

with differences did not belong in our community; they belonged somewhere else, some place "special".

That belief was first shaken in 1979 when, in a Canadian hospital in Lahr, West Germany, a beautiful baby girl with big blue eyes and brown hair was born into our family. We called her Mandy.

Several days following Mandy's birth, my husband and I received shocking news. The doctors suspected that Mandy had been born with an extra chromosome or, as it is better known, Down Syndrome. My head spun. How could it be?

With a pounding heart I hurried back to my room to cuddle my long-awaited baby girl and stare at the face I already loved so dearly. As I held her close, I tried to imagine what the future would hold for our family. All I knew was that I was her mother and she belonged with me. A nurse soon advised me to put my baby down as I was becoming much too attached to her. She said, "It wouldn't do either of you any good". Her words left me feeling angry, confused, defensive and alone.

It was several weeks before I found the courage to phone my parents to inform them of the birth of their first granddaughter. I was unprepared for their total acceptance of Mandy. Their support and acceptance were invaluable in helping me cope at that moment and in the years to come.

I feel fortunate that we had the foresight to reject the advice of the doctors — and the beliefs of our generation — and refuse to institutionalize our child. I will never regret the decision which set my family on a challenging road filled with obstacles.

In the years to come Mandy herself would challenge us all. She would have a powerful impact on our lives and on the direction we would take together as a family. As the mother of a child labelled mentally handicapped, I would have to continually give explanations, challenge conventional decisions and advocate for her rights. Mandy forced me to look for answers, to make choices and decisions. The very people I respected and admired in life became my adversaries. Mandy