



Voices
OF OUR REGION
THE DISABILITY CONNECTION

Interviewee: **Cindy & Liz Dollinger**

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Interviewers: **Athena Aardweg, Judy Barricella**
& Tony Buba

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Cindy Dollinger
May 22nd, 2008

Cindy: My name Cindy Dollinger and I'm from St. Mary's, Pennsylvania. I am married to Dan. He's a wonderful guy, and we have seven children. The oldest is Elizabeth and she's 15. And Christopher is 14. And Andrea is 11. And Jonathan is 9. And Timothy is 7. Marcella is 4. And Emily is 16 months. My husband has dyslexia. I never realized the role that that plays in communicating. It's not just reading and spelling and writing. But just the way you process... He always had trouble in school. He went through high school and did not do well grade-wise. But he did go through wood shop and the shop classes and he did very. And that's what he loved. When I really got to know his family, a couple of his aunts had gone through and they failed a number of grades because they could not spell. They don't read well. And just by paying attention to those cues, then I realized this is a hereditary issue. Because of his difficulty with reading and writing it's affected his career, his job, and therefore, his whole livelihood and our whole livelihood. What he ended up doing after high school is he went into trade school. He went for carpentry and construction technology. He is now self-employed and he has his own carpentry business and he has been for, this is his 18th year.

Interviewers: Wow.

Cindy: And he's...Yeah. He's doing real well and he supports all of us.

Interviewers: So who's next?

Cindy: So who's next? Well, I guess we could go...Well, with the dyslexia thing, it's a heredity thing and when Elizabeth was young, in about 3rd grade we...we noticed you were having...uhh...vocabulary problems. We brought her down to the Child Development Unit here in Pittsburgh and they evaluated her and said she has learning processing problems. Accommodations had to be made. And so now she's a freshman in high school and... Well let's see what all have you done?

Liz: Marching band.

Interviewers: What do you play?

Liz: I play the clarinet and I also play the tenor saxophone for jazz band.

Cindy: Christopher is our next child. He's the one that's 14. He was six weeks premature. He actually showed signs of progressing rapidly. When he was about eight, nine months old, he was speaking eight words. He spoke fluently really early. When he was two he wrote his name. When he was three he taught himself to read. And it got to

the point where, you know, we had our little book shelf with books, and he would be glued to the books. He would just sit there and read and read and read and read. And you couldn't get his attention away from the books. It was...First of all it was terrific having a child read at that age. Just ah, we were so proud of him, proud of ourselves. But then as he got a little older and we needed him to pick up his toys or whatever we needed him to do, he was...He wouldn't...We couldn't get his attention away from it. He was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome when he was seven years old, which is in the autism spectrum. We got him into Behavioral Health Services. He had a mobile therapist and a behavioral health specialist and a TSS. And he did that for about a year. When he turned eight he said, "Mom, I'm done with this. I know what I'm supposed to do. I'm not going to get anymore out of this." And he was right. Our other son who has Asperger's is Timothy and he is seven. He started having symptoms of high, high energy to the point where I didn't know what to do with myself. He was about 18 months old. No he was probably less than that even. And he loved anything electronic. Anything with buttons. The computer, the television, the telephone, the VCR, everything with buttons. One day I really had had enough. I put him in the crib and I called the early intervention...Again I'm very familiar with her. I said, "I don't know what to do with this boy. Can you help me?" And she was able to apply for medical assistance there for me and a waiver program and got him right into the early intervention program immediately. And she was right on. Sensory dysfunction was definitely it. When he was very young he nursed, but, you know, he never really bonded, you know. He nursed to get his milk and that was it.

Interviewers: Mhmm.

Cindy: And as he was getting into this high energy mode, he couldn't calm himself down, and one day he was making a lot of noise in the middle of all that chaos. He was making a lot of noise and my husband said, "Oh put a cork in it." You know, and we kind of looked at each other and said, "Pacifier? I wonder if that would work?" And here he was, what 15 months old, but he's never had one before.

Interviewers: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Cindy: Usually that's not the right time to start.

Interviewers: Yeah. Right. Right.

Cindy: But we gave him one. And as soon as he put that in his mouth it was...it was like magic. He walked over to the corner of the room where we had a little table and he sat down and he started to play.

Interviewers: Ahh.

Cindy: I mean it was that magical. He actually could play in an organized fashion because of that pacifier. Andrea has problems with distractions but I wouldn't classify her as, you know... Jonathan. We have never taken him anywhere yet, but he was having a lot of problems reading when he was in 1st grade. Marcella is our four-year-old. She is a beautiful blonde little curly-haired girl who's extremely explicit with her words, very precise and very immature. She doesn't have a single disability in the world that I can find. She wants to be the President of the United States.

Liz: She said that she's going to paint the white house pink. She's going to need a little help and a big paint brush.

