

From conception to natural death, every human life is sacred.

The VALUE of Life

One family's journey of life not so typical...

The picture-perfect life that singer/songwriter/speaker, and now author Jennifer Shaw planned and initiated came to a screeching halt with a series of life-changing events that shook Jennifer's faith to its core. After sharing her story in front of audiences around the world through her concerts and speaking engagements, Jennifer decided to open the old wounds and tell the entirety of her family's journey in her new book, "Life Not Typical: How Special Needs Parenting Changed My Faith and My Song" (Carpenter's Son Publishing).

It was a laborious task to relive some of the most painful moments, but Jennifer felt compelled to share the good, the bad and the ugly so that other families who are facing similar challenges will find hope and solace, even in the darkest hours.

"I remember feeling like I was falling and had no idea how far down the bottom was," says Jennifer. "There is no other way to describe it except that when I got to the bottom, God caught me. I was still in the pit, but He was there with me, and that gave me something to hold on to."

Jennifer began her musical ambitions early in life with an intense love for the piano, and after hearing her first Beethoven sonata, she was hooked on classical music. At an audition for a piano scholarship, she was urged by her choir director to also audition in voice, and much to Jennifer's surprise, ended up receiving the voice scholarship instead. She studied her craft in New York and received a Master's Degree in Vocal Performance from the Manhattan School of Music. Jennifer has performed in over forty shows in the theater, everything from Shakespeare and straight drama to musicals and children's theater.

After moving back home to Ohio, Jennifer began performing with the Columbus Symphony and later appeared at Carnegie Hall. She also became a Professor of Music for Cedarville University as well as the music director for her local church. Life for Jennifer and her husband and their two daughters seemed to be moving along nicely. But in 2003, Jennifer miscarried and, unbeknownst to her, began to bleed internally. After symptoms persisted, she was rushed to the hospital only to find out that she was dangerously close to death. After recuperating for over a month, Jennifer learned that her beloved father had been diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, a fatal illness for which there is no cure. Jennifer's

family was devastated as her father began to deteriorate over the coming months.

Jennifer became pregnant again and gave birth to son Toby the next year. But their brief joy turned to terror when her six-month-old son was found to have a severe hearing impairment from repeated ear infections. Several surgeries for Toby followed over the next few months, but his behavior became increasingly bizarre and extreme. He couldn't touch anything or be touched. He couldn't eat anything and he made no sounds except for crying all the time. He couldn't stand to get water on himself or be messy. Jennifer's charmed life seemed to be spinning out of control.

It was during a speech therapy session for Toby that a therapist began to help the Shaws put the pieces together. "Toby qualified for an intensive speech program since he didn't have any sounds, and they also had an occupational therapist on staff," Jennifer recalls. "She asked us if we'd ever heard of Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), and we said no. She started describing it and we were like, 'Check, check, check, that's our Toby.' SPD is a neurological condition where the brain does not read sensory input correctly. The therapist told us that many speech-delayed kids have SPD. It can look very different in different people, but in Toby's case, his brain



Jennifer Shaw

interpreted almost every touch as pain. He was so overwhelmed and frightened that he was shutting down, and learning to talk was his last concern.”

But giving the disorder a name did not take away the frightening and severe symptoms. “SPD is just unrelenting,” says Jennifer. “Toby was never okay. It was extremely intense, and he could never go with anyone else, so there was no respite, even at night. Also, there was the fear of not knowing what would happen, not knowing if he would ever be ‘okay’ or if he would be able to live a normal life. You have to rethink what dreams you have for your child. We went from thinking ‘maybe he’ll be a great this or that’ to ‘maybe he’ll be able to walk on grass someday.’ When you work for eight months every day just to get him to eat a piece of bread, it changes your definition of success.”



