole family. It is indeed a family affair and needs to be dealt with as a family, by the family.

CHAPTER 10



The Grandchildren (L-R) Daniel, Alexi, Joel, Emily and Rachel (1999)

The Livin' End

Now that I am a grandmother, wow! What an end to this tale!

Some of us do get married. We do have children, and eventually if everyone cooperates enough, we have grandchildren.

I know you don't want to ask, but the very first question that comes to your mind is, "Are your children 'normal'?" I thought we had gone over all that earlier, but for your sakes we'll go over it again.

Cerebral palsy is NOT hereditary!!! Nor is it contagious, catching, infectious or anything else.

No, my children do not have cerebral palsy. However, my daughter does have a severe case of DBS.

First, let me tell you about our son. Tom was born to a very young woman back in the '60's, long before it was popular for girls to keep babies even when they themselves were not mature.

I had lost a child the spring before he was born. When that tiny, little boy was five days old my gynecologist called to say, "Mary Jane, I'm in the nursery of the hospital here. I have a boy

five days old who, I think, belongs in your home. Are you interested?"

WERE WE INTERESTED?! But my very cautious husband said, "If there is any chance that the baby will not be allowed to stay, I do not want him to even enter the front door."

Three days later, after calls to the lawyer, doctor, lawyer to the judge, social services, and what have you, we went down to the hospital to pick up our son.

Leaving the nursery I was informed that I would have to ride in a wheelchair, since all babies and mothers were discharged in that manner. You think I didn't feel foolish?

Thomas Delbert was eight days old when we took him home. Six months later the adoption was final. The social worker assigned to the case said she was not allowed to make any kind of recommendations, just report the facts. But, she said, in our case she simply had to make an exception. She felt it would be a complete miscarriage of justice to even think of taking this child out of that home.

A sweeter, calmer child you never wanted to meet. He was just precious. Never knew a stranger. (Of course, neither did either of his parents.)

The summer Tom turned three I had the worst case of flu I had ever experienced. I was sick every morning for literally weeks. I was also thirty-eight years old, so the nine-month flu was not the first thing on my mind.

In April 1969, the results of the flu bug appeared in the form of Susan Sophia, weighing in at five-pounds, fifteen-ounces. She was not the sweet, docile, delicate little girl one would have hoped for. She rapidly grew into a tub, then a chunk, and by 1st grade was bigger than all her classmates.

Tom has grown into a fine man and gave us our first grandchild, Joel. My husband, Bud, did get to see, hold, and love Joel before he died. Tom has a good job with the city of Colorado Springs. He, with his wife, Machele, and their blended family (Joel – his, Rachel – hers, and Emily – theirs) live not too far away. Am I proud of him? You bet your boots I am!

Now for the kid with DBS. Susan grew into a MOST ATTRACTIVE (since mothers are not supposed to brag and call their own children beautiful) young woman. She went straight to Technical Trades Institute five days out of high school and finished eighteen months later with a degree in Laser and Fiber Optics with a 4.0 grade point.

Susan moved to Beatty, Nevada where she has a very good job in the aerospace industry. She is now Mrs. Archie Kibbe. They have two children. Dan is Archie's son, and Alexi is their daughter. I am so proud of her!

What is this DBS handicap she has? Dumb Blonde Syndrome: what else? She is blonde and beautiful, so it goes without saying she must be dumb. Oh, how we do stereotype. The old "all blondes are dumb" routine carries about as much weight in truth as the one that says, "all people with cerebral palsy are retarded".

Do not let me leave you with the idea that I, in any way, feel that finding a husband or wife,

getting married, and having children is the highest calling in life. Not at all. It is merely another one of those things that other people do that we, as people who have cerebral palsy, have the privilege of doing also, if this is desired.

For a woman, home and family is sometimes the desired full-time career, with other things as sidelines. However, I am also a firm believer in career training and experience.

Life does not come with guarantees. Had I been younger when Bud died I would have had to get a full-time job to support myself. So even the homemaker needs to have something to fall back on in the way of meaningful, productive employment.

A man or woman needs to become self-supporting as soon as possible and remain that way as long as possible.

CHAPTER 11



Mary Jane in Ghana with Wheels for the World

A Woman's Prerogative

It is the privilege of every woman on this green – and not so green – earth to change her mind. Well, I have done just that.

This collection of thoughts started out to be a strictly secular work so that the parent and child, Christian or otherwise, might find encouragement in these pages.

