



Text Version of Audio Story: Chelsea

It had been a relatively easy full-term pregnancy for Laurie. This was her third child. She already had two boys. She was really hoping for a little girl. Her husband, Bob, was in the delivery room with her. As the little girl was born, Laurie could see in Bob's eyes that something was very wrong.

Baby Chelsea was born with a very rare syndrome that affected her muscles and nerves. Several of her fingers were also joined together by a webbing. Baby Chelsea lay in the nursery with a blank expression on her face, and her mother looked into her eyes, wondering if she was really there.

A nurse came over and told Laurie that she could tell, just by looking, that the little girl was mentally retarded. The doctors would later assure Laurie that it was way too early to make any such determination. Crawling and walking would be delayed, they said. Feeding the little baby was going to be a real challenge, but Laurie persisted in her efforts.

Right around Chelsea's one-year birthday, she took her first steps. At 18 months, it was time to test her intelligence. She passed with flying colors. Perhaps the most difficult challenge for the little girl and her family would be Chelsea's inability to smile no matter how much joy she felt. She was unable to produce a grin.

Because of the rare syndrome, the muscle and nerve fibers necessary to smile could not come together. It left Chelsea with a blank expression on her face. The situation was being made more difficult by curious children where Chelsea was now attending elementary school. Her difficulties would become reason for teasing. As you can expect, it was terribly hurtful for the little girl.

It was finally time for Chelsea to have her webbed fingers separated, and the procedure went very well. Her mom, Laurie, had also heard of a doctor in Toronto, Canada, who had developed a surgical procedure that grafted nerves and muscles tissue from other parts of the body into the facial muscles allowing individuals with this rare disorder to smile.

But Laurie had so many worries. *"What if it doesn't work? What if it only works on one side of her face and not the other? What if the anesthesia harms her? What if? What if?"* She worried as a mother would worry. It was finally Chelsea who said, *"Mommy, I want that surgery. I wanna be able to smile like you do."*

They went through all the testing procedures and the blood work and the needles. Chelsea was determined to have her smile. Finally, the doctor acknowledged that Chelsea was a good candidate for the procedure. It would take time and practice on Chelsea's part, but eventually that smile would come.

On June 29, 1996, Chelsea's birthday, the joyous spirit of a little girl that had been through so much finally was able to shine through. On that day, the nice folks at Disneyland threw a private party for Chelsea and her friends. There was much to smile about.

I recently spoke with Chelsea's mom. They live in Palmdale, California. Chelsea, at the time of this writing, is in junior high school. She has lots of plans for the future. Some days she dreams about becoming a doctor, other days maybe a teacher, perhaps a journalist. On the day I spoke with her mom, it was her dream to be an equestrian.

This is a story about dreams come true. This is a story about triumph of the human spirit. But, as much as it is anything else, it is really the story of a mother's love and how a mother's love and determination can make so many dreams come true.

I'm the American Storyteller.