

**Stories from the Forest**

**By Daniel Roth**

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## Chapter 1 --- The Beginning

The picture was of 8 smiling boys in Cub Scout uniforms. Some of the boys obviously had Down's Syndrome or other handicaps, but one look at their huge smiles made the pride they felt obvious. The look on their faces as they stood tall in their uniforms was priceless. They were cub scouts, and the uniform was never worn with more pride. I instantly wanted to be part of something that made these boys feel so important.

I had just started my first job as a computer programmer at the York Bank. Because of work I moved the 22 miles to the York Area and I was looking for something constructive to do with my spare time. As I was browsing through the paper, I noticed the picture and a small article. The article explained that the den had recently started and was held at a church in south York. I cut out the article and set it aside. A couple of days later the picture was still sitting on the end table. I crumbled it up and threw it away, or so I thought.

A few weeks went by and while I was cleaning behind the couch I found a crumbled up piece of newspaper. Eight smiling faces were beaming out from the crinkled newsprint. I couldn't put the picture away. I telephoned the number under the picture and set up a meeting that would permanently change the way I look at people and at myself.

We were to meet at the church where the scout meetings were held. I was never very comfortable at interviews and was afraid I would come off bad. With all the bad things in the newspapers how could I convince them of my intentions? Why was I here? I did not have much experience with scouting or dealing with children with handicaps. What qualifications did I really have? The article wasn't asking for help, why should they trust me?

I timidly opened the door marked 'Minister's Office' and peeked in. The minister stood up from behind his desk, introduced himself as Pete Seiler and shook my hand. He also introduced me to the two other people in the room, Gary Jones, the scout master, and Virginia Houser, the special needs den leader.

Pete said that he had recently been transferred to the area and was looking for activities for his son, Peter. Since Cub Scout meetings were held at his church he thought it would be a good idea to start a Cub Scout Den that Peter could join. He looked within his own church for leadership and Virginia volunteered to help.

As they talked it became obvious that they were as nervous as I was. They had run a police report on me and contacted my boss at work. They wanted to believe me but were skeptical of a young man appearing out of nowhere. I tried to present a confident front and answer their questions as positively as possible, but I was never very good at interviews. We all muddled through. After the interview they told me that they would give me try.

That Tuesday I entered the room for my first meeting. I wasn't sure what to expect. I didn't expect 7 boys calmly sitting at a table. No one was bouncing off the walls or out of control. My

confidence grew. All of the boys were mobile and could speak. None of them would be considered severely handicapped.

Because the den had been active for a few weeks, I looked to the other leaders for guidance. They said I should work with David. David was a short, heavy 8 year old with Down's Syndrome. I prided myself in being "good with children" and confidently approached David. I started talking to David, but got no response. The rest of the boys started working on a craft. I calmly attempted to get David to join the group. Popsicle sticks flew everywhere. I tried my best to get David to cooperate but the more I coaxed the more he resisted. I tried all the things I would normally do to get kids to cooperate. The only response I got was David throwing himself on the floor and kicking the wall. I tried to pick him up back into his chair, but was unsuccessful. I spent the next 50 minutes desperately trying to get David to join in, or at least not hurt himself or anyone else. I never felt more relieved as I did when the parents arrived to take their scout's home.

Afterwards, I felt sick. How could have I done worse? Every scout did what was expected, except for the one I was helping. I was convinced that I was in over my head and they were going to tell me not to come back. At that point I really didn't care, maybe this wasn't for me.

I spent alot of time soul searching that week. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this. They didn't really know me. I didn't really know them. If I never went back we would all just go on with our lives. If I couldn't get one scout to cooperate, what good was I?

Something inside wouldn't let me give up. I went back.

Later I found out that they were having trouble with David and were hoping I would be able to handle him better. I wasn't the miracle worker they were hoping for. We were all learning as we went. We did eventually change our approach toward David and let him join in at his speed, without pressure.