However, I find it impossible to remove myself, my thoughts, and actions, even who I am, from my faith in Jesus Christ, who has so dominated my life and accomplishments.

I was raised in a God-fearing, Christ-centered home. My sister and I were TAKEN to church and Sunday school from early childhood. God has been a part of my life, though not always the center of it, for as long as I can remember.

At the age of twelve I heard the message and the call to the mission field. From that time on, I knew that I was going to be a missionary to China. I had been called. I had said "yes". There was no further discussion as far as I was concerned.

By the time I was in college preparing to be a missionary, two important things happened. First, China closed to western missionaries. Second, it finally got through my thick skull that no reputable mission board would send someone with cerebral palsy to China or anywhere else as a missionary. And, I certainly would never go under a less than reputable mission board.

God had used this desire to get me to do my best and get the best education possible.

Also it was during those college years that God really got hold of my heart. Up until then I thought I was a Christian. After all, had I not received even the highest call – that of a missionary?

One week, founder's week 1949, we had special meetings every night. The claims of Jesus Christ were made very clear and simple. That entire week I questioned in my mind whether I had ever really given my heart to Christ.

On Friday of that week during chapel it was forever settled in heaven and on earth.

In chapel, Dean Hartil announced that he was going to do something he did not usually do, because it was required that one be a Christian in order to be accepted into the school. "However," he said, "If there is someone who would like to invite Jesus into their heart would they please raise their hand."

I had just finished asking God, "If I don't belong to you and you want me to, do something special." He did and I did.

I gave my heart to Jesus and He received it. Never for a moment from then until now have I questioned my relationship to Him nor His to me.

After many years working in the secular world, my husband and I did become missionaries. We were on headquarters staff at International Students, Inc. And now He, the Lord, has allowed me to be cofounder of a Mephibosheth Ministry – reaching the disability community for Christ. Talk about "over and above" anything I could ask or think!

When I am weak, He makes me strong.

Paul, the apostle, was handicapped. The Bible does not tell us what his disabling condition was. Perhaps that allows all of us to relate to what Paul says.

Three times he asked God to heal him of his disability. God's response to Paul is written in Second Corinthians 12:9. God says to Paul – and to me – "My (God's) grace is sufficient (enough – more than adequate) for you. (Because) His strength (God's strength) is made perfect (mature) in (our) weakness."

Paul responds – and I respond with him – "most gladly will I rather glory (show the glory of God through) in my disability, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

This my friends is why I cannot leave God with all His wonderful power and glory out of these pages.

CHAPTER 12



Mary Jane teaching pastors and church leaders in Cuba.

Tomorrow Has Come

While it is true that it is never over until it's over, I would like to propose a climax to this saga.

When we moved to Colorado Springs in 1977, I sought out the Cerebral Palsy Association to see if I might serve them in some way. That has led to a fifteen plus year relationship between them, our community and me. It has been an enriching experience for me as well as a time for service and growth.

Very early in my service with this group I became a member of their community outreach program, now called the Public Awareness Committee. We started with a group of three. We went to a few schools to talk about Cerebral Palsy. We had a spokesperson, who gave the general facts about the condition, a mother who was struggling with the ins and outs of parenting a cerebral palsied child, and myself – representing the population group affected.

Within a year this group had dwindled to just me. For many years I did the programs alone and loved every minute of it. Schools were increasingly calling for the ministry I was having in the community.

Then came John. John Nix is a young man I met a few years ago at our annual banquet, which I had attended with my husband. I had no idea at that point that he was there doing his "community service". Ask John if you want to know why.

John has twin daughters, both of whom have cerebral palsy. He and Frances, his wife, also have a daughter 18 months older than the twins. The details are not important. But John was there and we met.

As we got acquainted at the meetings and sometimes coffee afterwards, we found, first, that we were both believers in Jesus Christ. Second, we learned that we both had a heart for people.

John became an active member of the Public Awareness Committee. As we began to share the excitement of opening the eyes of the school children to the humanity of “out of the ordinary” people, we also began to share our frustrations at the fact that we could not share the real answer. That answer being Jesus Christ. I spoke at John’s church and then at a sister church.

Four years after our first meeting we decided that God had led us to do something about our concerns. There at Village Inn we dared to share the dream, and Mephibosheth Ministry was born.