Toby
(as a toddler)

As the subtitle of her book suggests, there were other dramatic shifts in Jennifer's life. She moved away from her beloved classical operatic pieces, where she performed Mozart and Puccini, to writing and performing contemporary Christian music. She poured the lessons God was teaching her into heartfelt lyrics and music, giving her message a new voice with which she could reach a broader audience. Her quick radio success, garnering a #3 hit on the national charts with her CD entitled “Love Broke Through,” solidified her direction as a touring Christian artist. Her self-penned songs have made her a top 40 *Billboard* artist and have also been used in various choral and other musical projects by Lifeway Christian Resources, including the song *God Loved the World*, co-written by Jennifer and Lifeway’s Songwriter of the Year Paul Marino, which became a #1 best-selling Easter anthem.

Jennifer recently sang and spoke for a disabilities conference in New York where she heard a woman share her testimony. The woman had mental challenges which kept her in a group home, unable to live on her own and in need of constant care. But as the woman shared about her personal experience with Jesus that changed her life, Jennifer began

to weep. “There are many people who would look at that woman's life and say that it doesn't have value,” says Jennifer. “I have talked to many women who have been told that they

“How do we know that what looks like a tragedy or an overthrow of our dreams is not, in fact, the means by which God will bless us more than we could ask or imagine?”

The realities of Sensory Processing Disorder are harsh. One study estimates that 1 in 20 children in the U.S. suffer from the disorder to the extent that it interferes with their learning in school. Almost all children respond to therapy to some degree but some make small gains while others make great gains. SPD is closely aligned with autism in that the majority of autistic children have significant struggles with SPD although it is possible to have SPD and not be autistic. To date, the medical community is unclear of the exact connection. Children with SPD are often misdiagnosed as having ADD or ADHD, or emotional and behavioral problems.

“We were just hoping Toby would be functional,” recalls Jennifer. “We were told that therapeutic methods used before age 3 would actually be ‘re-wiring’ his brain, in essence, healing the problem. After age three, the brain is not pliable enough, and the therapy shifts to coping techniques. Our friend's son is in that situation, and it is hard. It's also very common since SPD is not usually diagnosed so young. In hindsight, we consider it a blessing that Toby's symptoms were so severe at an early age that it was obvious something was really wrong. A year into therapy, when he was retested, they described his progress as miraculous, and told us repeatedly that they'd never seen anything like it. One therapist told us that given his intake profile, it ‘should not have been possible.’”

have ‘options’ when they find out something is wrong with their baby during their pregnancy, as if the problem means that life is not worth living. I've heard the pain in too many parents’ voices when they describe conversations with people who assume their special needs children are a burden or that their kids’ lives have less value than a typical child's life. The Bible is very clear that all people have been created in God's image (Genesis 1:27) and therefore every single life has value.



The Shaw Family

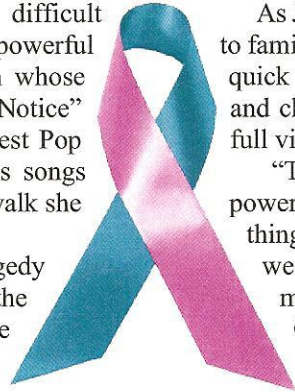
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Scripture tells us that God created us with a purpose and a plan for our lives here (Ephesians 2:10). God's Word tells us that He is absolutely sufficient to meet every need and that His power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)."

Jennifer's new CD entitled "Someday" features a song called *Your Child*, a moving anthem Jennifer co-wrote for all parents and families dealing with difficult circumstances. The song has been made into a powerful new music video directed by Jeffrey Kubach whose credits include the hit television shows "Burn Notice" and "Survivor" as well as a nomination for Best Pop Video from Gospel Music Channel. Jennifer's songs have become powerful reflections of the faith walk she has learned can be both treacherous and sweet.

