



THE DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE
**Office of Human Life,
Family and Bioethics**



A TRUE CHRISTMAS GIFT
When Down is Up

Giving Thanks for an Unforeseen Gift from God
By Bob Viscovich

I could tell there was something seriously wrong, the way the two nurses abruptly stopped their conversation as they saw me come out of the birthing room.

It was a Sunday morning, and just minutes before, my wife Donna gave birth to our second son, Nicholas, who seemingly was as perfect as can be. Now I was coming back with some fresh water for her, but I was feeling the blood drain from my head after seeing the look of concern on the two nurses' faces.

When Donna saw me come back into the room, she immediately asked if I felt ok, since I looked white as a ghost. I didn't mention anything of what just happened in the hallway outside. I was too busy going through a million different tragic scenarios in my head.



I stared out the window. What was so wrong with our child that would cause that reaction from the nurses? Why wasn't anyone congratulating us? Why did things appear so somber? What serious medical condition does our son Nicholas have? My head was spinning. The world around me was spinning. Very fast.

All of a sudden, a nurse we never met entered the room and announced that our Nicholas was indeed healthy, but that they needed to conduct some genetic tests as it appears he might have Down Syndrome.

A huge relief came over me. Was that it? Phew! I could deal with THAT, especially after so many other horrible scenarios I just went thru in my mind. Then I realized Donna didn't know any of this. What was her reaction to this new announcement? When I looked at her, she seemed concerned, but not upset. She immediately asked to see her baby so that she can see for herself.

When they brought Nicholas to us, we both knew immediately that the nurse's diagnosis was correct. He had the distinct features of Down Syndrome, even though he wasn't yet an hour old. But at that moment, I could also see Donna was relieved, and I could see an immediate motherly switch go on inside her, one that seemed to say, "this is our son, given to us by God, and we will love him and take care of him and all his special needs for the rest of his life." It was an immediate commitment of love and acceptance that has not waned one iota, even to this day, twenty-one years later.

But the journey was not easy. Especially in those first few weeks. We didn't really celebrate Nicholas' birth. Our family and friends were very supportive, but even their initial reaction was one of almost sympathy and sorrow. Donna and I started lamenting over what this really meant for our family. How was this going to affect our older son, who was not yet even 3 years old. Our image of a traditional "happy family" was becoming very distorted. We found ourselves crying at any given moment, naïve to the fact of what an unbelievable blessing from God this truly was.

I can somewhat attribute this feeling of despair to the fact that we were both very naïve of what Down Syndrome really was. In fact, my only personal experience with someone with Down Syndrome was when I was a child/teen growing up in Queens. There was a man with DS who would walk around all the streets by himself, waving an American flag and mumbling to himself. No one was ever with him, and in all those years, I never even knew his name or where he actually lived. This was my only real knowledge of what Down Syndrome was.

And I started wondering why I didn't encounter more people with Down Syndrome in my life.

Donna's gynecologist early on had recommended that she have an amniocentesis done, since some early bloodwork seemed to have markers of a genetic issue such as Down Syndrome. But since we were not going to abort under ANY conditions, despite the urgings of the doctor (he actually remarked at the time, "are you prepared to raise a Mongoloid child?"; yes he actually used the dreaded "M-word"!), we immediately dismissed the notion and never thought of it again. I can't begin to imagine how many other couples, perhaps not so solid in their pro-life conviction or Catholic faith, would've been persuaded by their doctor to move forward with more tests and urged to abort, even if there was some doubt. Sadly, only 1 out of every 800 babies diagnosed with Down Syndrome are born. All others are aborted. Now I understood why my exposure to Down Syndrome was so limited. This world doesn't know what it's been missing. And we were about to find out.

In the coming days, Donna and I scoured the internet, and we were soon becoming very knowledgeable of what Down Syndrome is, and to our surprise, most of what we learned was very positive. We were put in contact with support groups and other specialists. And we were so very thankful for all the wonderful therapists that came to our house during Nicholas' first year. They instilled such a positive and loving atmosphere for our family to build on.

Every encounter with a therapist or specialist made us realize more and more that we were truly blessed with Nicholas, and within a few weeks, we transitioned from one of despair to one of great joy and hope for the future.

We soon had him enrolled with ACDS, the school he attended until he was five years old, and from which many of his life-long friendships were established. The teachers and programs at ACDS were excellent, and we can't imagine what we would have done without them.

As with any child, we had our challenges. Nicholas was hospitalized in the NICU for eleven days with RSV early on. In fact, we spent the Y2K millennium New Year's Eve in that same hospital, praying that Nicholas would make it out alright. As a toddler and young child, he started to exhibit some nasty behavioral issues, some even dangerous, like throwing temper tantrums in the middle of a busy street, or running away from us in department stores or crowded areas. We would often find him trying to leave the house at all hours of the night, so we had to install special security locks on all our doors and gates. For a while, it was definitely taking a toll on us both physically and emotionally.

