

I knew from the time that Brad was born that I was a big sister. I just didn't get to know him as my brother since he didn't live at home. He lived in Wayzata Minnesota and then he moved to Duluth Minnesota. He lived in foster homes so he could get the right schooling he needed. He was diagnosed with Autism when he was 18 months old. I always wanted my brother at home with us. We lived in Bemidji Minnesota. When I was in 3rd grade, I wrote a letter to Santa as part of a letter writing competition sponsored by our local newspaper. In my letter I wrote, "All I want for Christmas is for my brother to come home and live with us." I got my wish a few months later. He was home. I always say now, "Be careful what you wish for!" All of a sudden, I had to share my mom and then learn how to cope with his "differences." My life...with Autism...

I never meant to be "one of those kids." The ones that teased, the ones that tortured, harassed and picked on peers with disabilities. I wasn't brought up that way. I accepted Brad for who he was...different. At least I tried. My actions spoke louder than my words.

I wanted to defend him when kids teased him. I got into fist fights on a number of occasions. Sometimes, I just looked the other way. I changed the subject when kids talked about him, I walked away and pretended I didn't care what happened. "Guess what dumb thing Brad did today?" "You should have heard what Brad said to the teacher!" I got really sick of it. If I listened to it, I had to make an excuse up for his actions. If I didn't listen, I felt guilty.

I couldn't wrap my teen age brain around having a "different" brother. I saw other kids and their siblings playing in the park together, playing games together, and even fighting! It was amazing to me that siblings could do that! It wasn't something I was used to, but I dreamed about it everyday. What would it be like to watch a movie, or play a board game with my brother and have him understand it?

Sure we got into arguments, but Brad never understood what we were fighting about. He just knew that I wasn't happy and that bothered him. One big argument around our house was him being nosy! Get this...I had a phone in my room and when I was talking on it, he'd sit outside my bedroom door and listen to me. I knew he was doing this because soon I'd hear my mom yelling at me to come downstairs. Brad had repeated verbatim everything I'd said to my friend over the phone. Of course this was one sided but my mom got the drift of what was being talked about. Picture a teenage girl talking to a boy on the phone or a girl friend on the phone about a boy! Brad got me into some trouble. Okay, it was my word choice that got me into trouble...but I wouldn't have been in trouble if he hadn't been snooping!

I got all the "negative" attention growing up. I was in trouble a lot. But when Mom was lecturing me, it was attention all on me. One-on-one with me and mom. This was something I craved a lot growing up. So the trouble I got into was a blessing. I knew that she'd yell at me, so I knew she had to talk to me and only me.

Another big issue I faced was embarrassment. I'd spend the night at friends' houses and go to their houses on weekends a lot. It was so exciting to me to be able to do this and get out of my house. I liked to see other families that I thought were "normal". I'd see brothers picking on sisters, moms and dads hugging, and laughter. It was a "normal" family. But then there were times when my friends would ask if we could come to my house and I'd come up with more excuses why not. "My mom is sick." "We have company." "We are remodeling our house so there isn't room." Then I got very creative. "A tree fell on our roof." Anything I could think of so that my friends wouldn't have to see my brother. I wouldn't have to explain him. Some of my best friends didn't even know I had a brother! He was my secret. Keeping him a secret was hard so when the kids found out that he was my brother all of a sudden, "I was adopted!" I just wanted to fit in. Knowing that my brother didn't fit in, I thought if people knew that he was related to me in any way, I would be an outcast too. Taking this chance was not an option for me.

I just wanted to be like everyone else. Having Brad for a brother wasn't like everyone else. I thought my family stuck out like a sore thumb. In restaurants, Brad would throw temper tantrums. In the mall...a teen's second home...Brad would cry and yell and scream! Imagine if you will, me trying to crawl under a clothes rack at the mall and just living there for the rest of my life!

I struggled in school partly because I was dealing with so much at home. I had the wrong crowd of friends because fitting in with the "in" crowd wasn't going well for me. Keeping Brad my secret or just dealing with the daily struggles that our family was going through was too much for me. I couldn't do home work, I had to help with Brad. I couldn't concentrate because my boy friend broke up with me. By the time my class was graduating, I was sitting at home raising my first child which Bradley named Nathaniel. I didn't know what I was going to do. I wanted to move out and get away from what seemed to be holding me back...Bradley. I don't blame Bradley or his autism for these things, but I just couldn't deal with everything at once. It was so bad compared to other girls my age that I didn't see a way out. I was still dealing with Bradley's issues. He was still in need of care all the time and mom was at work. I didn't want to be his primary care giver and it seemed I was. Then I decided to give school another whirl. I went to college and was really

proud of myself for taking this step. I wound up getting married and dropped out of school again. I worked some, but my new home life was bad. I moved home again. I now had two kids. Bradley helped me through this. He was so supportive every time I moved out and then moved back home. I did this a lot.

One day, I remember sitting in the stadium and watching Bradley walk the aisle for his high school graduation. I can't remember ever crying so hard. I was crying because I was so proud of him. There goes a guy that was said would never make it past kindergarten and he's going to get his diploma! Wait a minute! I'm older; I was supposed to graduate before him! I then decided to go back to school and make something of myself. I got my GED.

Living at home with Bradley, my kids, and my mom was hard. I had a curfew again when I went out. I had chores and I felt I was being treated like a 12 year old. But I had responsibilities. I had to be my kids' chauffer not to mention Brad's too. I had housework from 5 people and I couldn't keep up with anything. I was depressed and just wanted to die. Bradley helped me out so much. He watched my kids for me when I needed him and he cheered me up by being himself. We fought a lot while we were living together as adults, but we got through it.

Looking back, Bradley was an inspiration to me. When he couldn't get something, he worked till he got it. When he was told he couldn't do something, he did it. He just thrived in life and is still achieving goals everyday. He is a role model to people around him. One day he told me, "In school, I didn't care if kids teased me, they just didn't know me." How could I have not seen that? He has autism and that's pretty special. Brad and I are very close. We spend a lot of time together and we help each other out. He's a terrific uncle to my boys and he's a great friend to me. If Brad can overcome his obstacles, which he does everyday, there's hope for me! I'm so proud of my "normal" family!

I am Stephanie Coyle. I live in Bemidji Minnesota with my husband Todd, and my two sons. Nathaniel is 9; Nicholas is 6. Growing up with Bradley was a challenge. It made life hard and interesting all at the same time. I've always been a firm believer in the issues facing the siblings of children with disabilities. At times, I think, these issues are overlooked by parents, teachers, and others. I don't believe that they are overlooked on purpose, but us siblings seem to have our share of hardships related to our brothers or sisters that have autism or some other disability. Embarrassment, humiliation, pride, courage, humor, and love are all things we go through together every day. Learning so much about handicaps has also been a lifetime research project for my family. Bradley and I are best friends today and he is still an inspiration to me and everyone who gets to know him.