

An Orange Socks Sibling Story: Jennifer – Down syndrome  
Interview by: 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 who has Down syndrome. She is your younger sister. 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 sassy as can be; she's a full-blown teenager. When she was born, I was 10, and she has done nothing but influence my life for the better and influenced my direction of what I eventually went to school to study. She has 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 had Down syndrome, you were 10. 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, "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. I remember thinking, okay, sweet; I have another little sibling. Then I remember running back out to the family member's house where we were staying. We were jumping on the trampoline, and I remember running back out and playing. I don't think it really fazed me what that was. As I got older, I realized that it meant that there were some things that she was going to be a little bit slower at learning, and that was my general understanding. She was just going to take a little bit longer to learn some things.

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

Jennifer: Not really. I remember thinking that I was always very protective of her, and if anyone ever said anything, I was not afraid to speak my mind, 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 who I took everywhere with me, and everybody loved her because she was just so full of life and so funny.

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

Jennifer: Not to my face. I mean, who knows what really happened, but I had really great friends who were always very welcoming and 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. Tell me a little bit about that.

Jennifer: I got my masters in Deaf Education and Communicative Disorders, and I also have a teaching endorsement for special ed ages birth to five. All those fancy words mean that I can teach preschoolers from ages birth to five who have special needs. I knew from a very young age in helping Vanessa with her occupational therapy or her physical therapy or her homework that I loved working with kids with disabilities, so I always knew that I wanted to have a career in that. When I went to school, that was the very first thing that I declared as my major: special education. Along the way, it kind of changed, but it always stayed within the field of special education, and I knew that I would eventually work with kids with disabilities.

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

Jennifer: I married an amazing man who happened to have a son from a previous marriage who has Down syndrome. If I hadn't had that experience of having a sibling with Down syndrome, I don't know 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, let alone a son with Down syndrome. I don't think I would have been able to do it, but it was no big deal because 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, his son is the reason we got married. He bribed him to hang out on our dates with us, and his son is so cute 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: Tell me a little bit about the difference now that you've had the sibling experience and the opportunity of having the parent experience of having someone with a disability.

Jennifer: As a sibling, she has just always been a sibling. I don't view her any differently than any of my other siblings. There are fun sister things that we do, but as a parent, I'm a lot more involved in the educational aspects and different things like physical, spiritual and emotional aspects of this child. There's a lot more time, energy and effort invested in this little guy. That was probably the biggest difference. I thought that it would pretty much be the same since I grew up with it,

but it's a lot different being a parent than it is being a sibling, and I think anybody can agree with that.

Gerald: Some siblings describe a phenomenon called the Glass Child syndrome, which is basically as a sibling of somebody with a disability, 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 grew up in a family where there were eight kids, so there were a lot of us. I'm a middle child, and from a young age, we were taught and expected to be independent. We did our homework. I really feel like my mom tried her very best to treat my youngest sister exactly the way that she would treat anybody else. I was heavily involved in violin lessons and soccer and choir, and so was Vanessa. She grew up doing dance and choir, and she did all those extracurricular activities. I still feel like I got the same exact opportunities that she did, and my needs were still met.

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

Jennifer: Well, first I would say you lucky son-of-a-gun. You do not know how lucky you are to have that person in your life. Then I would tell them to pretty much cherish every moment because they truly are special spirits. Your life will never be the same, but in a good way. It might seem scary, and it may also seem like maybe now my parents' attentions 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.