



## The Gift

*As the saying goes, some are born to greatness, some seek it and some have it thrust upon them. I doubt that many of us would at first glance see parenting of a handicapped child as a call to greatness, but in my eyes, these mothers of children with special needs are among the greatest of humanity.*

*My first exposure to one of these extraordinary women came in my residency. Her son was five and dying the slow degenerative death of Canavan's sclerosis. She made no demands. Her only wish was for her son's comfort. Nothing I had learned to date had prepared me to help her. Her patience with me as I stumbled through a callous summary of her child's health will never be repaid. The gift I got from her was the same patience with my own residents as they repeated my mistake in the years that followed with other families.*

*The next mother I recall was just the opposite, a working class mom, demanding and rude. She was the ultimate child advocate but also a dauntless professional adversary. She wanted only the best for her child who was a young boy mentally retarded, sensory impaired and — sad to say for me — in need of extensive treatment. Over ten years, we worked out our relationship. In the beginning, she hovered and hollered as her son howled. We had hard times and good as we came at the "best" care for her son usually from opposite poles. In these chairside encounters, she'd share battles fought with schools and other health providers, architectural barriers hurdled, and the comments of an insensitive public. She had brought with her the emotional scars, wisdom, and wariness of many confrontations with a hostile world — including professionals like me. By the end of our ten years of caring for her son, we had become friends, each earning the other's respect and affection.*

*Between and after these two moms were many more too numerous to count, but all sharing the burdens and rewards of caring for a child with special needs. When it came to health care, including dentistry, a few sought to make their child whole. Others, like my first mom, just wanted her child to be at peace. Most often though, these mothers just wanted that child to experience what it meant to be normal, even in just one small way. If that meant braces and a pretty smile, then so be it.*

*I've learned a lot over the last 20 years from these mothers — not to be so quick to judge, to put myself in their shoes, and ironically, to want the best for their child and to fight for it, even if they themselves disagreed. They shared with me through words and tears, a world of total devotion, a true 24-hour day. They shared the pain of confronting a health establishment designed by and for those without chronic needs. They forced me to look at my own attitudes and words in their mirror, not mine. That was their gift.*

*As I've told my wife for many years, I believe these mothers and their children will have the best of the afterlife. The children will be freed from the physical or intellectual bondage of their human existence and enjoy through eternity what they missed in this life. Their mothers will enjoy a unique counsel with the Creator, sharing their greatness in wisdom gleaned from a lifetime of caring for a special child.*

*We in pediatric dentistry have been given a unique opportunity to experience their gift by virtue of the families who seek our care. I work with many colleagues who I know have received it. If you haven't received the gift, don't miss your next chance!*

*Paul Casamirio M.D., M.S.*