

**Excerpt from the recently completed book by Marilyn A. Martinez “BATTLING
the BASEMENT, The Trials and Triumphs of Marilyn A. Martinez
Part 1: On My Own**

At 6:19 in the morning on June 29, 1995, my parents moved from Albuquerque to Florida.

I was 36 years old. I had been born with brain damage of unknown cause (See Photo #1), and had lived with my family all my life. They had managed my physical therapy, supported me in my public school years, and given me a home as I tried to earn a living as a developmentally disabled young woman.

And all through those years, they had held me so tight in the cocoon of their help that there was no way I could ever grow the wings I needed to fly out into an independent life.

Now, at 6:19 a.m. on June 29, 1995, they were leaving for Florida. I was staying behind in Albuquerque. I was on my own!

When my family first decided to move, Mom had asked if I wanted to go with them. I prayed and prayed about this before I made the big decision to be independent. I knew my mom would be scared for me, but I told her I wanted a chance to try it on my own. She said, Fine. Go ahead and do what you want.

But then the next day, she tried to put me in a 24-hour-supervision home, and we went to several homes owned by a residential provider agency. They showed me a home with three women in it that they said would be perfect for me. The home had a flow chart on the wall telling when to brush your teeth, when to get dressed, and so on. I told my mom, If you think I need this, you don't know me. Then we went to a home where there was a person in a wheelchair, and I stayed over the weekend. After we left, I said to my mom, This is not for me. I told her I needed some activities to do, and she took me to Merrymakers. But I let her know that was not for me either.

At the time, my parents didn't know me, and years later, they still didn't know me. They thought when they left that I needed a 24-hour staff, but I've proved them wrong.

After my parents moved to Florida to be closer to their grandchildren, I stayed in our family home with my brother until he also went to Florida a few months later. Then I lived in the house by myself for a couple of months until it was sold. During this time, the Metro Regional Office of the state Department of Health worked with me to get an emergency allocation letter for the developmental disability waiver.

As soon as my family had left in 1995, I contacted the centralized service team and Jennifer Brown. The agency people who dealt with a situation like mine got together and decided I was in crisis and put me in Category One, on top of the list to be served, since I didn't have any other home besides the one my parents had just left. They also determined what level of care I needed to be eligible for the developmental disability waiver program. And I filled out a freedom of choice form to determine what type of case management I would have. On July 21, I got word from Peggy Blackwell at UNM Case

Management that my allocation letter for a developmental disability waiver had come through, and they would now be able to help me.

After I got the developmental disability allocation in 1996, we met with the residential provider agency again, and I advertised for someone to work with me. Paula (the only person who answered the ad) was a big help, taking me to the bank, grocery shopping, and on errands like that.

However, Paula was not available as much as I needed, so I looked for another assisted living person, and I found Michael Goldman, who was working for Res-Care. He was caring, gentle, good-looking, and had a great sense of humor. He helped me apply for food stamps, and would stop by sometimes to see how I was doing when I worked as activity director at Tender Loving Care, a home for the elderly, reading to the residents there and playing games with them from 10 to 2 three days a week.

I had been waiting a long time for the day to come when I would finally be on my own. When my parents left, they still didn't believe I could do it. On the day before they moved, my mom said, It's not too late to change your mind. But I told her, No, thank you. I'd like to try it on my own first, although I know you want me to go with you. No, we don't, she said. But I knew she didn't mean it. She was so scared for me she could not even admit it.

To tell the truth, my parents were against my living independently from the very beginning. When my brother-in-law's Aunt Edna in New Jersey died, my mother talked to Michael Goldman, my assisted living aide, about my moving into her apartment.

I spoke with my Aunt Mary Kay, my mom's sister in Phoenix, on the phone, and she also thought I should go back to New Jersey where I'd lived as a girl. She thought I needed to watch the kids in the family grow up. They are not going to stay little much longer, she said, telling me, Now you behave; you have no family here. I told her I had my Aunt Donna, but she said that wasn't enough.

