

A story: Learning to love Larry

BY ANNETTE FERRARA
SPECIAL WRITER

Even when I was very young, I knew there was something special about Larry. I suppose at that time I could relate to him, but then I grew up. Physically, Larry grew up too. Mentally, he did not.

My dad tried to explain that his brother is mentally handicapped. Those are big words for a small child to grasp. All I knew was that Larry talked funny and he liked cartoons as much as I did. When he visited it was just like having a friend over. We tried to play school, but Larry couldn't read. He did not know his ABCs and would get easily discouraged.

Some time during adolescence, my feelings for Larry changed. Instead of being excited over his visits, I began to avoid them. I had no more interest in cartoons, or the desire to watch them with a 30-year-old man who sucked his thumb. To put it simply, I was embarrassed by my uncle.

I remember hiding in the basement with my friend Leslie. We were standing behind an antique dresser, spying on Larry. He was listening to his records and singing along with Ernie and Bert of "Sesame Street." Unable to control ourselves, Leslie and I burst into laughter. Needless to say, Larry discovered our hiding place. When he saw us, he laughed too,

for he thought we were laughing with him. He did not know we were laughing at him.

I know there were times my parents were embarrassed as well. One day when we were all in the yard, an Oriental man drove up to my dad and asked him for directions. Larry was pulling at his temples to make his own eyes appear slanted. Then he put his hands together and repeatedly bowed to the man in the car. Fortunately, the man was gracious and insisted he was not offended, but my dad was speechless.

Somewhere along the line, I got over my embarrassment. Around the time I started high school I became more tolerant of Larry. My friends liked him, too. Larry's favorite TV show was "The Honeymooners." He watched all the reruns, then entertained my friends with Jackie Gleason impersonations.

Around my junior year, I took an interest in Larry's condition. I asked my parents questions about why he was mentally handicapped. I was concerned it was hereditary or a form of Down's Syndrome or Fragile X Syndrome. My parents explained that Larry became brain-damaged at birth when the physician used forceps during his delivery. Larry has indent marks on both sides of his head and there is no evidence of

any genetic disorders in our family.

It angered me to discover that Larry did not have a chance at a normal life because of human error. I decided I did not really know Larry the way that I should, so one day I visited him at his group home. He was so excited to see me. He introduced me to everyone on the home staff, making sure to inform them that I was his niece and he used to take care of me when I was little.

Later that day, we went to Larry's favorite restaurant, Elias Brothers. He talked on and on about his recycling job at the supermarket, so after lunch we went to his work. Again, he introduced me to his friends. It seemed as though Larry knew everyone, and everyone loved Larry. People were hugging him and waving to him. I could tell he enjoyed the attention. He was very proud of his home, his work and his

friends. I realized I was very proud of him too.

Larry and I have grown closer over the years. He is in his forties now, but he is still the same wonderful person he was when I was a little girl. He still gets excited about Christmas. Even though we have informed him that Santa Claus does not exist, Larry insists that he does.

Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to see the world through Larry's eyes. He is like an innocent child who sees only the good in other people. He is always eager to please and he loves to sit and talk. I'm glad I grew up and learned to listen. I still like to tease him though, but now he doesn't take it. In his best Jackie Gleason voice he informs me I'm headed "straight for the moon."

Annette Ferrara is an Oakland University senior majoring in business and psychology. She lives in Birmingham.



Learning process: Annette Ferrara has a new appreciation of her Uncle Larry, and his child-like excitement about Christmas.

ATTENTION!

Please note time changes in these church advertisements below. They were published incorrectly Dec. 14, 1992.

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