

My Redheaded Grandson

David was my grandson. He was redheaded, funny, and bright in a copper penny way. He was a big, beautiful infant. Our family waited a long time for that first grandchild. Everyone wanted to hold, cuddle, and become David's favorite relative.

I am a step grandfather with no biological children. I love my step daughters like my own. I was glad that David was born because it made everyone happy. I had no experience with infants or toddlers. I watched everyone interact with this newborn and got my few moments to hold and cuddle him. But, David was not easily cuddled.

Very few things seemed to get his attention. When I picked him up; he was almost stiff. The more my daughter and his grandmother fussed over him the more agitated he seemed. David was an odd baby in the things he really liked. He loved to watch anything that was bright and would spin. He would watch my spinning key chain for hours. David was strong and pulled up to a standing position at 6 months. He made stepping motions. He never crawled. He could pick-up the tiniest particle and could not use his whole hand for simple actions. David didn't attend to verbal play but would attend to the sound of the clothes dryer with absolute attention.

My daughter was aware of normal baby development and was very concerned. Her doctors kept a "wait and see" approach. My daughter was reading every book on infant development. David's grandmother was buying every developmental toy. David was continuing to do things both ahead of time and terribly behind time on a normal developmental chart. He was this lovely little boy with such sad blue eyes. He did not gurgle nor babble. He seemed to need no sleep. David seemed to need no one.

On his birthday, it was clear something was different about David. My daughter cried and changed doctors and continued to read. His grandmother went into complete denial. Everything David could not do, "Einstein also didn't do at that age." We all did lots of activities that the books said would help develop speech. David became the focus of everyone in the family. My son-in-law was quiet and supportive. When he and I babysat, we watched a football game and allowed David to rock in his cradle or bounce on a knee. David cried far less during those times. It seemed to me David would watch his father and I the more when we did not invade his space. It was clear he hated being cuddled. I am not a great harmonica player. However, I discovered David liked the sound of the harmonica. It was also clear some songs held his interest better than other. David was my only true fan.

The truth is I fell in love with this silent moody child. In many ways, I am a quiet man who likes my space. David was diagnosed with PDD before he was two-years-old. That began an unrelenting series of therapy and educational experiences. It was difficult to watch my daughter and son-in-law work so hard to find an answer for David. We all learned sign language...except David! David invented variations on sign language. He was quite clear in his communication. Often his signs were far more illustrative than standard sign language. By the time David was two, it was clear he had a wonderful sense of humor. Even though he was funny, David almost never laughed. I took hundreds of photos of David because he always laughter when the flash went off.

He and I loved the TV remote. We were excellent couch potatoes. We agreed on most TV...except he loved Louis Rukeyser. He would watch the tape running at the bottom of the picture as though it were the most important event in the world. David found his voice at 51/2 years old. Like everything else David was unique. He started speaking in full sentences. It was amazing to realize all we had said and worked on with him was there. I cried the first time David spoke to me. My daughter had called when he began talking. But, it was different to actually hear him express himself in words. Once he was

talking we discovered he knew the name of ever stock symbol on the NY exchange. It was amazing to learn that David had also been reading from far before he spoke.

I often think I am not far from PDD. David and I understood each other well. We both could eat potatoes three times a day. We both were not fond of anything green. Neither of us enjoyed small talk. We both loved to watch racing on a high volume. He liked the noise and I was losing my hearing. David loved puns. He liked to read the advertising on the cars. If a car had a Tide logo, he would say something like, "He's all washed up!" Then he would laugh at his own joke. David loved 4 X 4 cars and trucks. He loved to make a new car dealership run and pick-up free literature on the 4 X 4s. We would read them together until we wore the paper out. The funny thing is, I enjoyed the literature on 4 x 4 as much as David did. I miss the dealership runs.

David had a Great Dane named Thor. He was a gentle brute. It was a joy to watch them together. Thor always knew exactly how much play David would tolerate. Thor tracked David when he was outside the house. If someone came too close, Thor would offer a low growl and place himself in front of David. Both David and Thor had an excellent sense about who was a good person and who was not. Both David and Thor disliked the insurance man. The insurance man was always full of jokes and charm. The insurance man would try to engage David to no avail. Thor always growled at the man. We all liked the man. It turned out the insurance man was embezzling company funds and skipped town. I came to trust David's intuition regarding people. David had a special empathy that people with autism often do not have. When his grandmother was ill with a terminal disease, he always knew when she was in pain. He and Thor would sit very quietly beside her. When she died David, sat by me and gently patted my arm.

We lost David on December 3rd, 1996. He was twenty years old and looking forward to going to Las Vegas for his twenty-first birthday. He and I both loved the Vegas lights and sparkle. We would have played the best slots and flirted with the girls. We would have loved the buffet and ordered double portions of mashed potatoes with our chicken wings. I am not sure that it is a bad thing to have autism. I can think of no way to design a grandson that would be more fun and more accepting than my David. My life is so much richer because of the redheaded boy who made me laugh and cry.

James R. Black

My stepfather died 5 years ago. Two days before he died he was looking down the hall and thought he saw the image of David and Thor calling him. I do hope there are slot machines in the hereafter. Renee M. Whaley