

How love saved our blind triplets

by Marie Petraglia as told to John M. Ross

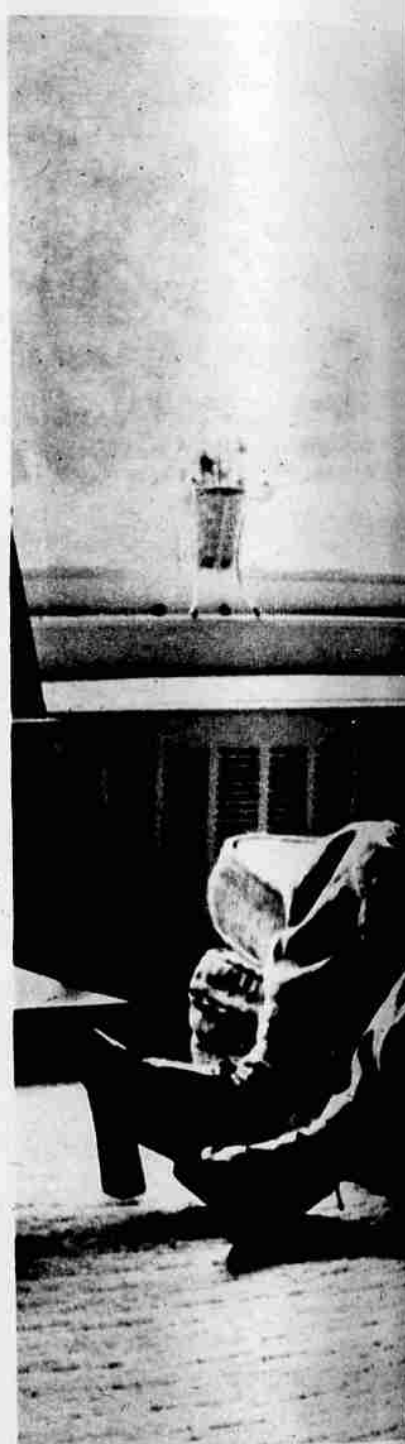
Here is the touching story of a brave mother and father who conquered the tragedy of raising three sightless babies



More than 85 percent of a child's learning is based on sight — but not for afflicted Gail Petraglia and her sister and brother.



The triplets' home is a monument to man's basic goodness.



The triplets learned to speak by placing their hands on Mrs. Petraglia's mouth and "feeling" words, then touching their own mouths.

"LET'S HOPE they live," the doctor had said after he'd brought my tiny premature triplets into the world. And for the next five months we lived on a fearful day-to-day basis, praying that they could challenge the odds that were stacked so high against them.

Slowly, the answer began to take form—and it was a wonderful answer.

Only 2½ pounds at birth, they gained steadily until they were almost 6½ pounds each, and I waited eagerly for the day I could take them home and cuddle them in my arms. I made special plans to cope with the monumental task of raising three infants all at once; bought the extra clothes, blankets, and diapers I'd need; and wondered if we could afford a large, ground-floor apartment to accommodate our new, big family.

Then in the midst of all this joyful anticipation the terrible, heart-breaking blow struck. It might have been less painful a few months earlier when the struggle still was in doubt—but now! The four words in the hospital report almost shrieked: "Your babies are blind."

How could God do this to me, I wondered. The same God who had listened to, and answered, so many of my devout pleas. How could He be so cruel now? My head spun dizzily as I groped for the answer, and for days I lay on my bed and cried in frustration. Frank, my husband, patiently tried

to lead me back from my despair. He placed my Bible and rosary on the night table where they would be within reach. He sat on the side of my bed one day, patted my hand gently, and reached for my heart with his soft words.

"Marie, you have a right to cry," he said. "You might even have a right to be bitter. But think about our babies. They have no sight, but they do have a mother. And they need a mother's love more desperately than other babies. Without it, they don't have a chance. You're not going to take that away from them, too, are you?"

The answer was in my heart before Frank had finished. "When can we bring our babies home?" I replied.

I had to wait 15 months before I could take the triplets from the hospital. During this time we tried to find out why the babies were blind. We had them examined by eye specialists, and we wrote letters to Mayo Clinic, Johns Hopkins Hospital, the Leahy Clinic, and other research centers for information. When the answer finally came, it reopened all the wounds.

The triplets were not born blind, as we had been told, but had been blinded during the early weeks of their struggle for life. They were victims of retrolental fibroplasia—damage to the immature retina of the eye. And, the doctors agreed, the culprit was the least likely of all suspects—oxygen.

Ironically, the concentrated flow of oxygen into the incubator, which helped save their lives shortly after birth, also caused the injuries that doomed them to permanent darkness.

Thousands of premature babies had been blinded in the same manner. To add to the irony of our own tragedy, medical research turned up the cause of the blindness just weeks after our triplets were born. It was a tremendous step forward but, of course, it was too late for our babies.

APPROPRIATELY enough, it was Mother's Day, 1954, when my babies, Donna Lee, Gail Ann, and Steven, were permitted to come home. We brought them into a second-floor, five-room apartment in a crowded Bronx, N. Y., housing project. Without a yard or play area, it was hardly an ideal home for three infants requiring constant attention. But the \$54 rent was an important consideration, since Frank's salary as a restaurant worker was only \$60 a week plus tips.

While three babies would be challenge enough for the most capable mother, raising three blind babies was a frightening prospect. What mother is equipped for this?

After 15 months, the babies had made only slight physical progress. Their heads rolled from side to side, they couldn't use their hands and, having been confined to hospital cribs for so long, they

didn't like to be touched or held. In their strange new environment, Steven and Gail soon took to tantrums. Steven would bang his head severely on the bedpost, and the resultant cuts and bruises only added to his frustration. Gail pulled out her hair until she was completely bald.

More than 85 percent of an infant's learning is based on sight. We found out that simple things like chewing solid foods also fell into the category of visual imitation and was not a natural instinct. To teach the triplets to chew, we had to manipulate their jaws with our hands. To encourage them to talk, we placed their hands on our mouths so they could feel where the sounds came from, and then put their hands on their own mouths.

One of the most difficult problems was teaching them to walk. They dragged themselves along on their buttocks until they were 3 years old, even though we tried every conceivable means of encouraging them to step out.

We massaged their legs to strengthen the unused muscles, put bells on their shoes, played games and made up songs, but nothing seemed to work. Often Frank and I would wind up a long evening of training by crying on each other's shoulder.

But we'd be back trying again the next day. When little Stevie finally took his first steps I almost became hysterical with joy.

We leaned heavily on prayer during this criti-

cal period, and we showered all the love that was within us on our babies. Before long, they responded affectionately, too, and began to like sitting on a lap or being cuddled. It was then that our work began to bear fruit.

While the triplets' first steps were a thrill, this development also brought about another problem. Now we had to cope with the hazards of our apartment—metal door jambs, doors that opened in, sharp-edged furniture—to protect the babies from serious injury as they toddled about.

Frank and I tried walking through the apartment with our eyes shut to understand the difficulties the triplets would encounter. We then made the apartment as safe as possible, but still there were daily bumps, bruises, and cuts.

Visiting relatives and friends were inclined to rush to the triplets' aid in almost any difficult situation. We promptly discouraged this, explaining that the children had to help themselves as much as possible in conquering the darkness. I'm sure they thought us very cruel at the time.

ONCE THE CHILDREN learned to walk, we enrolled them at the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind. This was a bold undertaking, since the children had never been beyond the sound of my voice and we didn't know how they would respond under another's supervision. As a

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