It was conceived out of a great need. The need for the church, the Body of Christ, to genuinely accept, actively reach out to win and nurture the population group we used to call handicapped or challenged, whether it be physical, mental or emotional. Finally our vision is to see the local church allowing and encouraging these same people, who by that time are just part of the church, to serve within their faith as talents and opportunity permit.

On February 24, 1992, Mephibosheth Ministry was legally incorporated in the state of Colorado. John and I are cofounders.

It seems that God has been preparing me for this ministry all my life. Step by step He has allowed circumstances to prepare me for this portion of my life.

I remember from the time I started at Gompers School for handicapped children in 4th grade, one population group I absolutely would not associate with was the “retarded”. We can’t call them that now. They are mentally challenged, or those who learn in less traditional fashion.

Show me a mentally challenged person, and I would run as fast as I could away from them. The fear was that if I even was seen speaking to THEM I might be considered one of THEM. What BIGOTRY! And I thought I was a good Christian!

Growing up physically challenged was something I had no choice about. I learned to cope and adjust as you have seen in the previous chapters. One look at me and there is no doubt in your mind that I have a physical disability. However, this same look causes one to wonder if there is not some mental challenge also. This is typical of the person who has cerebral palsy.

Therefore, from the time I knew there was such a thing as retardation; I went about proving over and over that I was NOT one of THEM. Even the educational system in which I grew up reinforced this idea. They were segregated within the special school, and unfortunately looked down upon.

The first thing God did was allow me to succeed as a person; then in school, college, a job in the real world, marriage, family and always lots of church work.

There comes the next point of preparation. I thought He was simply allowing me the privilege of being used. But as I look back now, I can see that from being a high school Sunday School teacher/youth director in 1954, He has been guiding my every service.

As children's work coordinator for twelve years, I learned to talk across rather than down to a younger level of understanding. I learned how to write lessons in a logical fashion. I even learned how to use my vivid imagination to think up pictures for an artist to draw and unique puzzles to challenge the mind.

This is just some of the preparation God has put me through. All the time I thought the service was an end unto itself.

Then I wrote the first study for Mephibosheth Ministry. It was an evangelistic study for people who have physical challenges. It was smooth and easy to write. I had used the material several times before. The study is called "Here I Stand Before God".

Then I had to write a similar one for the mentally challenged. "After all they have the same right to hear about Christ, accept Him, grow in Christ, and to be allowed to serve." I could not believe I was hearing myself say these things with such passion and truly meaning them. I, the "better than thou," was telling the Body of Christ that together we are responsible to accept ALL who come to Christ as both worthy and worthwhile.

It took five months to write, "It's the Truth". It is being used more than the other and is being effective.

Because there is little or nothing out on the bookstore shelves for this population group, I have been encouraged to keep writing.

Doesn't God have an absolutely marvelous sense of humor? Most of my writing is for the mentally challenged population – the very group I abhorred as a child and ran away from most of my life. I enjoy it.

This is where I am in my life and my Christian service right now. I'm traveling a lot, speaking to churches all over our wonderful land, giving seminars on "How to" put our message into practice. And I continue to write materials for Mephibosheth Ministry.

Chapter 13



Mary Jane and Joni
Eareckson Tada in Poland.

Then There Was China

In 1992 John Nix and I were invited to represent Mephibosheth Ministry at a conference for Chaplains at Fort Riley, Kansas. When we got there we found it was being put on by Joni And Friends – the disability outreach of Joni Eareckson Tada. We made a lot of new friends. One was John Wern, who led the conference.

In one of my conversations with John Wern I had expressed my passion for teaching, sharing, and even preaching the message of reaching out to the disabled. He listened politely while in his mind he was saying “In your dreams! This woman can’t even talk, and she wants to speak publicly?”

Our paths crossed again at the 1993 Christian Workers Conference in Spokane, Washington. Mephibosheth Ministry had a booth. Right around the corner was the Joni And Friends booth. We began visiting back and forth. John Wern came to the workshop I presented. That’s a story in itself.

As we walked together back to the display area John asked me to pray about going with the first Wheels For The World (WFTW) team headed for Nigeria that fall. I would be going as a teacher/trainer! He had seen first hand that I could not only speak but persuade audiences effectively.

That Nigeria outreach planned for the fall of '93 became the spring '94 outreach to Ghana, West Africa. Yes, I did go. I taught several sessions and in the following years have been on teams back to Ghana as well as to Poland, Romania, the Ukraine, Cuba, and Peru. Most of these countries I have served multiple times, as a teacher/trainer with WFTW.