David did get much better but he still had his bouts. At times, sometimes for no apparent reason, he would throw himself on the ground and his entire body would go limp. He would shut himself out from anything you said. We soon learnt that the best way to handle this was to ignore him. He would eventually be lured back into the fun.

David also knew how to use his weight and size to his advantage. One time we were at a Cub Scout Day Camp and David grabbed two scouts from a different troop and held them both against a wall. We never found out why he did this, but its good he got them coming out of the bathroom and not going in.

As we all got to know each other, the mood changed from one of doubt, to one of cautious optimism, and finally to a fun place. We all looked forward to Tuesday nights. The enthusiasm was contagious. Even David was opening up and joining in, at least most of the time. Many great memories were formed that first year.

Once a month all the Cub Scout dens meet for a pack meeting. At each pack meeting one Den is responsible for the opening and the closing. We had a grand scheme of a play about a tooth with a toothache. We made cardboard cutouts for each of the characters, a healthy tooth, a tooth with a toothache, a toothbrush, toothpaste, various vegetables, and the villain, candy. We gave David the starring role. He stood in the middle of the stage holding a cardboard tooth. When we prompted him he cried because his tooth hurt. Virginia read the story and the rest of us tried to direct the scouts on and off the stage. Half the boys didn't want to leave the stage once they were out and the other half wanted to leave as soon as they could. Our play was closer to the Three Stooges than a Broadway hit, but to us it was a huge success.

The following November we mustered up our courage and decided to take the boys camping at the local Boy Scout camp. The group of leaders, along with some of the parents, packed up our things and headed off into the wilderness. It was at the camp when Pete approached me. He said he wanted to start a camp. If he could get a core group to commit to helping, he would move forward with the plans. We all enthusiastically agreed.

While plans were progressing for the camp we were approached about a new scout joining our den. Matt S. and his mother arrived one night for a "preview". Matt S., who is non-verbal, but not non-vocal, had a major fit. He yelled, kicked, pumped his elbow against his side and bit his hand.

After the meeting Caryn was waiting for us in the hallway. She had a look on her face that expected rejection. Virginia and I exchanged glances that we both knew meant, "We have to try". The whole point of this den was to provide a place for kids who had no other place to go. We did not intend to say 'no' because a boy seemed a little (or maybe allot) more difficult. We not only told Caryn that Matt S. could join our den, but we also encouraged her to sign him up for camp.

## Chapter 2

### Wesley Forest - Summer 1989

We were gathered on the patio across the bridge from the parking lot. Anytime now the campers would be crossing that bridge and left in our care. We had a mixed bag of backgrounds. We were not professionals at this. But there we stood in our matching lime green camp t-shirts. Each of us wondering what we had gotten ourselves into. It was too late to turn back now; the campers would be here any minute.

A group of counselors had met on Saturday morning to car pool to camp. Virginia and Pete would be the camp "directors" and the rest of us would be counselors. The goal was to provide a one on one camper/counselor ratio. Extremely calm or cooperative campers might be two to one. The first year "our camp" consisted of a Doctor, a Nurse (who happened to be the Doctor's wife), their two little boys, Virginia, Pete, 8 counselors and 10 campers. I was assigned Matt S., our new scout.

The camp, donated by a wealthy member of the Methodist Church, is nestled in the hills of central Pennsylvania. It is a long way from nowhere. It is a beautiful setting. The camp has a lake and many streams and creeks. The creeks are perfect for "stream stomping" or just splashing around. There are many paths going through the woods surrounding the camp. If you were patient you would most surely see wildlife including deer, rabbit, and an occasional beaver.

We were staying at Penn's Creek Lodge, the log buildings that were part of the original property. The Penn's Creek Lodge consists of one main two-story lodge with 5 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms and one large living room. Attached to the main lodge is an annex with 2 more bedrooms. There are also three smaller cabins, the largest of which, Lick Run, the Doctor and his family stayed in. The rest of our camp stayed in the main lodge and annex.