Why can't they leave me alone? That's what I thought over and over again. I knew they loved me, but they had to learn that I had my own life. My mother said friends were more important than family to me, even though I told her that wasn't true.

I gave my mother an article on letting go by Betty Pendler, but she missed the whole point about parents' letting their children become independent. She thought I needed a group home. That made me very angry. I didn't need a group home; I needed help in certain areas. Finally, my parents started helping me look for a place of my own.

I tried to give them a book to read: "Parents Who Love Too Much." My father read it and really wanted my mother to read it, too. But she wouldn't. I tried my best to get them to see that I was grown, but they couldn't figure it out. I asked myself: How long will it take!

Whenever my parents were out, my brother would check up on me. They all were afraid I'd burn the house down when I was cooking. But nothing like that ever happened. I was so angry about what my parents were doing to me. Sometimes, they let me do things myself like make salads or mashed potatoes. Or make rice -- only put one cup of rice in a pan, they would say. They treated me like a five-year-old, and wouldn't realize I was grown up.

Something else that shows how my family treated me was a visit by my uncle on July 20, 1995. He bought tickets to the Santa Fe Opera and then asked me, Would you like to go? I told him, I wish you would have consulted me first before you made plans

for me. Just like my parents, I thought, still treating me like a child without realizing I'm grown up. When would they realize, I wondered. When I'm old and walking with a cane? I knew it was hard for them to let go, but I wanted to at least try to live on my own.

During those years, whenever I wanted to be independent, my mom would say, She doesn't love us anymore. When I visited my brother and said to him, It's good to see you, he said, Is it? I said, Yes, it is, and he said, You're just saying that. My mother told me, You have to be closer to the family. I said to her, I love you, but No.

One time in those early years, I received a birthday card from my family that said: "Us miss you. Hi, ho, ha." Oh, really? Sure, right. "Simply loopy with loneliness," the card said. "Hee, hee, hee." And inside it said, "Get back here."

I knew they loved me, but they made me so mad, overprotecting me, not getting off my back and letting me live my own life. Their answer was that they didn't want me to get hurt.

At that time, I was sharing an apartment with a roommate named Randi. We lived together for about six months – until an incident happened that turned out to be one of the worst experiences of my life.

It began when Randi and I were visiting the New Mexico State Fair. We were looking at the Jacuzzi display there, and I put my hand in the water as it swirled around. Would you like one? Randi asked. And I said, We'll see.

That's all. That's all I said.

But she and her brother went back to the fair later and ordered one, and when I came home from work the next day, she told me, Guess what! A Jacuzzi is arriving tomorrow.

What! I said. I couldn't believe it.

But she talked me into lending her the money for the deposit -- which I never saw again even though she promised to pay it back. It certainly shocked my mom and dad when they came to town a short time later (and stopped the payments on the Jacuzzi).

I know I used bad judgment with Randi, but I also learned a great deal from the experience about what can go wrong when you trust other people too much. I ended up selling the Jacuzzi through an ad in the paper, but unfortunately, it took \$3,000 to teach me a valuable lesson: Never lend money to anyone.

After my sad experience with Randi and the Jacuzzi, I moved into the first of several apartments I lived in by myself over the years, until I bought my own home. At each of these apartments, I met some really nice neighbors.

After my parents left for Florida, an assisted living person named Frances from the ARCA came to the house. Once a week, she would take me grocery shopping. After she moved away, a different agency, the Independent Living Resource Center, took over, and Julie Reddenbaugh taught me many things I needed to know, like how to compare prices in the grocery, take the bus, and find an apartment in the newspaper.

Julie taught me how to advertise for a roommate – and also how to cook a new dish: meat loaf. She showed me on the map how to get to my friend's house by bus. We took a No. 11, then transferred to the No. 4 bus, and I walked three blocks to my friend's house. Julie taught me a great deal.

