



An Unforgettable Christmas

By Ann Richard

That special night, I'd seen a side of my child I never knew existed. It was as if I was meeting my little boy for the first time.

I've celebrated 50 Christmases, yet there is one very special Christmas I'll always remember.

When my son, King, was five years old we attended a Christmas party hosted by the Fraternal Order of Eagles Club. We'd been invited to their Christmas parties before, but were always reluctant to attend. King had been diagnosed with autism a year and a half prior and my husband Dave and I hadn't yet recovered from the traumatic news. But this year we decided to accept the Eagles Club invitation. I had no idea when we said yes that something spectacular would happen that night...something that would change my life forever.

The Eagles Club was noted throughout the community for their annual Christmas party. It was given especially for children with disabilities and was one of the group's biggest events. Each year they gave the children wonderful gifts and provided delicious food and excellent entertainment.

The day of the party Dave was called into work, which meant King and I would be attending the party without him. While I was getting dressed, I was overcome with a feeling of dread. As I stood in front of the mirror I began to imagine the worst. What if King had a tantrum? Or, what if one of the other children did something that set him off? If just one child began to cry, King might become hysterical and we'd have to leave, ruining our entire evening. I knew this was a disaster just waiting to happen.

King, already dressed, sat in the middle of the floor playing with the sink stopper. He watched, fascinated, as it spun around and around. He was so intensely involved that I didn't dare disturb him for fear of setting him off myself.

The idea of going to the party without Dave terrified me, but I was determined we'd go in spite of my fears. Driving to the party I noticed that King was exceptionally quiet. He was pleasant and very cooperative. I prayed he'd remain that way, at least for the duration of the evening.

After a bit of an ordeal finding a parking space, which did nothing to calm my nerves, we entered the building. A cold chill swept over me, and I froze, standing in the doorway with a blank look on my face. I was paralyzed with the "what ifs" that could easily unfold this evening. King walked on ahead of me. When he noticed I wasn't by his side, he turned around, grabbed me by the hand and pulled me along into a huge room. It was

filled with colorful balloons and in the center stood a large Christmas tree decorated with many lights. Santa Claus was sitting in a big chair in the far left corner shouting, “Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas!!! Ho! Ho! Ho! Merry Christmas...” Scores of children surrounded him, their tiny faces smiling, their laughter ringing throughout the room. King joined right in. I’d never seen such a look of sheer joy on my little boy’s face.

We received a warm welcome from some of the club members and then were escorted to our seats. Santa and his elves began passing out gifts to the children and serving the food. King was given his favorite toy, Elmo. He became so excited I feared he might work himself up and over the edge if he didn’t calm down. Once dinner was finished the band started playing some Christmas music. King seemed to enjoy the music so much – enough that I decided we’d join the other families already out on the dance floor.

At first we just stood in the center of the floor looking around at everyone else. I glanced down at King’s tiny feet and to my surprise both were moving. He began to hop around, one foot up and then down, the other foot up and then down. Hop, hop, tap, tap went both of his feet to the rhythm of the music. I stood and stared in amazement. Then King raised both hands above his head and began to spin around. He twirled around and around, laughing loudly. My baby was dancing. He was really dancing! He paused and stepped toward me, took me by the hand and began swaying from side to side. I joined in. For the first time I was dancing with my child! Tears of joy began to stream down my face. I was crying so hard I could barely see.

In the past, I had been successful at getting King to clap his hands but I could never get him to dance. Time after time I’d attempt to show him a simple dance step but nothing ever happened. Never. Finally, I gave up trying.

But here we were dancing - King laughing and me crying and laughing at the same time! We laughed so hard, twirling around and around that finally we both fell to the floor. My baby was having the time of his life, and so was I!

This was such a change from the usual tantrums King had at past parties. Without fail, his behavior would become so disruptive we’d have to leave as quickly as we could. As we sat on the floor, the two of us having such fun together, I realized my anxieties and fears had been in vain. I wanted the evening to go on forever but, too soon, the party was over and we started for home.

King’s verbal skills were extremely limited, but that night, the joy I saw on his five-year-old face outshone all the Christmas lights in the world.