There is also a group of cabins around the lake. This allows two camps to occur at the same time. We would split lake and craft time and share the dining hall at meal times. This year a fourth and fifth grade camp was in the lakeside cabins.

Saying I was nervous was a gross understatement. I did not know if I was really up to this. It was one thing showing up on Tuesday nights and helping out for an hour, this was a totally different ball game. When the campers were dropped off today the parents weren't coming back in an hour. For the rest of the week, day and night, they were our responsibility.

One of the first campers to arrive was Bobby. Bobby was an 8-year-old dynamo. He was deaf, and had limited use of his legs, but don't tell him he had any handicaps. Despite his hearing loss he had no trouble communicating. He rolled into the room with a big smile on his face that said "I'm here, gotta love me" and in two minutes we did. Bobby did things his way and for himself. If you're in his way, watch out! But he'd run you over with a smile on his face.

It was past the registration time and Matt S. still wasn't here. In all honesty, Matt S. not showing up seemed like an easy end to my worries. I found myself hoping that they changed their mind.

He did arrive, a little late. After I gave him and his parents a brief tour, his parents left. I timidly followed Matt S. around as he explored his new surroundings. Things were going smooth, but I was still waiting for the outbreak. Matt S. happily rolled through the evening. He enjoyed supper and the singing that followed.

That evening, right after we read the Poky Little Puppy, Matt S. went right to sleep. I went down stairs happy about the easy, even fun, time I had today. I was still on edge though, waiting for the calm to fall apart.

I went back up in a couple minutes to check on Matt S. I quietly tiptoed to our room and peeked in the door. He wasn't in his bed! I rushed into the room and looked under the beds. He wasn't there! I ran into the hallway and checked all the other rooms and the bathrooms. I went down the steps in a panic and scanned the down stairs. No Matt S.! By this time my heart was pounding a million beats a minute. I ran back up the steps and into our room to make sure he wasn't in his bed. He wasn't! I turned around in a panic and saw that my sleeping bag looked a little lumpy. I pulled back the cover. There was Matt S., sound asleep. We switched beds for the rest of camp.

The more I was around Matt the more I discovered about him. There was obviously allot more inside Matt that was struggling to get out. It was truly amazing that despite this communications barrier he managed to maintain a pleasant and cooperative attitude. He really responded when he knew you recognized the boy trapped by the communications fog. It's really hard to explain Matt. He understood what you said but had trouble communicating back. He could take in and process the input but it was a struggle for him to provide any feedback. A simple grunt or arm motion was usually the most response I would get.

David came along to camp, and we thought we were comfortable enough with him to assign him to Stacy, one of our college-age counselors. Although David did listen pretty well, we could all picture the scene when Stacy described trying to push a reluctant David into the shower. David's impatience and stubbornness also became evident during a cookout. We were cooking hot dogs over the fire, and David cooked his for about 4 seconds, grabbed it off the stick and tried to eat it.

Stacy was not really the outdoors type. When we were going on a hike, somehow she got out in the lead. We heard a scream! We hurried up to her to see what the problem was, expecting the worse. We discovered a very frightened fawn scared her. Stacy now moved to the middle of the pack. We walked a little further and she started screaming again "A baby bat, a baby bat!" We heroically saved her from a moth.

Pete was also a member of the anti-nature club. He wouldn't walk anywhere without his walking stick. He would use it to move the grass and bushes in front of him looking for snakes. Luckily he never found any, or I'm sure we all would have heard the scream.

Sandy E. was a veteran of many Cub Scout and Boy Scout excursions. Her campers were two young ladies, Jenny and Lasha. Jenny was 15 and much taller than Sandy E. When she was

excited, she stammered. At night she would lie in bed and yell "M-m-m-m-y B-b-b-b-ed" at the top of her lungs. Lesha was 11 going on 25. She was a cute girl with downs syndrome. Being the only male counselor I became the object of their attention. Every time I glanced their way they would yell "Oh my God, he's looking at us" and hide their heads. Lesha told everyone, except me, that I was her boyfriend.

