



Can't Imagine Life Without You

By Elizabeth Ghilardi

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In November 1999, when I was four months pregnant, my husband and I were informed that our very wanted baby had a serious chromosomal abnormality and that the pregnancy would end in either miscarriage or stillbirth. Michael Angel was delivered, stillborn, on January 28, 2000.

Though our hearts were broken and we, along with our then five-year-old biological daughter, Tori, were grieving deeply, I believe our adoption journey began during that three month period of time.

It was during that time that my uncle, who I loved and respected very much, said, "You may not be ready for this yet, but maybe this means that you'll someday give another child a good home."

In my grief, most comments like that were discarded and never thought of again. But this one stayed in my heart and kept coming back to me until the summer of 2002 when I convinced my husband, Steve, to attend an orientation meeting about the Special Needs Adoption Program.

I was very interested. He was hesitant. We eventually went through the process and were approved as an adoptive resource in February of 2003. The next day, we were offered our first child. We accepted and met M. a few days later. Sadly, after two months, M. ended up staying in his foster home.

Another heartbreak.

There were two other children presented to us but neither of those worked out either.

However, on May 30, 2003, we received a phone call

regarding a five-month-old little boy, described by his foster parents as a "17 pound moose." I made several calls and made plans to meet this "little moose" the following day.

On Friday, May 31, 2003, Steve and I walked into the foster home and there, in the middle of the living room, lying in an infant seat, was a gorgeous, bright-eyed, smiling little boy. My heart melted (love at first sight) and I knew this was going to be our "little moose," our Aaron.

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There were some concerns that he may have delays—specifically with gross motor skills—and maybe some vision problems. He was in occupational therapy and would need to continue with that.

I made several calls to professionals regarding these issues, but I knew in my heart that it didn't matter, we'd deal with whatever happened.

What eased my mind

the most were the words of Aaron's foster mother, who had taken in about 120 babies over 15 years. She said they didn't know what they were talking about and that he'd be just fine. I knew that she was right—who would know better?

After our first visit with Aaron and his foster parents we knew we wanted him to be in our lives. Sunday afternoon Steve asked, "Did you leave a message for that worker to tell her that we're going to take him?" That's all I needed to hear and I was leaving a voicemail.

We had three other visits in the foster home and were extremely busy setting up a baby's room. Tori accompanied us to the next three visits and instantly fell in love with Aaron.

Some family and close friends were concerned that Tori would have a difficult time being "dethroned," as she had not only been an only child for eight years but also the only grand-

daughter and niece in Steve's family. After that first meeting, I knew it wouldn't be a concern. I tell people now that, in the beginning, there were concerns that Aaron would be delayed, but then he met Tori, and she'd have none of that.

On June 10, 2003, the day after Tori's ninth birthday, we brought Aaron home and Tori's work began.

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The occupational therapist said that Aaron was fortunate to have his own in-home therapist. Tori worked with him, talked to him, played with him, etc.

Aaron started walking a few weeks before his first birthday and, now, he plays soccer, volleyball, basketball and baseball. And this is a child who the O.T. said didn't have very good motor coordination! Aaron graduated from occupational therapy and speech therapy long ago and his vision is perfect.

I still see the O.T. occasionally and tease her about his "athletic prowess." She tells me how very glad she is to be proven wrong. We credit much of Aaron's success to Tori. She was and is relentless in teaching him things and he loves it. Steve and I take a little credit—but only a little—because we raised her!

Our TPR and adoption process went very quickly by system standards, though, to us, it seemed like forever. Aaron's birth parents'

rights were terminated on February 16, 2004. I was at work that day; the day the TPR trial was to begin. When I checked my cell phone I heard a very distressing message from Steve telling me to call him right away. Something had happened. He was in tears. I tried several times to reach him in a panic.

Finally we spoke and he told me that the District Attorney had called with news: Aaron's birth parents had voluntarily terminated their rights. We were so thrilled and so very grateful.

On April 28, 2004, surrounded by friends and family, Aaron became Aaron Joseph Ghilardi. I tear up just thinking about it. We were all so happy, grateful and we felt truly blessed.

In the course of our adoption process, we went through 13 weeks of preparation classes; something we initially were not looking forward to, but turned out to be wonderful. We have kept in touch with many of the families and have gatherings on a regular basis. We have developed an unbelievable support network that is invaluable to our family and the children. Among us, we've adopted a total of eight children, with several more pending.

Today the "17 pound moose" is a 32 pound two-year-old, who is talking well beyond his years, is sassy, very busy and extremely bright. He has brought such joy into our lives and into the lives of others. He just lights up the room when he walks in. People often say they give us credit for what we did, but it seems to us that we did very little.

Aaron has given us so much that we are definitely the ones on the receiving end. We couldn't have asked for a better outcome. I know there will be challenges in the future: he's adopted, we're Caucasian, he's African American, etc. But he is our son, just as if we had given birth to him and nothing will change that. We will meet the challenges as they come with the love and support of family and friends—many of whom are on the same path as we are.

On April 18, 2005 my uncle who talked to me about giving another child a good home, died suddenly. Steve and I did the eulogy. Both of us independently spoke of the gift he gave us with those few words.

What a miracle Aaron has been in our lives. But it was Tori who said it best one day several months ago as she, Aaron and I were in the car. He called her "sicha" (sister) and she got all choked up. She said how much she loved it when he called her that. Then she said she couldn't imagine what her life would be without him. We all feel the same way.



This story is dedicated to Ralph A. Cina who was always a very special part of my life/our lives. His memory will live on in Aaron forever. That is the gift he left us.