

Catching the Vision!

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Heavenly Chocolates

A chance meeting on the Jersey Shore in the summer of 1969 is where it all began. A morning of making candy in the family chocolate business followed by quick dip in the ocean changed lives forever. The chocolate shop became an integral part of a three year courtship culminating in a large Italian Wedding on a freezing January day. During the next five years lots of holidays were spent working in the family business creating Valentine hearts, chocolate bunnies, saltwater taffy and other chocolate delights.

The birth of a son—the first grandson—imposed some time restraints but the business went on. Soon after, Grandma's ill health made everyday operations more difficult. So the agonizing decision was made to close the shop and sell the property. The grandparents went to Florida, and everyone went on with their lives. Grandpa carefully guarded all the candy recipes. They were part of his treasured possessions, along with his confectionery skills, long before the Jersey Shore business came into being.

While in retirement Grandpa kept his hands literally in chocolate by working for one of the Sunshine State's leading chocolatiers. Four years passed, and in 1981 a healthy baby girl, the first granddaughter, was born. How perfect—a loving couple, a 4-year-old boy and a new baby girl—all together living in the home of their dreams.

One year later, number-one granddaughter, Miss Amanda, was just about to celebrate her first birthday. She could win any baby walker derby hands down. She took corners on two wheels while giggling and talking up a storm. Shortly after, Amanda began having difficulty picking up finger food and other small objects. Her walking was not progressing. She would lose her balance as well as her contentment.

Several trips to the pediatrician yielded nothing more than, "wait and see." By the time Amanda was 15 months she could no longer move on her own. Her vocabulary was disappearing,

and finally there was no speech at all. Eye contact was gone. Local doctors were puzzled. Answers to how and why were allusive. Strangers couldn't believe Amanda was a typical one-year-old just three months prior.

After an evaluation with a world-renowned neurologist the devastating results were revealed. The doctor was rather casual in his reporting, assuming we were already aware of the extent of the brain damage. We had no idea prior to that meeting. We were in shock, and he offered no explanations or what to do or what to expect from Amanda.

We had no diagnosis for Amanda's condition until October 1986. The disease is Rett Syndrome and was not known in the United States until 1983, only two years after Amanda was born. Only girls are affected after being born perfectly normal. The symptoms appear between 12 and 18 months—fine motor, gross motor and speech skills disappear. Seizures usually occur along with curvature of the spine. The prognosis is unknown and cognitive ability varies greatly.

Although we had no idea what we were dealing with, we decided to create a super-learning environment for Amanda. She was put through a rigorous customized stimulation program. One hundred volunteers per week helped to implement the program. Amanda worked for seven hours a day. After three months she could creep around on her own and 16 months later she walked independently. Amanda is an atypical case in that she is still walking at nearly 21 years of age and is very much aware and responsive to others and her environment. She communicates with eye gazes and uses a computer.

The volunteers were a very special group of people. One woman wanted to help because she couldn't help her own daughter who was dying from cancer. Another elderly woman who was widowed at age 35, had her nine children taken from her and were adopted out. She had no idea



Story by

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where they were, including her child with Downs Syndrome. The stories just went on and on.

We wanted to show our appreciation to the volunteers in some small but meaningful way, so we decided to make candy as holiday gifts using Grandpa's recipes. This was another connection between Amanda and the candy. When Amanda was able to attend a wonderful school the candy was given to her numerous teachers as gifts.

As the years went by Amanda became more and more interested when the candy was being made. She wanted to be around during every part of the process. Our concern for Amanda and what the future held for her became more and more important.

We investigated many programs around the country to find an appropriate setting that would serve Amanda and all her needs. Nothing came close. Time is running out in her present placement that ends when she turns 21. The options at this

point are almost nonexistent. The few programs that do exist are not appropriate to Amanda's circumstances and do nothing to maintain her precious but limited skill level, and most programs have a 5 to 8 year waiting list.

With few options and critical time concerns we searched for something creative that would serve Amanda and others at the same time. A group home, a sheltered workshop could benefit many. Thus Heavenly Chocolates was founded using Grandpa's recipes. A foundation was created to allow tax-deductible contributions to fund a group home and other projects that would not only support Amanda but many others at the same time. We hope to encourage community participation; employing seniors, teenagers and anyone who wants to give of themselves. Heavenly Chocolates, Inc. could mean many things to many people. Heavenly Chocolates....A Divine Intervention.