As the week progressed, Matt S. and I got to know each other. We went from cautious strangers to good friends. Many times Matt S. would become excited and put his arm around my head and pull it in towards him. During song time this was a common occurrence. We would also sing our way to the dining hall, the peppier the tune the faster Matt S. would walk. As Sunday turned into Monday, then rolled into Tuesday I finally started to calm down and enjoy the ride.

One part of Matt's routine remained consistent. Every night, and multiple times during the day, Matt S. wanted me to read the Poky Little Puppy. If I attempted to read another book he would reach over and take it from me. I must have read the book 50 times.

Another part of the day that we all looked forward to was lake time. We would load up in rowboats and paddleboats, move out to the middle of the lake and let the action start. We would take the buckets, stored on the boats to bail water, and throw water on each other. It was a great time. Afterward everyone was tired, wet, and laughing.

On Wednesday night, our last night together at camp, we unknowingly started a tradition. After 4 days of constant activity and broken sleep we all assembled around the campfire. Even the most active camper was tired. Pat, the site manager, brought his banjo down and we had a sing along. By this time the campers and counselors had time to bond. We were one big pile of tired, happy campers. If you would scan the circle of people you would see campers sitting on counselor's laps or with their heads resting on their shoulders. The apprehensions from Sunday were gone. The transformation from strangers to family had occurred.

We couldn't believe it when Thursday rolled around. None of us was ready to go. As it crept toward departure time, I once again found myself wishing Matt S.'s parents would be late. His parents did come, anxious for news. I tried to explain the fun time I had. I tried to convince them that Matt S. not only had a good time but had a great time, and so did I. As I was thinking about Matt S. leaving, tears filled my eyes. After sharing so much it is very hard to say good-bye.

Later, as I got to know Caryn better, she told me how much my reaction meant to her. She was used to Matt S. being rejected or at most "put up with". It meant allot to her that we wanted Matt S. there and enjoyed his company. It still brings tears to both our eyes reminiscing about this day.

The counselors all said their tearful good-byes and gathered in the lodge. We all just shared an experience that turned out to be much more than we ever imagined. We went 5 days with hardly any sleep and virtually no time to sit and rest, and we never felt so good. We had grown from total strangers to a tight family group. Camp years would come and go but the family of Wesley Forest 1989 will always be special to each other.

After the campers left we all felt empty. A piece of us was missing. We would stay until tomorrow and clean up. We were too tired to sleep so some of us drove into the local town and got some pizza and soda. After we returned we gathered in the main lodge and reminisced about our week. We laughed, cried and hugged. Finally late into the evening we drug ourselves up to bed.

Just as I fell asleep, I heard a scream coming from Stacy and Karen's room. I wandered out into the hallway, ready to chase the moth out of their room. They both ran out of their room, faces white as sheets. Karen, the braver of the two, stammered "There's a giant bug in there with wings and teeth coming out the front of its mouth, and it attacked me." I bravely entered the room expecting to find a tiny bug. What I discovered sitting on her pillow was the ugliest bug I ever saw. It was about 5 inches long and had 1/2 inch long pincher coming out of its mouth. We later discovered that this bug was a hellgrammite and common to the area. I went and got a shoebox, covered the bug, and let him loose outside.

The next morning we mopped and cleaned the cabins, loaded our stuff in our cars and assembled in the parking lot. No one wanted to be the first one to leave, so we sort of milled around the parking lot. We thought we could extend the feelings, even if just for a little bit longer. I don't remember who left first but we all followed. The camp left when the campers left, all that was left was empty buildings. Good-bye for now Wesley Forest, we'll be back.

## Chapter 3

### SHERATON INN - SPRING - 1990

Pete decided he wanted to supplement the week of camp with an early spring weekend retreat. Because he is not an outdoors type he chose the local Sheraton Inn. We stayed in the motel rooms and used their pool and a large general-purpose room. The retreat started Friday night and ended Sunday afternoon.