With her help, I found an apartment at 231 Jefferson, near Lomas and Washington. My case manager and job coach and I discussed whether I had enough money to put a deposit down, but no matter, I wanted that home. The bedroom was big,

and there was a yard where I could plant a garden for tulips and other flowers. We agreed that I could afford it, and I got the keys and went through it to see if there was any damage. It felt so good to have my own apartment. Sleeping in my new home on Jefferson – to finally sleep in your own place! -- felt really wonderful.

On June 1, 1997, I moved to the Three Fountains Apartments near Wyoming and Menaul -- this time all by myself, no roommate or anyone. It was a great place to live, a pool downstairs I could exercise in, and within walking distance of everything. And I was learning from the Independent Living Resource Center how to use a cookbook -- making banana cream pie, chicken and rice, fish, steaks, spaghetti. I cooked a ham all by myself. I felt so good that I could cook meals now. I'm always looking for new recipes and wanting to try them.

One day, Michael's wife, Cindy, taught me how to make a pie crust. I had a good time getting my hands dirty. What fun!

On January 1, 1998, I cleaned my first toilet in my whole life. It has to be done sometime, and I never had done it before. First time for everything.

Later that year, I visited my family in New Jersey. Michael went with me to talk with local providers about services that would be available if I decided to move there. One of my family members who wanted me to make the move arranged a meeting with a case manager for the ARC of New Jersey, and they set up a chance for me to look through a house there. It was quiet and small.

At an ARC function, I bumped into an old friend. When I got home afterward, my mom asked if I'd met anyone. My sister, Susan, said, She met her old boyfriend. Did you get his phone number, my mother asked, and when I said No, she said, Isn't that what you wanted? They just don't know me.

When I left there on the plane, I felt so relieved, so emotional that tears were coming down my face. Boy, that was so powerful, I said to myself. I felt like God was answering me on the plane, telling me I didn't have to move to New Jersey!

I have learned and accomplished so much since then. I take the bus, go shopping, and wash and iron my clothes. I also have learned to use a checkbook and balance my account as well as keep a budget.

I have many friends and enjoy being with them. Through the local church I attend, I joined a faith-sharing group (See Photo #23) that still meets regularly. I enjoy the scripture readings and discussions afterward. And the snacks are a great way to end our meetings.

For the past few years, I've also been part of a singles group that I helped to start. We sometimes go to plays and meet at the Catholic Center for fellowship and spiritual evenings. Sometimes, we go out to dinner and to the movies.

My job experiences started in New Jersey in 1986 when I worked in the cafeteria at the Revlon Company. While I was there, I received an award as the "Employee of the Month." The maintenance department had a party for me with a cake, card, and three hats. I appreciated being recognized as doing a good job. They knew I was dedicated.

It had taken a long time, though, for me to get help from a social service agency after my parents left. The first case manager I was assigned to, on August 21, 1995, didn't even know when we met a week and a half later that I was eligible for food stamps. And the job coach who came to my apartment in November did nothing to help me find work. I also was eligible for help from the state Division of Vocational

Rehabilitation, but they never helped me find a job either. I left a message with my phone number with the secretary, but my counselor never called me back.

While I was living on Jefferson Street, I started working at the Rio Rancho Library as a page, putting books back on the shelves according to the Dewey Decimal System. (See Photo #5.) I worked there from February 1993 until May 1997, and I really enjoyed it. Here's how I got hired: One day, I went to the Rio Rancho City Hall and asked if they were hiring for the library, because I like to read books. They said, We don't hire "outsiders" but you're welcome to fill out an application. So I filled it out. Later, when I asked again if they were hiring, they said yes, so I kept calling the library director, Toni Beatty. I asked her, Did you review my application, and she said, Not yet. So the next day, I asked again, and this time, she said yes. I went to an interview with her, and she hired me right away.

Because there was no public transportation from Albuquerque to Rio Rancho where I worked, I would call Sun Van, which took me to Wolfe's Bagels on the West Side, where Michael would pick me up and drive me to the library. After work, Res-Care would come and pick me up at the library and drive me home.

