

An Orange Socks Sibling Story – Jennifer: Down Syndrome

Interview by: Dr. Gerald Nebeker, President of Orange Socks

Gerald: I really appreciated Jennifer taking the time for an Orange Socks sibling interview. Jennifer was 10 years old when her youngest sister, Vanessa, was born. Having a sister with Down syndrome has had a profound impact on Jennifer, as you will learn from her interview.

Gerald: Jennifer, thank you so much for taking the time to meet with me to talk about your experiences as a sibling of someone that has Down syndrome, and she is your younger sister, why don't you tell me a little bit about her.

Jennifer: My little sister's name is Vanessa, and she is such an amazing person. She is 16 and is sassy as can be, she's a full-blown teenager. Whenever she was born, I was 10, and she has done nothing but influence my life for the better, and has influenced my direction of what I eventually went to school to study, and has really shaped me to be the type of person that I am today.

Gerald: That's great, so tell me, when you found out that your little sister has Down syndrome, you were 10 you said, what were some of your thoughts?

Jennifer: I don't think as a 10-year-old I could really comprehend what that was. I just remember my dad called me and said, "You know your mom had your little sister and there is something different about her, she has what's called Down syndrome," and he kind of explained what that was. And I just remember thinking, "Okay, sweet, I have another little sibling." And then I remember running back out to the family member's house that we were staying at, we were jumping on the tramp, and I just remember running back out and just playing. I don't think it really, like, fazed me what that was. And I think that as I got older, I realized that it meant that there was just some things that she was going to be a little bit slower at learning. And that was just, like, my general understanding, I think from a young age was that she was just going to take a little bit longer to learn something.

Gerald: Was there ever a time that you were embarrassed by your little sister when you got into your teenage years, that now you're the kid with the different sister?

Jennifer: Not really, I just remember thinking I was always very protective of her, and if anyone ever said anything, I was not afraid to speak my mind and immediately come to her defense, and immediately want to correct them about how amazing she was. It never bothered me, in fact, she was like the cool little sister that I took everywhere with me and everybody loved her because she was just so full of life and just so funny.

Gerald: So, you had no friends that were making fun of you or teasing you or making bad comments in front of you?

Jennifer: At least not to my face, I mean who knows what really happened, but I had really great friends who were always very welcoming and always very loving and they loved Vanessa as much as I did.

Gerald: You mentioned that early on her life influenced some of your decisions in terms of schooling, why don't you tell me a little bit about that.

Jennifer: So, I got my masters in deaf education and communicative disorders. And then I also have a teaching endorsement for special ed, and it's ages birth to five, so basically all the fancy words, they basically mean that I can teach preschoolers from ages birth to five who have special needs. And I knew from a very young age in helping Vanessa with her occupational therapy or her physical therapy, her homework, that I loved working with kids with disabilities. So, I always knew that I wanted to do a career in that. So when I went to school, that was the very first thing that I declared my major as was special education, and along the way it kind of changed, but it always stayed within the field of special education and that I would eventually work with kids with disabilities.

Gerald: Now, you mentioned earlier in conversations with me that also in growing up with Vanessa had an influence on who you ultimately chose as a spouse, do you want to talk about that?

Jennifer: Yeah, so I married an amazing man, and he happened to have a son from a previous marriage who has Down syndrome. And I don't know if I hadn't had that experience with having a sibling with Down syndrome, that I would have even thought about that. I think it would have been a very scary and daunting idea to marry somebody with a son, and let alone his son has Down syndrome. I don't think I would have been able to do it, but it was like, "No big deal, like, I grew up with this. I got this." It turned out to be a little bit different than I thought. It's different being a sibling versus a parent, but honestly, like his son is the reason we got married. He kind of bribed him to hangout on our dates with us, and his son is so cute and so I immediately went for it.

Gerald: So, you fell in love with him before you fell in love with your husband.

Jennifer: Yes, exactly.

Gerald: So, tell me a little bit about the difference now that you've had the sibling experience and now you have the opportunity of having the parent experience of having someone with a disability.

Jennifer: So, I think that as a sibling, she has just always been a sibling, like, I don't view her any different than any of my other siblings. And there's just fun sister things that we do, but as a parent I'm a lot more involved, like, in the educational aspects and his via different things like physical, spiritual, emotional well beings of

this child. And there's a lot more time and energy and effort invested in this little guy, that was probably the biggest difference, like, I thought that it would pretty much be the same since I just grew up with it, but it's a lot different being a parent than it is being a sibling, and I think I mean anybody can agree with that.

Gerald: Sure. Now some siblings describe a phenomenon called the glass child syndrome, which is basically as a sibling as somebody with a disability that the parents will look right through their needs to meet the needs of the person with a disability, did you experience any of that?

Jennifer: No, not really. I mean, I grew up in a family where there was eight kids, and so there was a lot of us and I'm a middle child and I think from a young age we were taught and expected to be kind of independent, and we kind of did our homework. But I really feel like my mom tried her very best to treat my youngest sister exactly the way that she would treat anybody else, and so I was heavily involved in violin lessons and soccer and choir and so was Vanessa, like, she grew up doing dance and choir and she did all these extracurricular activities, but I still feel like I got the same exact opportunities that she did and my needs were still met.

Gerald: Now, just a question, as what advice would you give another sibling who's in a similar situation as you, they find out that, "Oh my goodness, I have this sibling that has developmental disabilities." What advice would you give another sibling that's new to this?

Jennifer: Well, first I would say, "You lucky son-of-a-gun, like, you do not know how lucky you are to have that person in your life." And then I would tell them to pretty much just cherish every moment you have because they truly are special spirits, and that your life will never be the same, but in a good way. And it might seem scary and it may also seem like, maybe now my parents attention might not necessarily be on me anymore, but it's an amazing experience that I truly wish every single person in this world had an opportunity to have, by interacting with someone with a disability or having someone with a disability in their family.

Gerald: Great very good thank you very much for taking the time to meet with me.

Jennifer: Thank you.