I had Matt S. again. My 15-year-old brother, Jay, came along. Because Jay was in my room and I enjoyed Bobby so much, I arranged for Jay to be assigned Bobby. Jay was shy around the other counselors and spent most of the time interacting with Bobby. Sunday afternoon I asked Jay a simple question and he spoke back. One of the other counselors looked at us with wide eyes. When I asked what the surprise was, she told me that she had thought Jay was deaf. She had only seen Jay talking to Bobby in pseudo-sign language. She had not heard him speak all weekend.

On Saturday when we were at the pool, my eyes were opened to what these kids, and their parents, must be faced with everyday. We would use the hotel's public pool. There were some other children in the pool, splashing and playing around. We entered limps, wheel chairs, and all. The Mother of the children stood up and hovered over the edge of the pool. She loudly complained about every move our kids made. I wouldn't have been bothered by her concern if our campers were bothering her children or if they were extremely rowdy. The opposite was actually true. Each camper had a counselor directly watching him or her; no one got out of line. She was complaining because, in her eyes, our campers were "different" and didn't belong with her "perfect" children. What right did she have to judge? Later when I really thought about it, my feelings to her turned to pity. Her ignorance of anyone different will block her from some wonderful people.

## Chapter 4

### THE DEN GROWS

Mostly through word of mouth, the Cub Scout den continued to grow. One of the new boys was Joey. Joey was a constant trickster, always looking for laugh. He'd wheel around in his electric wheel chair asking everyone to open his 'can of worms' or whatever trick he had that night. One night Joey asked me in a serious voice "What do you and Virginia do when we're not here?"

That summer I realized how the boys viewed me. I'm still not sure if I should have been flattered or insulted. We were preparing to go to the Cub Scout camp for the day. Virginia had prior commitments and could not attend. When we arrived, Peter looked around puzzled. I asked him what was wrong. He asked, "Where's Virginia?" I told him that she couldn't make it. "Well, who's the teacher?" Peter asked. In other words Peter wondered who could be in charge. I was just one of the guys.

## Chapter 5

### WESLEY FOREST - SUMMER 1990

We approached our second year of camp with allot more confidence then the first year. The camp had grown to 15 campers and 10 counselors, and Pete and Virginia were back. I was very excited because I had convinced Virginia and Pete to let me be Bobby's counselor. My younger brother Jay was going to be Peter's counselor and be in my cabin. I was really looking forward to the week. It promised to be lots of fun.

Because of the growth of the camp we now were using the 3 smaller cabins. Because I was to have Bobby, I was in Lick Run, the biggest of the smaller cabins. It was the most wheelchair accessible. Also in this cabin was my brother Jay, his camper Peter, ano ther new counselor Doug and Matt S. Doug was a perfect match for Matt S. because he sang and played the guitar, and Matt S. loved music.

I straightened up the cabin before the parents arrived. In order to avoid any bad impression I put the horror book that Jay was reading in his suitcase. I later returned to the cabin to find Jay laughing. He informed me that Peter, who rode along up a day early, had thrown his book in the lake (actually it was a creek). Peter and Jay had returned to the cabin when Jay noticed that his book was missing. He thought Peter was a likely suspect and asked him where his book was. Peter replied, in his broken English, "I throw book in lake." Despite Jay's pleads and threats, Peter stood by his story. When I reached in Jay's suitcase and showed him the book Peter started laughing hysterically. Peter summed it up when he said, "That was good one." Peter still looks back on this trick with pride.

Many times we wondered whether Jay or Peter was in charge. Peter was constantly telling Jay that he was Robocop and he was under arrest or repeating his favorite phrase "I'm the boss around here!" Jay couldn't turn his head without risking Peter taking off. He never went far he just enjoyed the chase.

As we were waiting on campers to arrive, we received a phone call from Bobby's mother. Bobby's shunt, which drains fluid away from his brain into his stomach, became infected and had to be replaced. Bobby was in the hospital now and would not be attending camp. Besides being worried about Bobby's health, I was also very disappointed.