Cindy: And then we were blessed with Emily. Emily is our 16-month-old little girl who was born with Down's Syndrome. When I was going through the pregnancy with her, I was given the option to have a fetal echocardiogram just because of my diabetes and I had already done this with a couple of my other pregnancies. I said sure. If there's a problem with the heart I would like to know. And it was doctors from Giesinger who traveled to DuBois to do that. They said, "We think she has a coarctation of the aorta." Which is a narrowing in the aorta. But they couldn't quite tell. This was in October. So they said come back in a month. So we went back in November. They said we can't find the coarc but there was something else they thought they saw but they weren't sure so they said come back in December. When we went in December they didn't see what they saw in November but they thought they saw the coarc again. So when she was born in January in DuBois and she was breech. I never had a breech baby.

Interviewers: Hmm.

Cindy: I never had a C-section. So she was...everything with her was totally new.

Interviewers: Oh you had a C-section?

Cindy: I had a C-section with her.

Interviewers: Ohh.

Cindy: None of the others. So then they told me that she probably had Down's Syndrome and definitely had the coarc so within 12 hours they ambulated her to Giesinger which is about a three hour drive from DuBois. So I sat in the hospital for three days and my husband was a rock. He never experienced the mourning, and I say mourning because that's what I was going through. When I found out that she had Down's Syndrome. It's not what I expected. I was grieving. How do you explain that? It's like almost a death.

Interviewers: Mhmm.

Cindy: I struggled with it. Not that I didn't love her. It wasn't that kind of a struggle...

Interviewers: Mhmm.

Cindy: But I just struggled with that. And then I think a woman's hormones are just going rampant anyway so that really adds to it. But Dan never experienced that at all. I said, "How can you tell me you did not feel a little bit sorry for yourself." He said, "I don't. She's my daughter."

Interviewers: So what day in January was she born?

Cindy: She was born January 15. Yeah. 2007. The very next day Dan said, "I'm going to go down and see her." That's three hours away. And so he did. He drove down there to see her. He met the pediatric cardiologist which was good. He saw everything...saw everybody and talked to everybody that he needed to talk to. Then he came back to see me. And then he went home. So he put on many, many miles.

Interviewers: Miles.

Cindy: I want to say.

Interviewers: Yeah.

Cindy: 200, 200 plus. He did that the next day. Then the very next day he took all of the children in our van with my parents and drove all the way down so everybody could see her. The following Friday...It was hard to travel with the incision but I did. I traveled to Giesinger to see her. And the first time I saw her, you know...Through the week I kept praying that that test. It's got to be negative for Down's. It's not. It has to be. Dan never said, "I know she has it. I can see it in her eyes." He never said that to me. But when I saw her, you know, I did start to cry immediately. I could tell.

Interviewers: Mhmm.

Cindy: By looking at her, you know. And saying this I'm so ashamed because now I would...I'd do it again. I just love her. But I did struggle with that and as a matter of fact, I didn't even want to touch her. I just...I just couldn't do that. Once we left...We were only in there maybe 20 minutes, half an hour. So once I got past that we were good. She had the coarc surgery when she was eight days old and came through it with flying colors. She had no problems. She's very active. She's a busy girl. She gets physical therapy three hours a week in my home. And speech therapy is an hour and a half a week in the home. She really is doing well. Occupational therapy is twice a week. And then she has a teacher who comes for 2-1/4 hours a week. And then she has Parents as Teachers. They come for an hour a week, also. Friday, Saturday and Sunday we have off. But all the rest is four to five days a week.

Interviewers: And how do you do all this?

Cindy: I have a lot of help from above.

Interviewers: Yeah.

Cindy: I'm very organized. I have four calendars. Dan has one and I have three. Emily has her own calendar that I have all her therapies on and then I have a kitchen calendar and then I have my day planner. I have diabetes. I've had it for 35 years and so I've had diabetes through all the pregnancies. I have an insulin pump.

Interviewers: Oh, you have a pump. Okay.

Cindy: Mhmm. Yeah.

Interviewers: Mhmm. Mhmm.

Cindy: It's worked well. It can be done.

Interviewers: What's the thing you're most proud of?

Cindy: I don't know. I guess I'm proud just to be alive. Surrounded by so many wonderful people. I've had fantastic support from my family and we have a lot of extended family. I have a lot of help.

Interviewers: So which children didn't we mention that, you know, didn't identify has having...

Cindy: Andrea. Andrea is 11. She's a bubbly, colorful young lady. She looks older than she is because she's about as tall as I am. She plays basketball. She loves to sing. She's a fantastic trombone player. And Jonathan. Didn't mention much... Well, I mentioned a little bit about him. He likes to play baseball. He and Tim are quite close actually. When you get those two heads together they can figure out all kinds of things. You know. But they're all gifted, you know. You just take the disability and... We're just a big family of people that, you know, we all have our gifts. And I'd rather focus on our gifts.

Interviewers: Is there anything that you want to say, think it's important to say that we haven't talked about?

Cindy: To have a disability is not a death sentence. It's not a... It's important to have a diagnosis if there's a problem, I feel. Because it gives you a definition of what it is you're working with. And then you can take your information and go from there. You

can say, all right, this is what we're dealing with. How can we help this child, this person, to expand on their gifts?