

Walking With Spirit of Christmas

Our little girl's name is Joyce
She once walked and had a voice,
Tragedy struck her down one day;
Left her unable to walk or play.

They say she cried out one night
The staff hurried and put on the lights,
The tape recorder they ran to get —
To prove that Joyce didn't forget.

Her girlfriend's name she called loud and clear
And they wanted everyone to hear.
But the beautiful girl with hair so red
Lay fast asleep in her bed.

Life is not often as we often plan...
God please make her whole again...you can!

By Nancy Tassone
McKeesport

By CYNTHIA MANSFIELD
Daily News Woman's Writer

Nancy Tassone of Christy Park received a Christmas present a week early this year. A few days ago, Joyce, her daughter by custody, took a step... the first one in seven years.

Joyce once was "whole". As a beautiful nine-year-old child she enjoyed all life's luxuries, the ability to walk, talk, see, and laugh.

Today, at sixteen, Joyce is learning to walk again and someday with help, she may even talk. She will always be handicapped but because of the Tassones she will always be loved.

Joyce is a drowning victim. On July 30, 1970 Joyce died... for three minutes. The red-haired girl was a

Child Welfare ward and was enrolled in a Red Cross swimming course. Although instructed to stay away from the water's edge... Joyce fell in and within a few minutes her vital functions stopped... for 180 seconds she was dead.

An ambulance staff revived and rushed her to Pittsburgh's North Passavant Hospital. But Joyce had suffered severe brain damage.

At one point of her hospital stay her EKG was entirely flat. She had no speech whatsoever, vision was impaired 70 percent, and her coordination was poor. One staff nurse referred to her as a vegetable.

She was transferred to Children's Hospital for a short time and later to the Home for Crippled Children, the place where Mrs. Tassone found her.

"I specialize in nursing handicapped children and had been working there for a year. During that year, I fell in love with Joyce. I could communicate with her. I was the only one who could get her to take medicine," Mrs. Tassone said.

The child's condition commanded close attention. Everything had to be done for her and she had to be very carefully monitored, Mrs. Tassone stressed.

One night, Mrs. Tassone came on duty to learn that the Home could no longer support Joyce. She was burdening the staff and was to be transferred to Western State School.

"Western State is the dead end. They had given her up to die," Mrs. Tassone claimed.

That very evening, the mother of two and grandmother of three, decided she wanted custody of Joyce. She wanted a chance to give Joyce a

chance. She wanted to supply Joyce with one-to-one care "in her own home." For this privilege she was willing to give up her career.

But her request created fervor in legal circles. It had never been done before. Never had a nurse been given custody of a handicapped child. She would be setting a precedent.

"Word of my request traveled and soon 29 other nurses asked for Joyce's custody," she explained.

After careful consideration of all "applicants", the hospital hierarchy chose Mrs. Tassone and legal cogs began to turn.

Virginia Thornburgh, president of the Allegheny Chapter of the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children, testified on her behalf before Judge J. Cohill.

In her opinion "a placement of anybody in Western State School is not appropriate."

Twenty other institutions were considered for Joyce's transfer but refused her because her biophysical needs were so great they weren't staffed to give proper care. Her fate was in Judge Cohill's hands. She would either go to Western State School (where Mrs. Tassone and others believed she would die) or to the Tassones who hoped to strengthen and love her.

Dec. 23, 1974 was the thirteen-year-old's lucky day, the first day in her new home, the Tassone home.

But her first Christmas with her new family was much different than it is this year. Joyce trembled at rumpling of wrapping paper. She was totally immobile (all four limbs crippled) and could barely see. But this year she is already playing with bows on packages, anxious for Sunday to arrive so she can open them... them... herself, Mrs. Tassone explained.

But her progress has been slow. For the past three years Mrs. Tassone has worked day-in and day-out with Joyce. She's strengthened the child's sight through exercise with a flashlight and she's prevented curvature of the spine by exercising Joyce every day.

"The doctor told me that she would develop curvature of the spine and would have to have an operation. I started to exercise her, every day, every hour and within a year the doctor said her progress was remarkable and she wouldn't need the



—Daily News Photo by Ralph G. Pittner, Staff Photographer

Like mother and daughter, Joyce Z. and Nancy Tassone are having a Merry Christmas. Mrs. Tassone set a precedent in the state when she gained custody of the thirteen-year-old drowning victim.

operation," the nurse noted.

Mrs. Tassone hasn't slept a whole night in three years. She's up at least twice a night to check Joyce. Because her swallowing reflexes are weak, Joyce's susceptibility to choking is great. She has not and will not leave Joyce with anyone. Her only free time is from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. when Joyce attends Mon-Valley School for Exceptional Children.

Through Mrs. Tassone's constant vigil and effort and the school's training, Joyce's progress has been remarkable. Although she is mentally handicapped she now will heed commands and has a grasp of colors and shapes, according to Mrs. Tassone.

Mon-Yough Mental Health/Mental Retardation, Child Welfare, and the Home for Crippled Children have supplied Joyce with medication and examinations and the Tassones with advice and encouragement.

"These years have been the most rewarding of my 16 years of nursing. We think and treat Joyce as our own. My first dream was to see her walk again, now my dream is to hear her

speak," the "dedicated mother" said with optimism in her voice.

Doctors claim Joyce came this far on "faith" and they cannot determine her full capabilities.

She is treated by her "family" as a normal child and Mrs. Tassone feels this is most important to her success.

"I think it's really what brought her around. She understands commands and likes to watch television (especially Donnie and Marie Osmond), ride in a car and go out and eat spaghetti," she added.

Mrs. Tassone has great "faith" that she will hear Joyce speak. She claims Joyce has called out in her sleep and will someday talk in her waking hours.

As a "parent by custody" to a handicapped child, she is willing to share her knowledge, patience, and enthusiasm with other parents.

Mrs. Tassone's ultimate goal is to open a day care center in the area for handicapped youngsters. Joyce will undoubtedly be her star pupil and most memorable Christmas joy.