On May 13, 1996, Michael and his boss from Res-Care, Dan Davis, met with me, my mom and dad, and my Aunt Donna before a presentation I was giving at a five-star Albuquerque hotel about how I had developed an independent life. My aunt said I had to be closer to work, but I said I didn't want to live on the West Side. Sometimes, you don't get what you want, she answered. Then Dan said, What if Michael and I can't drive you anymore. Then he said, Let's end this meeting, and I said I had to get ready for my presentation. Sometimes, agencies know what's best for themselves and not for the people they serve, which shouldn't be -- just like sometimes, parents can be too controlling.

Working at the Rio Rancho Library was always fun, especially the people there. They would all talk to me, and some of them even had lunch with me. It was such a good place to be. I didn't want to leave.

But on September 24, 1997, I was transferred to the Los Griegos Library, and in December, my two bosses there called in Michael and Dan and told them that if Marilyn doesn't get a cart done in one hour, we are going to have to let her go. So the next day, I asked if it was true that they were letting me go, and she said, Yes. Why didn't you tell me first, I asked. I could take it. They said, Oh I'm sorry. And I said, You should have consulted me first. I was so upset and angry. They were discriminating against me because I could not go fast enough.

I was volunteering at this time making bud vases for a florist in Taylor Ranch on the west side of Albuquerque. Michael would pick me up and take me there. One day, when I went in to work, Susan, the owner, told me she had sold all my bud vases, which made me very happy. I really liked working there, and got speedy so I could make one in 10 minutes, but Susan didn't think I was fast enough, so I quit going.

Then on the 29th, I called a DVR counselor because I got sick and tired of waiting for a letter to come in the mail. They never found a job for me, and I decided I'd close my case file and stop bothering with them. (Even since then, all they've been able to do is find janitor jobs for me. They got funded to help me find work, but they didn't.) So I went home to make meat loaf, and it turned out pretty good. Then I made banana muffins, baked ham, chicken and rice, chicken stuff, and fish sticks. I was so frustrated I

just wanted to cook all day. Sharon, my case manager, said, You really like to cook, and I said, Yes.

Once I remember my mom and uncle talking, and my mom said to me, Why don't you become a nun? They get free room and board. I said, No, I would like to get married. And she said, Not everyone gets married. She said she'd like me to date someone just like me. When I heard that, I was so offended. She thinks she has no disability. She's wrong. Everyone has a disability; it's just that some are more visible than others. If we were all born the same, it sure would be a dull world. Each person is unique in one way or another.

I know that when my mom and my uncle said what they did, they meant well. They just didn't want me to get hurt. But every time one of my friends would bring me home, my family would say, You should have called us and we would have come and picked you up.

In 1997, my mother was going to visit me in August, but I uninvited her in June. She had said to me, You're not strong enough to have a baby. I told her, Maybe I will, maybe I won't, but you shouldn't have said that. Sometimes, mothers say very hurtful things to their daughters.

That was when I was dating a guy named Robert. But he was too aggressive for me. Because I was moving, I asked him to help me unpack some boxes, but he wouldn't. All he wanted was sex; he didn't want friendship. So I dumped him.

Then on July 13, Michael fixed me up with a guy named James. We went to Bennigan's, then miniature golf. But he didn't behave himself either.

We went on a few more dates, but he did not act the way he should. One night, eating at Souper Salad with friends, James and I had a booth to ourselves, and I told him how I'd felt when we went to a Randy Travis concert together. I didn't feel like it was a date because he walked ahead of me. And he said he was sorry. When we talk on the phone, I told him, You say you just want to be friends, but you act like you want to be boyfriend and girlfriend. You hold my hand and kiss me. Friends hold hands, but they don't kiss. He said, But I'm attracted to you. I knew, though, that we were not right for each other, and soon we decided it wouldn't work out.

