

## Parents' perseverance to be recognized



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When Joan and Bob Lockhart were expecting their second child — a baby girl — they envisioned a little ballerina. They imagined their son and daughter growing up together, playing together. But that dream didn't come true.

Katie suffered brain damage at birth. She has cerebral palsy, a seizure disorder, and autism.

Doctors gave her a poor prognosis, but Katie — with the love and support of her parents — has defied the odds.

She learned to walk around ages 4 and 5. At 8 years old, Katie's family moved to Napa where she was in special education but was able to attend some regular classes. Now 33, Katie lives in her own home with a disabled roommate. Support staff stay at the house in shifts.

In September, Joan and Bob Lockhart will be honored as Parents of the Year by ParentsCAN, a Napa agency advocating for the families of children with developmental disabilities.

Joan Lockhart founded ParentsCAN in 2005 and served as the executive director until July of last year. Bob said he believes she deserves all the credit for their upcoming award.

"I'm very excited about Joan getting this," Bob said.

But Joan said that advocating for Katie has been a team effort. "It's an honor for both of us," Joan said. "(Bob) supported me along the way."

The Lockharts have been fighting for their daughter almost her entire life.

Before moving to California, the family lived in Montana. There, Katie was denied entry into a regular preschool. Instead, she was sent to a facility outside of town — a classroom that was filled with significantly disabled children of all ages, Joan said.

For Joan, it was important that Katie be surrounded by children her own age — including children who were typically developing, so they could serve as a model for behavior.

"I believe kids learn from kids," Joan said. "They belong together — at least for some part of the

day.”

When they moved to California, the Lockharts looked specifically for a place where special education students were integrated into regular classrooms. After they chose Napa, Katie attended Snow and El Centro elementary school, Redwood Middle School, and Napa High School.

Today, one of Katie's favorite activities is painting watercolors on paper. Some of her artwork has been featured at the Brown Street Gallery, which was started by Napa Valley Support Services to provide adults with disabilities the opportunity to express themselves through creative and performing arts.

Bob said their home (as well as that of their relatives') is filled with Katie's artwork.

“When we saw these paintings she was doing, all of us cried,” Bob said. “She's a unique, lovely, talented young woman.”

Joan and Bob visit their daughter at least twice a week — often taking her to church or out to dinner.

Katie is non-verbal, so they communicate with her using a battery-powered device they call “her talker.” The device features more than 30 pictures for Katie to choose from. She touches a picture, and the device gives a simple message — such as, “I'm hungry.”

Joan said one of the most important things a parent can do for their child is to get the resources they need as early as possible. The mission of ParentsCAN is to connect parents and caregivers to services.

“Early intervention is so important,” Joan said. “The sooner you can get the services, the better.”

Joan said having a child with significant, life-changing needs can be heartbreaking for parents. It's the beginning of “a whole strange, new world — with its own language and stigmas,” she said.

ParentsCAN assists families in getting past those stigmas, Joan said, and helps them recognize the unique gifts of their child.

“The message is if you have a child that's disabled, it's not the end of the world. You can do something about it,” Bob said. “Just alter your goals a little. And don't lose hope.”