Fortunately, we were able to get the help of some outstanding behaviorists, who slowly but surely, were able to refine Nicholas' behavior, and as he got older and matured, most of those behavior problems, especially the dangerous ones, just quietly went away.

But his transition from ACDS to our school district was definitely not a smooth one, and we soon had to pull him out and enroll him in a local nursery school until we got a core curriculum together for the following school year. You see, Nicholas was the school's first child with Down Syndrome, and they really didn't have the expertise, although they were quite versed with Autism, which was much more common. As such, we worked closely with the school directors and established a curriculum which helped Nicholas (and soon many other children with Down Syndrome) excel in the school.

In fact, school was a structure and framework that Nicholas seemed to enjoy very much, and he was becoming more confident and sociable with each new school year. Nicholas started becoming a beaming and smiling and enjoyable young boy, and teacher aides were fighting each other to have him assigned to them. It was remarkable to witness how his typical schoolmates would gravitate around him and converse with him and help him whenever possible. Our earlier nightmare worries of having him eat his lunch all alone never materialized, and in fact he had plenty of friends to share a meal with.

Just as any child, Nicholas was developing his own personality and likes. He developed a strong love of sports and classic rock/pop music, and to this day, he could probably beat anyone in "guess-the-song". His memory retention never ceases to amaze us, and in fact we often go to Nicholas to remind us of "the name of the lady we met in the supermarket several months ago" or "the name of daddy's orthopedist". He can also dance with the best of them, and many a wedding videographer has captured the circle of girls dancing around him (I call him the "chick magnet").



Our family has been blessed to witness many of Nicholas' accomplishments and to be part of his memories. There are so many of them, but here is a "short" list:

- Becoming an alter server at St. Dominic's Chapel (it brought tears of joy to everyone)

- Being asked to be part of St. Dom's CYO basketball team (there was even a play set up for Nicholas called "Superman")
- Playing little league baseball in our town of Oyster Bay.
- Learning to ride his 2-wheel bicycle.
- Going kayaking and boating with his dad (his favorite pastime!)
- Learning to swim better every summer at GAP camp (ok maybe that was his favorite)
- Personally meeting and being blessed by the Pope (still seems surreal to this day)
- Appearing in Newsday's March for Life frontpage (Nick is passionately pro-life!)
- Winning three gold medals at the Special Olympics (for track)
- Being voted Home Coming King by his HS peers
- Being asked to go to the HS Prom by a girl in his grade (that story made the 6:00 news)
- Becoming a stud groomsman at all his cousin's weddings
- Winning Best Actor award in his first movie, *Down and Away* (a short film)



Not bad for someone who was once considered a "burden" while still in his mother's womb.

Nicholas has truly turned into a fine young man. He is always there with a smile or funny phrase to brighten your day. Or playing your favorite classic rock song at just the right time. He seems to sense when you are feeling a bit down and immediately comes over with a big hug, or kiss, or a simple word of encouragement.

He also never seems to hold any grudges and is always happy and content, no matter what the circumstances are around him. He is ready to be your comforting friend and turn his attention to you when you are in need.



If you are in need of a prayer warrior, well Nicholas is your guy! He's dedicated to reciting the litany of names that need our special prayers and is always ready to pray the Rosary each night or the Chaplet of Divine Mercy each day at 3pm. You should see the beaming smile on his face when we sit down for prayer or go to Mass. All this shouldn't surprise anyone, since I truly believe that children with disabilities come to us straight from God with a special grace already

within them, with the Blessed Mother protecting them with her motherly love, and upon their last breath, they will return immediately into the loving arms of Our Lord. Because of this, I always feel the Blessed Mother's strong presence around Nicholas, somewhat knowing that Nicholas is one of our "direct lines" to God.

In an ironic sense, it is WE who have learned so much from Nicholas. It is WE who depend on Nicholas. The world wants to tell us otherwise, but WE are the ones that benefit and derive so much love from those with disabilities. It makes us better Christians. As I always tell Nicholas, I wish that more people had Down Syndrome. In fact, I often wish that I had Down Syndrome. I would probably be a better Christian. ("See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven." – MT 18:10)

As Donna and I have said many times, we still don't know why we are deserving of such a blessed gift from God, but we now know what PURE LOVE is this side of Heaven.

Thank you, Lord, for enlightening our hearts and minds to the fact that we are ALL made in Your image and likeness, and for entrusting us with Nicholas and blessing us with his continuous love and joy.