When my parents lived in Albuquerque, they always asked a billion questions about where I'd been and who was there. They were shocked when a guy called and asked me out. I went on a hike one summer with a very good friend of mine, and my mother said after I got home that he could have gone higher or he could have gone on a different trail if he wasn't with me. I said I knew, but he wanted to stay by my side all the time. She seemed so surprised that a guy wanted to stay by me. I think my parents just didn't want me to have friends.

They didn't think I could cook, shop, iron, budget, or balance a checkbook. They pictured me as a little girl, and never realized I was grown up. Whenever guys would call me, my mother would answer the phone and whisper to me, It's a guy for you. Back when I lived with my mother, she didn't want me to get involved with a guy.

One Friday night, I went to Merrymakers. When I entered the room, a guy wanted to kiss me. I wouldn't let him. He had bad breath. I walked right out. My mom asked, Did he kiss you? I said yes. I was so scared. I stopped going there. That's not for me.

When I told my aunt I was going to the State Fair, she said, How many of you are going, and I said, Just James. And she just said, Oh.

My family didn't want me to date. They still pictured me as a little girl. That's why I couldn't tell them if I was going out with a guy. If I decided to marry, they'd fight. They thought a person who was disabled didn't know anything about marriage. For example, I went to a function in New Jersey, and when I came home, my mother asked, Did you meet anybody? My sister said, Bob Barnes. She asked me, Did you get his phone number? I said, No. She asked, Isn't that what you wanted? And my mom said, See, she doesn't want to get married.

On October 18, I was invited to Elaine and Ron's wedding. When I was sitting outside by myself, one of my friends named Earl said, Sit by us. At first, I said, I don't want to intrude. But he said, No, you won't. So I did. At the time, I was still angry with him because earlier, he'd kept calling me and leading me on, but he wanted me to dance with him most of the evening. After the reception, Earl and I went to Elaine's house to drop off the gifts, and we stayed for a while, and he stood next to me and close.

At Elaine's bridal shower, tears had started to run from my eyes after a few minutes because I wasn't getting married. Maybe I'll be married next, I thought. I sure hope so. It would make me very happy to get married. My mother wanted me to date a person just like me. What is that supposed to mean? I wouldn't even tell my family I was dating anyone. For instance, my sister showed my mother an e-mail from Monty (who has since become the most important man to me), and my mom said, Who's this Monty? Is he a friend or someone special? And I said, He's just a friend, and she said, Good. The truth is that she didn't want me to get married at all. If she ever found out I was seeing someone or I told her I was getting married, she would fight. I know her better than she knows herself.

That summer, Monty, the man I was dating, gave me a rose for my birthday. It was really thoughtful of him. No guy ever gave me a rose before. It touched my heart. He and I have stayed close all through the years since then. Knowing someone like him is such a change from the kind of dating experiences I'd had before.

When I was living with my parents, there were quite a few guys interested in me. One of them named Chris would call on Sundays and ask me to go for a drive. So I asked my parents if I could, and my father said OK. After a while, Chris would say, I think your father is a little suspicious of me.

After Chris, there was a guy named Bart, who I introduced to a woman named Laurie. As soon as they met, they hit it off real well. They were seeing each other almost every day, and she was going to be part of his family. But she died unexpectedly. Afterward, he would come over to my house. He used to play the wedding march in the car when we went for a drive.

I invited him over for dinner, just to be a friend. He talked to me outside and said, We're not boyfriend and girlfriend. And I said, I really thought you liked me; you played a tape in the car that meant you really liked me. And he said, What tape? I told him the tune and said, You're leading me on. He said he was sorry he was leading me on, and he didn't even stay for dinner. He left in a hurry, and I cried to my mom, and she said, See, you wanted him for a boyfriend.

Another boy named Earl called and asked me on a date. We went to Summerfest. We started holding hands, and after he took me home, he kissed me on the cheek and came in to meet Susan, my sister. After a while, he would lead me on, and even said, I

will “try” not to lead you on. But he did anyway. I was so angry. I was trying to be nice to him, and he did that to me. How dare he do that! Boy, was I really angry with him!

