

## SIBLING's PERSPECTIVE

### *The Voice, Summer 2015*

#### Keeping a Promise By Gerri Zatlow

I lost my mother, best friend and partner in crime in June of 2013. She left me as the eternal protector to my autistic brother Douglas. There isn't a day that goes by when I do not feel her loss substantially. When my brother comes home to visit me each and every weekend, I sometimes miss her more, as the amusing buffer between myself and Douglas' *autism* (NOT Douglas the person), is no longer there to make peace, or joke about his strange ways.



**Douglas and Gerri**



**Douglas with his mom**

We discussed the concept of her death many times over the years. She was an unflinching realist when it came to the fact that she would not be here forever. As her daughter, I never wanted to hear about it, let alone think about the day when she would not be with us, for Douglas' sake as well as mine. She would sometimes question me about the location of our cemetery papers, asking if I remembered who would go where? I usually snapped at her "Again? You're doing this to me again? I KNOW WHERE THE PAPERS ARE! I KNOW WHAT YOU WANT!"

What my mother wanted was the steadfast assurance that I would honor her every wish and that I would always be there for the son she loved so deeply. The fact is, I am the one who wanted a brother desperately as a child. Years later when I told her that I'd requested an 'average' brother, she responded without missing a beat, "You never specified!"



**Gerri and Douglas as children**



**Gerri and Douglas as children**

No one is prepared for the appearance of a child with special needs. If they are lucky, families with involved, extended members rally around the child with a handicap and provide support for the parents and other offspring. Unfortunately this is not what usually happens. Parents find themselves isolated by their circumstances, and siblings are all too often involved in the day-to-day care of someone whose needs far exceed their own.

My family was left to find solace with one another. Our relatives abandoned us when my brother was diagnosed, as if we had done something 'wrong.' Once loving grandparents were no longer here to love unconditionally, our tight family grew tighter, and more isolated. But my mother filled us with love, and after wrestling with her own demons, grew into an amazing advocate for children with autism. She learned how to be his best warrior, and in the process taught me how to do the same. My mother created an agency to serve people with autism and their families nearly 40 years ago which grew into an alternative providing residential and vocational services for adults with autism.

Regardless of my brother's move into his group home, my responsibility to him will never end. Mom expected me to keep my promise, to be there for my little brother who now towers over me. She knew that I would always fight for him in any capacity and continue to love him without reservation. And love him I do. As for the struggle to ensure his health, well-being and happiness, well that is another story I hope to tell VOR members in another issue.