

Finalist, Non-fiction

## **Unwrapping Unique Gifts**

by Rebekah Wolfe-Martens

Copyright © 2013 Rebekah Wolfe-Martens. All rights reserved.

What do you think of when you hear the word, “gifts?” I think of Christmas and pretty, wrapped gifts under the tree. Since I was age ten, I grew up with my Aunt Kim who has special needs. The official diagnosis from the 1970s is non-classifiable mental retardation and borderline autism. My Aunt Kim moved in with us when my grandma died. She lived in California her whole life and moved to Canada with us.

At first, I was really jealous of Aunt Kim because she took up a lot of my mom and dad’s attention. Over time I understood she needed a lot of attention, too. Life was stressful for my parents; happy, but stressful...for them, it was like having another kid. For me, it was like having a big sister and a little sister in one (person). For example, Aunt Kim was like having a big sister because she could reach up to get the glasses from the cupboard since I was too short. In another way, she was like a little sister because I would help her make her bed (for fun) sometimes. Kim and I are so much like sisters, we even fight like sisters!

When Kim first moved in she didn’t understand that grandma had died and wasn’t coming back. About six months later, Kim woke up in the middle of the nights and acted out her grief. For instance, she went into the movie room and turned on the tv really loud (my room is next to that room). Then, she screamed and hit the couch! Mom took her back to her room and calmed her down when this happened. This type of behavior also took place in public. I felt embarrassed during these outbursts. However, over time I remained calm and became accustomed to this behavior. Mom talked to a friend who runs a group home in California. She explained that persons with special needs take a while to grieve the loss of a loved one and that Kim’s behavior was her expressing her confusion and grief.

During the two years Aunt Kim lived with us, we applied for her to stay in Canada as a permanent resident. Unfortunately, Canada Immigration has a general rule that persons with disabilities are not allowed to live here long-term due to the cost they would be to the government. Therefore, Kim now lives in Grafton, North Dakota. She still comes home to visit for sleepovers and holidays and we visit her often, too.

Since Kim lived with us, I now see “gifts” differently. Aunt Kim is the happiest person I know! She has given me a lot of gifts but the two main gifts she has given me are: compassion and the knowledge/ability to treat persons with disabilities the same as everyone else!

Now, I would like to share with you some of my experiences with another person who has a different sort of disability. My grandma cannot walk very well and needs a scooter to drive around on. Grandma has a great sense of humor; always joking around and she really wants an old-fashioned horn that makes an “ah-ooga” sound to let people know she’s coming! When I was younger, she let me sit on her lap for a ride on the scooter. One of her gifts she’s given me through her challenges is, she always chooses to make the best despite the circumstances!

I have a great friend and her name is Daphne! Daphne is developmentally delayed, she is 14, and is an “extreme” teenager! She loves cranking up the rock and roll music as high as it can go. When Daphne was younger, she loved to play and draw with me. But, crafts were her specialty!

Daphne has also given me a lot of gifts! Right now Daphne is going through a phase where she likes to be alone and she doesn’t spend that much time with me. However, she still tells me often that she loves me and that means a lot to me! I have learned that

true friendship takes a lot of work and it is worth it! Our gift to each other is love and patience.

In the beginning when I asked you what you thought of when you hear the word “gifts,” you might have thought of Christmas gifts. Now I hope when you hear that word, you think of these powerful gifts I’ve shared with you!