"How do we know that what looks like a tragedy or an overthrow of our dreams is not, in fact, the means by which God will bless us more than we could ask or imagine?" asks Jennifer. "My son's SPD is nearly completely healed now, but it was very extreme when he was a young child. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat, couldn't play, and couldn't be touched. He cried all the time. It was emotionally draining, time intensive, and physically difficult to deal with. And yet, I remember that one of the things that saddened me the most at that time was when people looked at my son, they didn't see what I saw. I

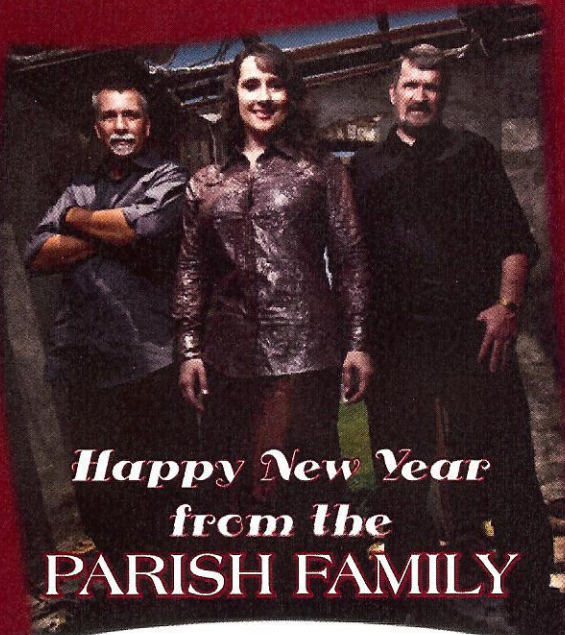
saw my beautiful child whom I loved more than life, and they saw a problem. I saw his sweetness and innocence and loving heart, and it hurt me that others didn't recognize how valuable and special he was. Yes, it was difficult to parent him, and yes, I wished life was easier for him, but I would never have traded him for the world. I love him completely. He is my son and he is such a blessing in our lives."



As Jennifer continues to travel the world, ministering to families and children who are facing struggles, she is quick to let people know that it is often the tragedies and challenges in life that bring God's presence into full view.

"Through it all, I learned that God is amazingly powerful," Jennifer continues, "and that He will use all things to the good of those who love Him, even when we can't see how that could be possible in the moment. He healed my son, but my dad died.



God's answer to our prayers is not always what we think it should be. But I now understand that our purpose here is just to glorify Him, and that these are 'light and momentary troubles' as Paul wrote. When we were going through everything with dad and then with Toby, I could trust God for His goodness and strength every day, trust Him even though I lost my father, and trust Him for the strength I needed to deal with my special needs child. And He absolutely met us there."



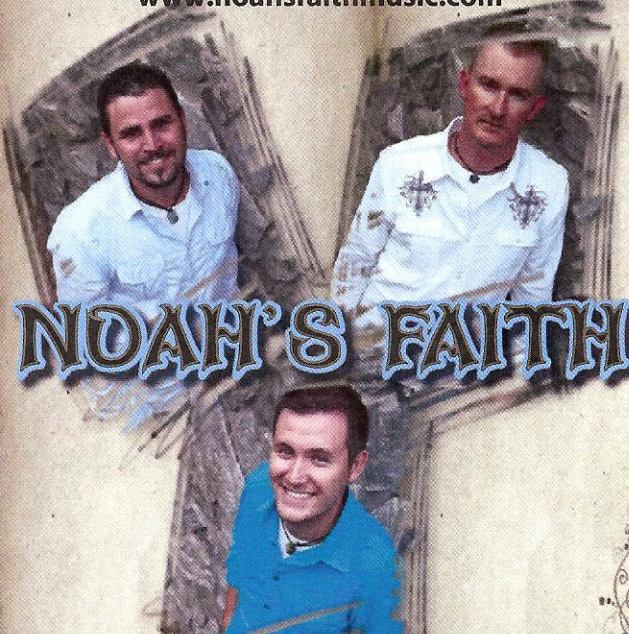
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