We had received a last minute camper and decided to accept him without our traditional pre-camp visit. All we knew about him was his name, J.J., that he was 15 and blind. Stacy was to be his counselor and had gone to the library and obtained books on Braille and dealing with blind people.

When J.J. arrived, we were really surprised. He was chronologically 15, physically 6 and mentally 3. Because I was now camperless. We shifted a doubled up female camper to Stacy and I took J.J.

For the first couple hours he didn't say anything. I let him feel around our cabin and then led him to and from the main lodge a few times. I didn't feel J.J. recognized my voice or cared if I was there. I could not get any interaction to occur between the two of us.

The walk to the dining hall was about 3/4 of a mile. We had a bus that we used to transport campers who were not up for the walk. J.J did not walk long distances. If he gets tired he would just sit down. Sometimes I had to carry him just to get him to go the 50 yards from our cabin to the main lodge. In order to save my back, we took the bus. J.J moved to the back right hand seat and sat down contentedly. He must ride a bus to school because he certainly looked at home.

The first meal did not go well. I could not get J.J. to eat anything; all he would do was drink milk. When he wanted more milk I heard him speak for the first time, he said "More juice please." I chalked up the first meal to nerves and didn't worry about it.

The night was horrible. J.J got up at 3:00 in the morning and starting wandering around the cabin. I didn't want him to get out of the cabin or trip and hurt himself so I jumped down off my bunk and went to get him. When he felt my hand he took me to his bed and pushed me like I should sit, so I did. He then sat beside me, about 30 seconds later he grabbed my hand and pulled me up and made us switch places. This scenario repeated itself for about 3 hours. I could not get him to lie back down; I could think of no other choice then to play along.

When it got closer to a more reasonable hour of the morning I woke one of the other counselors, took a quick shower and then got J.J dressed and ready. He was sitting in the middle of the floor moving his head back and forth to a beat somewhere in his head.

I said, "Come on J.J. let's go ride the bus." I did not really expecting a response. But J.J. surprised me by quickly getting up and saying "Ride the bus, Ride the bus."

When we got to the bus, J.J. headed for the same seat in the back he sat in yesterday. Peter was there. J.J. got mad and started pushing Peter out of the way. I calmly explained to Peter that J.J. needed to sit there. After J.J. got his seat, he contentedly smiled and rocked his head back and forth repeating "Ride the Bus. Ride the Bus".

Breakfast wasn't any better than dinner the night before. Once again, all J.J. would do was drink milk. I was starting to worry. How long could someone last on just milk? How do we make him eat?

The rest of the morning went fairly well. J.J. particularly enjoyed the singing. He would sit there and rock his head to the beat. At various times during the morning, J.J. would appear to be overwhelmed by the crowd. We would have to leave and go for a walk.

By the time lunch was drawing near, J.J. must have been getting hungry. In his singsong voice he said "Oatmeal" and "Ice Cream." I quickly drove to the local store and purchased oatmeal and ice cream. For dinner J.J. ate 2 bowls of oatmeal topped off with a chocolate milkshake. With some more experimentation over the next couple days I discovered that J.J. would eat almost any food that was soft. A huge worry was gone.

After lunch we had lake time. We all put on our life vests and headed out in our boats. It didn't take long for the wild water battle to start. Jay and Peter were in a paddleboat. They were both laughing so hard, trying to get everyone else wet, that we wondered which one would fall out of their boat first. On another boat was Lesha and the nurse, Gretchen. Much to Gretchen's embarrassment, Lesha spent the whole time yelling, "Help! The witch has me!"

