

# Caring for Sandy

Story by APRIL JOHNSTON ■ Photos by DAVID SMITH

**O**n the night before the world changed, they played hopscotch.

Three girls tossing stones and dancing between chalk lines — right foot, left foot, both feet — the youngest one, Sandy, stubbornly trying to keep up with the older two.

It was 1985. Sandy was 7.

She had thick, dark hair and bangs that cut straight across her forehead, like a ruler. She loved the Care Bears. She wore a jacket like the one Michael Jackson wore in "Thriller." She had more boyfriends in first grade than most

girls have in their whole lives.

Her father had just taken the training wheels off her bicycle and built a bridge over the nearby creek so she could ride to her grandparents' house after school.

Sometimes she and her older sister, Tracy, played hide-and-seek in their grandfather's garden, weaving paths between the cornstalks.

She wanted to do everything Tracy, at 12, was allowed to do. She wanted to listen to Bon Jovi and sleep over at their cousin Charlotte's house in the city.

One night in February, her parents relented. Sandy could go to her first sleepover. They drove the girls from Linden to Fayetteville, dropped them off at Charlotte's and reluctantly waved goodbye.

The next day, a nurse would call from Womack Army Community Hospital to tell them their girls had been in an accident and that the little one might not make it.

And a cage would fall down around their lives, trapping love, despair and the shards of broken dreams inside with them.

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On the  
**Web**

■ 'Now I lay me down to sleep ...,' Linda Driggers prays for her daughter. For David Smith's video report on a family's devotion — and the accompanying frustrations — visit [fayobserver.com](http://fayobserver.com).

**MORE PHOTOS**

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# Driggers: Caregiving takes

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Jerry Driggers pops his thumb up between his index and middle fingers and teasingly waves it in front of his daughter's face.

"I got your nose Sandy," he tells her.

Her narrowed eyes trail his fist, searching for what's locked inside. She purses her lips, squeezes the stuffed moose trapped in her arm hard against her Tweety Bird pajamas. But her father's hand won't stop dancing long enough for her to get a good peek.

"Daddy's got your nose," Jerry calls again. "Do you want it back?"

Her face scrunches into folds and slits. She's getting frustrated. She can't tell him so, but Jerry knows she's saying, "Daddy, stop!"

"OK," Jerry agrees. "I'll give it back."

He waves his hand over her face like a magician, and though her nose has been there all along, something about her face changes. The folds and slits disappear. Her mouth turns and opens and releases an eardrum-rattling noise, something between a laugh and a holler.

Jerry grins. This is his favorite Sandy. His little girl.

Only Sandy isn't so little anymore. She weighs 100 pounds now. Her last birthday was a milestone.

She turned 30.

But she is trapped inside a body that won't obey her. Her wrists and her ankles twist at sharp angles. A handkerchief tied at her neck catches the spittle her throat won't let her swallow. A tube in her stomach feeds her. Pillows stuffed between her body and her wheelchair steady her.

It's hard to say how much she understands, how much she remembers, because she can't talk, beyond the occasional, "Ma."

But she can react.

And when her mother, Linda, tells the story of that day on the river, the day of the accident, her face shows that her insides are twisting, that her heart is pounding.

So Linda takes the few visitors she gets anymore out to the picnic table when she needs to relive it. It used to be she couldn't tell the story at all. She'd cry so hard she couldn't speak.

Now, she brushes pine needles from a plastic chair

and takes a deep breath to calm herself.

"I'm sorry," she says, apologizing in advance for the tears she knows are coming. "Some days I look at Sandy, and it breaks my heart."

She looks through the pine trees, across the yard, to the driveway next door, where her young niece and nephew play basketball in the waning daylight.

"We had a lot of dreams for our kids," she says. "That day, they were gone."

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The morning after the sleepover, Charlotte's mother, Betty, called to ask if she could take the girls to the park.

Linda and Jerry hesitated. Their church homecoming started that afternoon. They were taking a covered dish and couldn't be late.

"Have them home by 3," Jerry told her, "and don't let those young 'uns get toward that river."

He had been teaching the girls to swim in a section of the Upper Little River where the water lay still like glass, his arms keeping them afloat. Tracy could dog paddle her way back to shore, but Sandy still sank when he let her go.