So often, men look at the disability, not the person. Earl was a jerk. He led me on. How could he? He was just selfish and thought of nobody but himself. After he bought a house and closed on it, he said, It’s my house, nobody else’s. That meant to me he wasn’t going to share it with anyone. He’s 47, I thought, single, never been married. No wonder he has a problem. And I’d thought he was a nice guy, but he turned out to be a jerk.

Then I met Monty at the Loma Linda Community Center. For our first date, June 5, 1999, we went to a rhythm and blues place on Central Avenue. I got to meet his mom. She thought I was neat. One day, I invited him up to the pool at my apartment house to swim, and he said I was gorgeous, and I said he was handsome, and after that, we kissed. We were attracted to each other, and we’ve been seeing each other ever since. (See Photo #24.)

The community center’s social club was a place where a lot of us would meet to do arts and crafts, celebrate birthdays, and put on plays. One of them was “Grease,” in which I played Sandy, and I also was Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz,” and sang, “Over the Rainbow.”

Monty and I would love to get married now. This is where our feelings have taken us. But the cost would be too great – a fact that both angers and frustrates us. The reality is that the legal penalties would cut into the small amount of money we receive and make living together simply impossible. So all we can do is fight to end this discrimination, so we can be husband and wife like any other couple in the country who care for each other as much as we do.

While my parents were still living in Albuquerque, I signed up for a program called Partners in Policymaking which helped me believe I could live on my own and become an advocate for people with developmental disabilities. (See Photo #6.) It was a great program. I did it from October 1993 to June 1994. You would start Friday afternoon, go all day Saturday, and end Sunday at 3 in the afternoon. It provided 128 hours of state-of-the-art training about issues concerning people with developmental disabilities and how to become an effective advocate by influencing public officials. It also taught me how to let go of my parents. On the very first day I went, my father said to me, Now you behave.

On September 26, I gave a speech to the Developmental Disability Planning Council on managed care from the point of view of a person with a disability, and I was very excited to do it. There was a big crowd, quite a few people who wanted to learn about managed care. It came out so smooth I couldn’t believe it. (See Photo #7.)

One of the things that has helped me a lot in living independently has been being able to get around town by myself using the Albuquerque bus system. Michael was the one who taught me how to do this. The first time, he and I took the Wyoming Boulevard bus to Wal-Mart. One day, it was raining when I needed to go to the doctor’s, and Michael asked if I wanted a ride. But I said no. I was determined to get there myself. Sometimes as I took the city buses, the drivers were particularly helpful to me, (See Photo #20), and when I didn’t know a route, Michael would follow the bus in his car to make sure I got off when I should.

When Michael’s car wasn’t working, I went shopping and to the bank myself. One day, it was raining so hard that I got soaked, but if you want to be independent, you

have to walk sometimes no matter what the weather. I think it was time to do things myself without Michael.

Sometimes, getting from one place to another by bus could really be complicated. Going to my job at the Los Griegos Library, I would take the No. 8 to Fourth and Menaul, then transfer to the No. 10 bus. After work, I took the No. 10 to Fourth and Tijeras, then the 90 West Side express to meet my singles group. If it weren't for Michael and the things he taught me, I wouldn't be as successful as I am now.

Michael was the first of many service providers I have had over the years, and he was great. I really didn't want him to leave. But there have been some pretty bad ones, too.

One of them bleached all my clothes and made them pink, and even threw things away without asking me. Another wouldn't even enter my apartment. Why was he considered an assisted living person, I asked myself, if he wouldn't come into the apartment? I never worked with a woman before, he said, as if that was an explanation. Plus he thought I should fix a toilet. And learn to use a fire extinguisher.

I had another person who wanted to reorganize my apartment and went through my drawers without permission, which is totally wrong, and ended up making me cry. Some of the people who were supposed to help me didn't have enough training or household skills, and just played with their cell phones and twirled them around. That wasn't helping anyone.