Don and Sandy W., a husband and wife who volunteered as counselors, also talked friends into letting their daughter, Emily, attend camp. Emily is a pretty girl and in all sorts of ways she reminded me of Matt S. She appeared to understand what was said to her but had trouble communicating back to you. She could talk, but not carry on a conversation. We all found out she knew Don and Sandy W., because at any time she would start repeating "Don and Sandy" over and over. If something really bothered her she would speak. She didn't like when we went to the craft room and would repeat "No crafts, No crafts." Although Emily's communication was limited, it was obvious, at times, that she understood what was going on. When things were explained to her she would do what was asked, but it was hard to tell exactly how much she understood.

I wasn't content just to baby-sit J.J., so I decided to try to get some kind of interaction going. I assembled objects with all different textures. He laid claim to a foam paintbrush and carried it around. If he ever misplaced it he would ask for it by saying, "Toys please."

When we were walking from place to place, although he couldn't see, I tried to get him to appreciate the nature around him. Often we would stop and pick up pieces of bark or rocks. He became particularly fond of a cluster of three medium size trees. The trees were close enough together that he could touch one without letting go of the other. He would sometimes spend large amounts of time going between the trees feeling the bark.

That afternoon I temporarily left J.J. with another counselor. I came back in the room and said something. J.J. immediately reacted. He got off the couch, followed my voice, grabbed my hand and led me to a seat back beside him. After this incident, if I ever wanted to leave him with someone else, I had to sneak away then sneak back before he noticed.

Monday and Tuesday night we "played" musical chairs again. Just when I thought the frustration of our limited communication or the lack of sleep was getting to me, J.J. would pick me up. He would crawl onto my lap and hug me or laugh a happy contented laugh. It was the kind of pure joy that I don't think the rest of us can feel anymore. During quiet time J.J. would sing back the songs he heard during the day. He wouldn't sing with the rest of the campers, but later back in the cabin we would hear the songs he enjoyed sung back to us.

I was shocked awake Thursday morning by something I hadn't heard all week, my alarm clock. J.J. had slept the whole night! I couldn't believe it. We packed up J.J.'s stuff and prepared for departure. Although at times J.J. was difficult, more mentally than physically, he made me slow down a little. He uplifted me with his laughter and, as I searched for things for him to experience, taught me to appreciate my sense of touch and hearing. It was hard to tell if J.J. grew from the experience, I would like to think he did. I know I did.

## CHAPTER 6

### SPLITTING DENS

Virginia received a call about a new boy, Mike C., joining scouts. He has cerebral palsy and required total care. He cannot talk or walk, has limited control over any muscles and needed to be fed and cared for. He says 'yes' by raising his left hand and 'no' by raising his right hand, sometimes he has trouble even doing this. He was small and extremely thin. You could wrap your thumb and index finger around his biceps and his legs weren't much bigger.

Mike C.'s mother stayed for the meetings and she was always the one to help him. Because we never dealt with someone with Mike C.'s condition we were content, for now, to observe her interacting with him.

We soon realized there was a lot more to Mike C. than we first imagined. He understands everything you say. His eyes are his communication board; just by looking into them you can tell when he's happy, sad, or mischievous. His smile is completely infectious. When he smiled at you, you couldn't help but smile back.

One day Mike C. was in church with his family. While the people were filing up the middle aisle for communion, Mike C. would glance over at his parents to make sure no one was looking. Then move his hand to hit whoever was beside him in the aisle. Afterward he would glance back, and after making sure he got away with it, he smiled and looked for the next victim.

We knew Mike C. understood what was going on. In order for him to get his Bobcat badge, we had to come up with a way for him to prove he knew the Cub Scout promise. Virginia came up with the perfect idea. She would say the promise for him but sneak in incorrect words. When she made a mistake Mike C. would raise his hand. He got really good at it and was soon picking up even the smallest changes.

The Cub Scout Den steadily grew. We tried to avoid the inevitable but we finally realized we had to split the Den in two. Virginia and I both had apprehensions about the move. I believe we are a good team. She was the organizer and I was the kid person. She made sure everything was organized and ready and I helped when new kids joined or a scout needed an extra push. But split we did. She took the older boys and I took the younger ones. My brother Jay volunteered to help me.