Sometimes God has wonderful surprises hidden in our future. I want to tell you about one such surprise He had in store for me. Do you remember a while back, when at the age of 12 (see chapter 11), with resolute commitment I set my heart toward China? In His time God privileged my husband and I to join the Christian work force—step one. After Bud went home

to be with the Lord, Mephibosheth Ministry was born—step two, and God allowed me the privilege of going to Africa on a short-term mission trip—step three. What more could I ask?

In the fall of the year 2000, after returning from Ghana for the sixth time, I received an unexpected invitation from Wheels for the World.

“Mary Jane, do you want to go to China next month?”

“Well, let me think about that.” After ten seconds of thought, I burst out crying (like I am right now just thinking about it). I answered in a very positive manner, “Yes! Yes! Yes!” United Airlines had offered to fly some wheelchairs to China for our first Wheels for the World outreach in that country and had also offered two free roundtrip tickets. I was offered one. WOW!

After 58 years, most of them spent in the realization that I could never go to China, God nudged the doors of China gently just a crack. No, we don’t go as missionaries, we go because we are friends to the disabled of China. I went to China in the year 2000, not in spite of, but rather *because* of my disability. Doesn’t God have a delightful sense of humor?! I returned in 2001 and plan to go often to my beloved China.

If God had healed me those many long years ago when I was so earnestly pushing for it, I would have no credibility in the “disability community”. It was His choice and His timing, and, yes, perhaps just a little of my faithfulness.

Some people look at me, (I think I look a little older than I really am) and think I belong in an “old people’s home.” Well, guess what? Several of the seniors in the “old people’s homes” in China wanted desperately to keep me with them. I was fulfilling things of which they dared not even dream. I was older than some of them and had traveled halfway around the world to visit them. (Of course, my teammates kept showing me which room would be good for me!)

We built some bridges, laid some foundations, and made many new friends with whom we will be working in the future for the good of people with disabilities who live in China. I plan to return to China as often as the Lord allows and to continue to encourage not only people with disabilities but also non-disabled people in their relation to each other.

Allow yourself the privilege of dreaming dreams. Allow others the privilege of dreaming their own dreams, attainable or not attainable. How do we know what God’s plans are? However, don’t live in a dream world. Live each day as fully as possible where you are. If God wants you to move, He will move you.

In the year 2000 I also went to Ghana, Peru, Cuba, and served on all five major continents of the world with Wheels for the World. The Lord is allowing His influence in the disability community to expand through me.

People with disabilities have dreams also. Don’t you dare deny them their dreams! Encourage reality, but allow the dream to remain—however far back in your mind you may have to push it. Don’t let it die. Who knows but God may want to fulfill that dream one day.

Dream on. Live life fully. Enjoy your life. But you can only do this as you live in proper relationship to Jesus Christ.



When Today Becomes Tomorrow is a topical autobiography by Mary Jane Ponten. Born on the south side of Chicago in 1930, with no hope of living, due to cerebral palsy, her parents gave her to God. By His Grace, after nearly 92 years, she lived a full life filled with family, faith and fun!

She credits her parents diligence in physical and social therapy, a husband that adored her, raising 2 children, fulfilling a life long dream of being a missionary and co-founding a ministry that has touched families worldwide with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

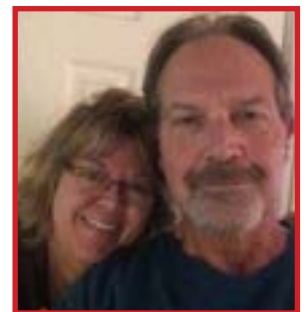
Little did she know in 1993, this book would be translated into numerous languages and read on 6 continents. Dive into and enjoy the amazing life of Mary Jane Ponten.



Mary Jane Ponten in Romainia

Greg and Carol Brown have been actively involved in serving families affected by disabilities for over 25 years. Working alongside local churches, encouraging and equipping them to welcome in those families to be discipled with training conferences, bible studies and events, ministering both in the US and overseas. They own a construction company that remodels homes for people with disabilities.

Having served with Mary Jane for over 12 years, Greg and Carol were asked in 2020 to ensure that the legacy of Mephibosheth Ministry continues well in to the future.



Carol and Greg Brown