Some providers don't even check with a person first to find out what the best time to work with them is, and others take control, which I can't stand. And when they see a person who is "high functioning," they don't want to work with you anymore, because they've got to involve that person in making decisions rather than just doing everything for her, which is easier.

I have known providers who didn't care that I needed a ride to my television show because they had tickets to the circus, and they said I could get there without them, which made me so angry because the buses weren't running. When will they learn?

The whole thing is Money!!! Money!!! Money!!! Some of these agencies are just in it for the money. They don't care about the person; all they care about is the money. Money makes the world go round. Some agencies take advantage of you, such as by ordering more expensive things than you need – paid for with your money – without even consulting you.

What happened to self-determination? Some provider agencies work with other conservers and ignore people with disabilities who are high-functioning.

Too often, these people have been concerned only about times that worked for them. I've had scheduled appointments in my calendar that the provider showed up 20 minutes late for, and then, when I told them they were late, they said, No, I'm not. I clock in when I pick up the company car. But I'm the one who missed appointments because they were late.

Once, my case manager and I specifically made the six-month review appointment for my Individual Support Plan (ISP) a week in advance. Then, in a typical event that happens much too often, the case manager called at 5:18 p.m. the day before my 11:30 appointment to say that the service provider (an employee of the case management agency working with me who directed the support staff) couldn't make the

meeting but could be there 9:30 a.m. I called my occupational therapist, but it was too late for her and others who also needed to be at the meeting to reschedule to 9:30.

Finally, we all worked something out and got together at 11 o'clock. When the meeting began, I told them what had happened. I said my case manager and I specifically had it down for Wednesday, February 22, at 11:30 a.m. -- until the case manager called at 5:18 p.m. the day before. Then, she blamed me for the change. I told them how angry I was that they did not respect me. The program manager said, We respect you, but you changed dates on us. That was not true! I had not changed the dates, and I told them so. Some program managers can be so defensive.

And some providers think you can do everything for yourself, so they can do things like the circus and other activities on a Friday evening, even though that's when my TV show is, and then they say, If we could get you there, can you get a ride home? I was so angry that they had not put my need for a ride to and from the TV station in my ISP.

I remember one day in August 1997 when I did something for the first time. Michael took me to Wal-Mart and I tried on my first bra without my mother. It was quite an experience.

On September 1, my mother called, and I told her I was going to Furr's and to the bank myself. She said, What do you do at the bank, and I said, I withdraw and deposit. She said, You know how to use one of those bank cards? Who taught you?

Even though I have a disability, she thought I didn't have a brain. She also said my cousin who is blind was ready to move closer to the family, but not Marilyn. No, I said, maybe someday I'll move back. When? she said. When I have white hair; that's the answer. My Aunt Donna told me, You could be closer to your family. If I was, she said, you could still take the regular bus. You could have your own apartment. Your parents don't want you to live with them. But they kept driving me away. I was so angry with my whole family.

Another time, my bank statement came, and it showed \$24.22 in my account, but my records showed \$24.72. I caught the mistake and went to the bank to report it. I think Michael was impressed. Then I picked up my dry cleaning, and it cost \$17, so I told him I'd like to compare-shop. We went to another place on Academy Boulevard that cost only \$7. Then on October 12, my mom called. After I told her about these good things I'd done, she said, You don't have to prove anything to us anymore. They always underestimate me! They don't think I can do anything for myself! They don't look at my abilities. They look at my disability. People need to focus on the abilities and ignore the disability.

It took a long time, but I think my parents finally started realizing that a disabled person could do things and live on her own. When my mom sent me a check that she wanted me to use to visit my brother and sister-in-law and their two kids in Texas, I told her, Mom, I can't go everywhere you'd like me to go. It just doesn't work that way. And after I said that, she said, I don't want to push you. And I said to myself, She is finally realizing and letting go.