As part of the split we contacted the local school district to see if there was any interest in their special needs classes. We got a fair response, and the new dens began. I struggled with the organizational side but our meetings are always fun.

One of the new scouts was Mark. Mark was an 8-year-old bundle of energy. One of his favorite sayings was "Come on dude, let's go." If he sat for more than 5 minutes, he was doing well. After Mark started we had to keep the door to our room closed. This gave us a couple extra seconds to catch him if he headed for the door.

One night our guard was down. We turned around and Mark was gone. Jay took off after him. He tracked him down in the bathroom, locked in a stall. Jay convinced Mark to open the door. Jay soon discovered Mark had taken his shirt off and dropped it in the toilet. Jay picked up the shirt and carried it, dripping, to the sink. He turned his back to wring out the shirt and Mark was gone again. Jay tried to grab him but slipped in the water on the floor. Mark ran up the steps and into the sanctuary where the choir was practicing. Imagine their surprise to see a little ball of lightning run by, without a shirt, then a couple seconds later Jay running through after him. I hope they have a sense of humor.

Another time we took the Scouts bowling. Mark came along and when it was his turn to bowl he carefully rolled the ball down the lane, then took off after it. He ran down to the end of the alley, got down on all fours and peered in to see where the ball went. I carefully chased after him, picked him up, and carried him back. One of the bowling alley employees met us at the end and said "You know, you're not supposed to go down there."

## CHAPTER 7

### Camp Hebron - Spring 1991

This year we threatened a boycott, and forced Pete to give up the Sheraton. We chose Camp Hebron for our retreat site. Camp Hebron is located in the hills of south central PA. We would be staying in a circle of cabins. Each cabin contained 8 - 10 beds and a bathroom.

Mike C. signed up to go to camp, and I nervously agreed to be his counselor. I had never fed or dressed him. More than that I was worried something would be wrong and I wouldn't be able to figure out what it was.

When Mike C. first arrived, I tried my best to act confident for his Mother. When it came to Michael she was not quick to give her trust. She must have bought my act, because she left him with me.

My first order of business was to get Mike C. in a good mood. I pulled out all of my best jokes and ridiculous actions. He laughed so hard he could hardly breathe. We joked and kidded our way through the evening. He made it easy by laughing at everything I did no matter how ridiculous. I felt he was working to put me at ease instead of the other way around.

The first time I tried to get Mike C. dressed was quite an experience. Mike C.'s joints, especially his elbows and knees, are extremely stiff. They can be moved but only slowly and carefully. I was certain I was going to hurt him. The first step was to get his shirt off. Mike C. cannot sit up on his own or hold his hands up for an extended period of time. You can probably imagine the scene as I attempted to hold his body up, his arms up, and pull the shirt off over his head all at the same time. Because I was afraid to bend his elbows I tried to accomplish this without bending his arms. I managed to get the shirt halfway off, with his head still covered. I was certain Mike C. was thinking, "What is this clown doing?" 10 minutes later the shirt made it up over his head. I expected Mike C. to be upset but he had a huge smile on his face, he thought it was loads of fun to see me struggling. Once again I was working to keep Mike C. at ease and it was him who showed patience and a sense of humor that put me at ease.

From then on Mike C. found great humor in any troubles I would have. Mike C. especially found my inexperienced wheelchair driving amusing. Anytime I would bump into a door or have trouble getting over stones he would laugh.

The most frustrating part of dealing with Mike C. was the communication. It is scary to think that he might have some, otherwise, minor problem but his lack of communication prohibits him from telling you. When he was upset, it was up to me to figure out what was wrong. I always started with the most obvious, hunger and thirst. It could be an itch, or a stomachache or the need to be put in a different position in his wheel chair or bed. Luckily Mike C. was almost always in good spirits and enjoyed the "guessing game". I tried to be "super aware" of any changes in mood or facial expressions and to react immediately, we were having a great time and I didn't want to lose him.

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