

An Orange Socks Story – Shirlene and Jim: 51 year-old with Down syndrome

Interviewed by: Gerald Nebeker, President of Orange Socks

Gerald: I had a wonderful conversation with Shirlene and Jim. Jim has Down syndrome and is 51 years old. Shirlene provided great insight to me. She is in her mid-80s, and unlike many parents of her generation, did not place Jim in an institution but rather he was just part of the family like her other children. Shirlene, when did you find out that Jim had Down syndrome?

Shirlene: Well I was totally ignorant in the first place. I didn't know what the doctor was talking about. I had never seen it, never been around anyone who had it, and I was totally devastated. I had no idea what was ahead of me. My husband was a veterinarian. You don't hear about that in animals, and he didn't know what it was either. He had a worse time than I did because he knew two or three days before I did. He couldn't tell me; the doctors didn't want him to tell me until they had it all taken care of.

Gerald: What advice did the doctors give you at the time?

Shirlene: Take him home, wrap him up in a blanket, put him in the middle of the floor and let your kids play with him, roll him around or do whatever they want. Treat him like any other baby in your family.

Gerald: That's great advice, and you are older..

Shirlene: Yeah, I'm older.

Gerald: Many in your generation were encouraged to place their children with disabilities in some sort of institutions, but you didn't do that.

Shirlene: Nope, they didn't recommend it. We asked, "Is this something we should consider?" "No! You take this baby home, and you take care of him."

Gerald: That's wonderful.

Shirlene: So that's what we did.

Gerald: That is wonderful.

Shirlene: It was difficult.

Gerald: Sure.

Shirlene: Emotionally.

Gerald: So what were those hard things? The hard times?

Shirlene: You can't help but compare him to other children as they're growing up, see what they're doing and what he isn't doing yet. Just to know that you have a very unique handicapped child is very difficult. It was for me any way. I had never been around a handicapped person ever in my life, and my husband hadn't either. So it was extremely challenging and difficult for us to handle.

Gerald: What were the thoughts of your family, your extended family?

Shirlene: Oh, they were devastated. It was just so hard to tell them, so hard to share the news. But if I can tell you one beautiful story. My father and mother came down the first weekend I got home from the hospital, and we were telling them, and my father was holding Jim at the time. My husband Keith and I said that there was something that we need to tell you about Jim, and we, told them about his condition, and my father just took hold of his hand and he said, "There's nothing wrong with this boy. He's going to be absolutely okay."

Gerald: That's wonderful. Tell me about some of the joys that you've had over the years.

Shirlene: Oh we've had a lot of fun, haven't we Jim? Yeah. I think the joy is that people have accepted him. Society is so open nowadays to these kinds of things, and they just accept him. They don't put you down. They don't put the child down or the situation down. They just think he's a wonderful person. It has been that way really ever since he was born. It was my husband and I that were ignorant of the situation and what it would be. We were the most inhibitive of anybody, and it took us longer to accept and overcome that than about anybody I know.

Gerald: That's interesting. What impact has Jim had on his siblings, your other children?

Shirlene: Well, they have always just accepted him. He was just part of our family. He wasn't any different as far as they were concerned until they got old enough to understand. We had six children at the time; Jim was number five, and there were two babies after him. We lived in La Paz, Bolivia. In 19...when did we go down there, Jim? I can't even remember. Anyway he was so accepted by those South American people. We had a maid and all of the wonderful things that we had in that kind of a situation, and my maid had a little boy named Pablo. So Pablo and Jim played together every day. He was the same age as Jim. He wasn't in school yet, and actually Jim learned to speak Spanish before he learned to speak English.

Gerald: Interesting.

Shirlene: When we came back from South America, he had to learn English.

Gerald: Oh, for heaven's sake. So tell me if I were to come to you seeking advice because I had a child who was diagnosed with Down syndrome either in utero or shortly thereafter, what advice would you give me?

Shirlene: Probably what I was told, "Take that child and love it like any child in your family." That's what they need. They don't need to be put down or segregated or treated differently. They just need to be treated like a prominent member of your family, and that's what we've tried to do.

Gerald: So Jim, you turned 51 this week, right?

Jim: Yes.

Gerald: And you also have a job?

Jim: A job.

Gerald: You work in a grocery store?

Jim: Yes, in a grocery store.

Gerald: What do you do?

Jim: Bagging the groceries.

Gerald: You bag the groceries. Do you like that job?

Jim: Yes and stocking shelves.

Gerald: Stocking shelves and bagging groceries.

Jim: Yep.

Gerald: Do you have another job?

Jim: Temple worker.

Gerald: You work in the temple? Good for you.

Jim Upstairs.

Gerald: Good for you, Jim. So, have you had a good life?

Jim: Yes, a good life.

Gerald: Very good.

Shirlene: He's very pleasant to live with.

Gerald: You are, so that's wonderful. Well thank you. This doesn't take long, just a quick little interview.

Shirlene: Well if it will help even one family, I would be thrilled. If someone would see this who was like me, raised in such a protected environment that you didn't know of any handicapped people in your community, I say just take them home and love them. Discipline them, and love them like you do all of your children. Then you're happy.

Shirlene: Tell him what you like to do.

Jim: Basketball.

Shirlene: He loves to play basketball.

Gerald: Good for you.

Shirlene: Tell him what you did in Special Olympics.

Jim: Country ski.

Shirlene: He did cross-country skiing and got him a gold medal.

Jim: I got a gold medal, first medal.

Gerald: You got a gold medal? Good for you!

Shirlene: Yep, he did.

Jim: I hit the buzzer.

Gerald: You hit the buzzer. You were the first one to do it. Good for you!

Shirlene: It was when they had Special Olympics in Park City. He did cross-country skiing.

Jim: I watched Olympics.

Shirlene You were there and got your gold medal, didn't you?

Jim: My dad is happy.

Shirlene: He was very happy. We were all so happy we could hardly stand it.

Jim: I hit the buzzer hard.

Gerald: Shirlene is a widow, and Jim is a great companion to her. She and the whole family have been a blessing in Jim's life, and Jim has been a blessing in theirs. Not placing Jim in an institution was the best thing for him and for them. He is a contributing member of society. He has a job and is active in his church and community.