# s a toll on parents

Neither one was ready to swim alone.

But Betty's boyfriend, John Prudden, didn't know that when he dropped the wooden fishing boat into the Upper Little River at Vass Road and helped Charlotte, Tracy and Sandy climb inside.

The foursome planned to paddle down to the bridge at N.C. 87, where Betty would meet them with her car.

No one wore a life preserver. Maybe because they didn't know two were tucked beneath the seats. Maybe because Prudden didn't realize a spillway split the water between their launch and their destination.

It wasn't long before he spotted it, a rush of white water waiting to suck them over to the other side.

Later, after the accident was over and before Prudden left the area in a cloud of pain and guilt, he told police how the unfathomable happened:

He ordered the girls to head for shore, their paddles frantically slicing and splashing through the water.

When they were close enough, Prudden grabbed a low-hanging branch and held

tight. But the current soon ripped them away, turned the boat sideways and tossed them over the spillway, into the whirling water 3 feet below.

For a while, the four managed to hang onto the overturned boat and keep their bobbing heads above water.

But then Sandy panicked. And then Charlotte did. And then Tracy.

One by one, they lost their grip and slipped away.

Prudden grabbed who he could and fought for shore.

Tracy reached land scared but safe. The shock of it all beat most of her memories away, but she can still recall the children who stared down on them from the hillside above and the way Prudden raced toward them with orders to call 911.

Because Sandy wasn't breathing.

And the last time anyone saw Charlotte, she was floating away on her back.

Army divers wouldn't find her body until the next day, 200 yards from where the boat capsized, covered in a layer of river silt.

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"Are you ready, Miss Prissy?"

The enema that purges Sandy's colon is finally over. It's time for her bath.

Linda slips her arms under her daughter's warped legs. Jenny Huebner, the nurse who helps Linda for a few hours each day, grabs under Sandy's arms.

"One, two, three," Linda counts.

They heave Sandy into the air, away from her hospital bed, out of her diaper, through the living room and into Linda's bedroom.

They lay her on the comforter for a moment, to recover, before they maneuver her stiff body through the narrow bathroom door and into a chair in the tub.

It's exhausting. But there's no better way.

Sandy's wheelchair won't fit through the door. The manual lift Linda and Jerry once used was harder on the body than carrying her.

They've longed for a handicapped bathroom for years, but they don't have the money to build one. Once, at Tracy's urging, a company offered to build it for free. A contractor even came out to the mobile home. But they haven't heard anything about that in a year.

Jerry's body is beaten by the routine. His arteries have more stents than Linda can

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## Driggers

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count. His bones and muscles and joints are tired.

When he was younger, he could hoist Sandy's 100 pounds without a wince. Now, his back aches so much that some days he has to sit crooked in his chair to take the pressure off. Other days it hurts no matter how he sits.

But he won't stop carrying her, even when walking the length of their mobile home feels like walking a mile.

Linda won't stop bathing her, even when Sandy's limbs stubbornly contract and freeze, making it difficult to get her into the tub and a task to wash where she needs it.

People ask them how they do this. They don't have a good answer. They just do.

Partly, Linda's youngest sister, Lisa Connell, suspects, it's guilt. They feel responsible for the accident, for letting Sandy sleep somewhere other than home.

But mostly, Lisa knows, it's love. Sandy was always their baby, their joy.

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An hour after the accident, the phone rang at the Driggers house. It was the nurse at Womack Army Medical Center, calling to say Tracy and Sandy had been in a boating accident.

"You'll have to come down and identify them," she said.

Jerry and Linda climbed into their truck and raced to the hospital. Linda was sure Jerry was going to have a heart attack. Jerry was sure Linda was in shock.

They found Tracy in the emergency room. Her legs were stiff and discolored from dangling in the 45-degree water, but she was otherwise fine.

Sandy was not.

"She's not going to make it," a doctor gently predicted as Jerry and Linda approached her hospital bed.

Linda felt her heart plummet to her feet.

"That's my baby," she cried. "Lord, don't take my baby."

Sandy was still, her body wet and blue. Her eyes closed. Mud streaked her dark hair. An Army helicopter was waiting to fly her to N.C. Memorial Hospital in Chapel Hill, where she would remain in a coma for months.

