

By BERNICE KENNEDY as told to Terry Morris

MY STORY begins a few years before Vicki was born, on an afternoon in 1949 when I was working at the information desk of the telephone company.

I had handled rudeness from callers before, but for some reason this particular "gentleman" shouting in my ear really affected me. Snatching off my earphones, I put my head down on the desk and cried.

My understanding supervisor, sensing I was upset about something, gave me the day off. I ran out of the building, tears streaming down my face. I knew it wasn't the caller's rudeness that had upset me.

I simply wanted a baby! Why couldn't I have a baby?

I was married when I was 19. After a serious miscarriage, I had a full-term pregnancy and gave birth to an RH baby, stillborn. The doctors made it plain that I had better accept the fact that my husband Benedict and I would be childless.

I was an only child, yet I grew up surrounded by children and loved every one of them. My mother and father participated in a program of giving convalescent care to babies after their discharge from the hospital and before they were returned to their own parents who, for one reason or another, were unable to give this kind of care themselves.

The afternoon I ran out of the telephone-company building I knew that the only job in the world I wanted was the job of motherhood. Somehow, I decided, I would have babies—lots of babies. If they couldn't be mine, then they would be somebody else's.

I had youth and energy, and our house had ample room and yard space for little ones. When I read the appeal then being made by the Cardinal's Campaign for Foster Homes, it seemed as if it was directed right at me.

Our priest referred me to Catholic Charities which, in turn, put me in touch with the New York Foundling Hospital. After careful investigation, I was able to bring our first foster child home two days before Christmas, 1949. From that Christmas on, I was foster mother to a total of eight children. I just couldn't resist a call for help from the hospital.

Then, in 1953, they called to ask whether I would take a handicapped child.

"Of course," I said promptly. "I'll come right down!"

When I first saw Vicki, she was 13 months old but looked only six months. A premature baby, she had been abandoned soon after birth. "She has a very weak back," the nursing sister told me. "And she'll be difficult to care for. Will you take her?"

At this time, I had at home Gina and Michael, both of whom we have since been able to adopt. I wondered whether I could give Vicki, this lame little sparrow, the extra time that she would need. But it was a momentary doubt. This little child needed me more than the others. This little one had nobody!

For the next three years, I took Vicki for regular visits to St. Vincent's Hospital. I had to carry her everywhere. She couldn't move her legs, and even crawling was impossible. Accurate diagnosis of her condition was still difficult, but it was fairly clear that she suffered from cerebral palsy, spastic type.

"She'll never walk," the doctors said.

But she certainly talked! A mile a minute. Of all our children, Vicki was the liveliest and most vivacious, a sassy,

bright-faced girl who attracted people like a magnet. Everybody prayed for little Vicki.

We bought Vicki a walker because I was convinced she could walk. For the doctors, I took snapshots of her holding onto the bars and moving her legs. I took pictures of every tiny move she made.

But the doctors weren't impressed. When Vicki was three years old, they decided on an operation to cut the nerves in the back of her legs to relieve the spasticity. I was strongly opposed to the whole idea.

I kept telling myself: they must not operate! If they cut those nerves, Vicki would surely be a cripple, and I felt so certain that if the child and I were permitted to keep pulling together as a team, *she would walk!*

But as her foster mother, I had no legal status or rights to Vicki. To operate, her real mother, who had abandoned her, would have to consent. I was terrified for several reasons. If Vicki's mother chose belatedly to claim her child, then any chance I had of adopting her might be ended. And of course Vicki's mother might consent to the operation.

While a search was made for the mother, I lived in a state of near-hysteria. I broke out in rashes and had daily headaches.

When Vicki's mother was found, she gave her consent to the operation. But at least she did not claim her. The operation was set. How I prayed for a miracle! I was walking the corridors of the hospital, utterly distraught, when Vicki was returned to her room—without being operated on!

I learned that the surgeon who was to have performed the operation was driving to the hospital when, swerving to avoid a collision, he rammed his car into a tree. He was unhurt but sufficiently rattled to cancel the operation.

One of the nursing sisters smiled at me. "You prayed so hard against this operation, Mrs. Kennedy, but did you have to pray the doctor right into a tree?"

When the operation was rescheduled a few days later, Vicki developed a high temperature and a bad bronchial cough. Again the operation had to be postponed!

"I have faith in her legs," I kept pleading. "I feel strength in them. I see improvement day by day! Please don't cut those nerves."

We offered to pay for braces or any other appliances from our own funds. As foster parents, we were paid a sum each month for her food and board and a quarterly clothing allowance. Medical and dental expenses were also covered, but we knew the agency could not bear all the extras, too.

The agency agreed to let us take her to the orthopedic clinic at Cornell University Medical Center where special work was being done with cerebral-palsy cases. For three days, a medical team made tests. Happily, they, too, opposed an operation and supplied Vicki with low leg bands which gave her a certain amount of support. We were advised to put her on the floor and coax her into trying to crawl. If she crawled, she might pick herself up and try to walk.

So I began to put tempting objects just out of her reach, and playful, inquisitive Vicki slowly began to crawl toward them. Then she began to hold on to things, trying to stand. Every so often, she did manage, but she couldn't balance herself and would totter a few seconds on her toes before falling. Of course, I worried about those falls, though Vicki instinctively shielded herself.

(Continued)



Vicki, as courageous as ever, clumps around in Mommie's pretty high heels.

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