Later that night I lay in bed alone, thinking about everything that had happened, about how King had initiated everything, beginning with grabbing me by the hand and pulling me into a room that I’d been terrified to enter. And how it was he who took me by the hand once again and coaxed me to dance with him. That special night, I’d seen a side of my child I never knew existed. It was as if I was meeting my little boy for the first time. He’d been confident and at ease, showing me how to have a good time if only I would

follow his lead. That special night I discovered that when I let my guard down, I created a chance for King to pull me into his world. And for the first time on that special night he allowed me to share it with him. That night I realized this was God's way of revealing King's world to me.

Looking back, God had been showing me King's world all along but I was blinded by my own fears and my determination to force King to be like all the other children.... to fit into the "normal" world. I never gave him a chance to welcome me into his.

That special night at the Christmas party my life changed forever. I never imagined King would open the door into a new world for me. He did, and it would become the best Christmas gift I'd ever receive.

Postscript on King Richard

Many years have passed since that eventful Christmas that changed our lives forever. King graduated from high school May 29, 2009, and I had the honor of presenting him with his diploma. What a milestone!



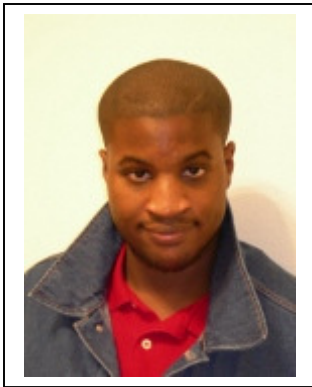
King has grown into a handsome young man, handsome enough he's been modeling professionally for several years now. One of his passions is singing and last Christmas King's chorus was chosen to sing in Disney's Epcot Center Candlelight Processional. For King this was the opportunity of a lifetime. His dad had to sing beside him, but he was able to perform with his peers, which included other high schools from across the country. King also performed with the Disney singers, a 55-piece orchestra and a celebrity narrator who told the Christmas Story. There are no words to adequately describe this event, for him or for us, his proud parents. The Disney cast fell in love with King and gave him an award.



Autism is still very much a part of King's life and ours, but it no longer consumes us as it did when King was young. But there still are moments, sometimes serious and sometimes funny. Here's a quick story.

King attends the Kids for Camp autism camp during the summers. One camp session the behavioral therapist shared with me that she had on many occasions tried to get King to eat a Fruit Gushers (a fruit snack), but had failed miserably. She said he was always afraid and would push the item away. One day she finally got him to eat it, and told me that immediately after he ran away and headed towards the bathroom. She and a male staff member went after King to make sure he was OK, only to find him standing in front of the bathroom mirror rubbing his head. When she asked King what was he was doing, with a great sigh of relief, he

said, “It’s still there (meaning his head)! It didn't turn into a watermelon!” As it turns out, King had seen a Fruit Gushers' commercial on television where someone’s head had turned into a watermelon after eating the fruit snack. King’s literal interpretation of the commercial (so common with our spectrum kids) had traumatized him and he had vowed never to eat a Fruit Gushers. I watched the commercial and thought it was very funny, but it wasn’t to my concrete-thinking son. Thanks to that therapist and her expertise! I would have never figured out that one. During the camp's closing ceremony King was awarded the “I Won't Be A Watermelon-Head” Award.



King recently received the “Spirit of Life” award by the Pensacola Civitan Club, given to a person with a disability who best celebrates life in the community. He performed the National Anthem at the ceremony’s opening. It was awesome! Actually, singing the anthem is what King has been busy doing lately, at all sorts of venues in our community. He’s even singing the anthem on YouTube!
www.youtube.com/watch?v=BVUIZFGjL3E What is so amazing is that King has very limited speech skills and is unable to dialogue with others. But, he can sing songs – even difficult tunes.

That’s King – an extraordinary son who is growing into an extraordinary person. This holiday season, I pray every parent of a child on the autism spectrum has an unforgettable experience like I did so many years ago, one that opens their eyes and heart to the amazing qualities of our children, no matter how much or how little their autism affects them. They are, indeed, the most precious gifts we’ll ever receive.

BIO

Ann Richard is the author of *And When He Didn’t Come Home*, an inspirational story of her family’s struggle coming to terms with their son’s autism. Richard has become a well-known local speaker and autism advocate, appearing on local and national television and radio programs. She lives in Pensacola, Florida with her husband and son. Contact Ann via email at KING100490@aol.com.

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