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Special Report: Insurance Problems & Solutions

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Because of You

by Deborah Shuck, MA

I was born over 40 years ago with a not-so-ordinary birth defect of my leg. "She will never walk," many doctors told my parents. "And why would you teach her to when she will just fall down?"

Fortunately, my parents were seasoned veterans of parenthood and knew that every child – whether able-bodied or with a disability – learns to walk by falling down. Those doctors' silly comments didn't faze them one bit. Instead, although there were few other optimists, my parents took me to Duke University and to several Shriners hospitals looking for a solution.

Ultimately, they took me to see a doctor in Indianapolis who was doing state-of-the-art surgery, and he asked them to make a difficult decision – the decision to amputate my malformed leg.

"You have no idea how hard it was to give a totally healthy toddler to a doctor to perform an operation that would alter her life forever while not really knowing the outcome," my father later told me. He always cried when he talked about that day.

After my amputation, my parents treated me like all of the other children in my neighborhood. They didn't allow me to cry when I fell down, and they never allowed me a moment of



Deborah Shuck (r) with her mother, Audra Shuck.

self-absorption or self-pity. Giving up and feeling sorry for myself was never an option. It made it difficult when I was older and needed to ask for help, but I wouldn't trade my upbringing for anything.

I remember being so proud when I would get a new laminated prosthetic leg without a single scratch on it. Then there was the tree – the one that called my name every day. All of a sudden, I was up there some 10 feet above the ground and had "the scratch." I hated that. Though I tried so hard not to get those scratches, now that I am older, I can truly appreciate them. In fact, I wish that I had saved all of those legs with all of their scratches. You see, they were not just scratches; they were "growth marks" much like the marks other children may have on a wall to

measure their height changes: "Debbie – 5 years old, 12/17/63."

My parents also knew that roller skating would be difficult at best for an above-knee amputee, but that didn't stop them from buying me the roller skates of my dreams. I would go up and down the street for hours at a time. I fell a lot, but I also got up a lot. And don't forget, crying was not an option. Just a few more scars and another "growth mark": "Debbie – 7 years old, 12/17/65."

It seemed like forever, but it was finally time to learn to ride a tricycle. Realizing the difficulty involved in riding, my parents drove miles to find a larger tricycle that would enable me to pedal more easily. It didn't last long, however, and I was on my new red "Super Fast Schwinn" with training

wheels as soon as the last bolt was tightened. Soon after, I was riding my two-wheel bicycle down the street knowing full well that my dad would never let go of the seat. But he did, and I thank him every time I ride a bike today. It was difficult, but my parents always knew exactly when to let go.

Years later, at 16, I went hiking with friends near Mt. Washington in New Hampshire and made it over halfway up the mountain. A little later, I remember being forced to call from Massachusetts General Hospital to tell my parents that I had been carried off the mountain with a sprained ankle.

Twenty years later, I had to make yet another call from a hospital to explain to them how I had broken my residual limb while skiing in the Alps.

I want to pass this story along so that when your children fall, you can teach them that you will always be there for them but that they will have to get up on their own. I hope you will teach them that there is a love so much deeper than picking them up, dusting them off, coddling them, and teaching them to live in fear. Don't let them learn about fear from you; that will come on its own. Cherish those "scratches," those true marks of growth. Know that when your child has an accident, it is because he or she is "living" and not just sitting back watching others live.

The most important thing to teach your child is that there is no love like that of a parent. My parents taught me how to love and how to accept love, and every day, I realize how special their love was.

Thanks Mom and Dad. You may not leave me a penny or a single material good, but what you have given me is far more important. You have taught me that fear has no place in my life. You have taught me not to question what I can do but to question those who put limitations on me. You have taught me to persevere and that even when you are no longer here on this earth, you are within my soul. I will always be able to hear you say "Get up!" when I fall down either emotionally or physically. These are the things I value, and I will never forget them or you.

Thanks, for everything good I am, it is because of you. ■

With special thanks to my mom and dad, Audra and George Shuck. Though Dad died in 1997, he still lives on in my memories.



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