Linda spent those months sitting next to Sandy's bed in the pediatric ICU, sleeping on a couch in the hospital waiting room, smoking the cigarettes Jerry bought her at the gift shop — she'd quit for an entire year before the accident, started again the day after. Doctors told her to go home, to get rest. But Linda stayed.

When Sandy finally did wake, a nurse pulled Jerry and Linda aside. Her brain had been deprived of oxygen for too long; her coma had

compounded the problem.

"Put her in a home. Get on with your life," the nurse advised them.

Jerry felt as if the accident happened all over again. How could they tell him to send what was left of the daughter he knew away? He couldn't do that.

But he said nothing.

Linda said it for him.

"You're talking about my daughter. I love her and I'm not going to put her someplace like that."

■ ■ ■

Linda unfolds a piece of white paper and begins to read from it, aloud.

*I know our children's disabilities are very different, but I believe we probably feel a lot of the same emotions. Frustration, anger, sadness, hopelessness, guilt, the list goes on and on.*

It's from a woman in New York whose son is deaf, epileptic and mentally retarded. She found the MySpace page Tracy made for Sandy and felt oddly and immediately connected to Linda, a stranger.

Tracy eventually offered the woman her mother's address, desperate for Linda to make a connection beyond the walls of the family's double-wide.

*So I thought if maybe you'd like to write to each other, or maybe even a*

*phone call every now and then, maybe we could help each other. At least then you have the comfort of knowing there's someone out there who knows what you're going through and is thinking about you and praying for you.*

It's been a month. Linda still hasn't written back. No amount of Tracy's scolding or Lisa's prodding has made a difference.

It's not that the letter didn't touch her. It was strangely liberating to know there was someone who felt trapped in the same prison of emotions and responsibilities. Comforting to know she wasn't there alone.

But she can't find the energy, or the words, to write back. So she retreats, tucks the letter in among the bills on the kitchen table.

It's easier to forget.

Nearly all the photographs taken of Sandy before the accident are packed away. Only two — a studio portrait in a tiny round frame and a photo of her sitting on Santa's lap — remain.

In them she's got a tight smile and stocky legs. There's trouble in her eyes. It's not hard to believe that Sandy once popped a neighbor boy in the nose when he wouldn't stop picking on her, that she left for school tossing the matted hair that she refused to let her mother comb.

Linda fastens and unfastens Sandy's hair all the time now, marveling at how it hasn't changed — it's still long and dark and thick — wondering why everything else has.

When people die, families don't forget, they don't stop hurting, but they find ways to move on. Linda and Jerry can't. They have to look at Sandy, knowing what she was and what she is, every day.

"There are things that are worse than death," sister Lisa says.

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In the fall of 1986, nearly two years after the accident, the West Area Fire Department bought Sandy a blue van with a mechanical wheelchair lift.

The family used it to take her to school and to doctor appointments. To the mall and to the movies.

Those were the good years. Before the world began to shrink.

Linda's closest confidant and biggest help, her mother, died. And then soon after, her father. Friends stopped dropping by. Tracy left, joined the Air Force in honor of her sister and her cousin, and traveled the world with a promise to see all they never would.

Sandy aged out of school. The old van got finicky, making it difficult to go out. The doctors insisted Sandy's feeding tube be attached to her round-the-clock, making it

even harder.

These days, most days, it's Linda and Sandy alone in the double-wide, waiting for Jerry to get home from work.

Sometimes, even though as a Christian she thinks she's not supposed to, Linda asks why. She wonders if this is punishment, if this is hell.

Will she always start her days at 3 p.m., with a Mason jar of sweet tea and a cigarette, and end them in the morning before the sun rises, waiting for Sandy to fall asleep?

"There has to be a better way," Linda says, "a better life for Sandy."

She dreams about adult daycare and a handicapped-accessible house. Neither she nor Jerry wants to think about sending Sandy away. Leaving them would destroy her, they're sure.

So Linda settles into the pink recliner next to Sandy, lets her head fall back against its cushions, stares at her daughter with love in her eyes.

The television is blank, Sandy is quiet. All is silent except for the sound of the living room's six ticking clocks, endlessly counting up the moments for a mother and daughter who have been hopelessly stuck in a single one for 23 years.

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