

RAISING AN **AUTISTIC** CHILD:

Our Pains and Joys

By Elnora M. Guzman

The inspiring promise from God is the gift of his Son who came and suffered, that we might have life in full. It's life that is beautiful, full of joys and excitement. We marvel and boast of our successful accomplishments. But when life becomes tainted by the storms, hardships, and difficulties, we become almost frustrated. Then our faith weakens; we withdraw, give up and question God, "Why me? Why do I have to suffer this way? What have I done? Where did I fail?" In tears, this was the first reaction when my precious eldest daughter was diagnosed with autism and moderate mental retardation. I felt like my whole world had crumbled and I asked myself where exactly I went wrong. What had I done?

Alora was our first child. When I was pregnant, I did my best to eat healthy. For 9 months, my husband and I were excited and looked forward to her arrival. I was 2 weeks delayed and finally delivered her by

Caesarian section. She was a healthy 7 pound-baby and we took her home after 3 days. We showered her with love, care and affection. She received the Sacrament of Baptism at 4 months old and was a happy, healthy child with normal development. She loved to smile and pose for the camera. At 6 months old, she enjoyed playing hide and seek with her dad in her walker. She began to utter words at 10 months and started to walk by 14 months. Alora loved playing with puzzles and toys. Of course, we regularly took her to the pediatrician for her required visits and immunizations.

When she turned two years old, we noticed she stopped talking, did not make eye contact anymore and was running around in all directions. She could not sit still and was not behaving like other two year-old children. We were concerned about what was happening to her because it didn't seem normal. After referrals to different programs and social workers,

arrangements were made for Alora to meet with a panel of professionals which consisted of a special educator, a pediatrician, a speech therapist and others to help diagnose her. She was given toys to play with and instructions on what to do. Two weeks later, the devastating report arrived in the mail. Crying, I read the results. My child was diagnosed with Autism syndrome and mental retardation. I felt as if my world was completely crashing. It was too painful to accept that my first child, my beloved daughter, suffered from this. What about her future? How exactly could we explain this? We had high hopes and expectations for her but then we felt like we had failed. But I did not lose hope. Her social worker gave us a lot of support and assured us that we had not done anything wrong. She referred us to Child Find who recommended that we enroll Alora in a special education school.

Alora received a lot of beneficial services

and assistance. She was still non-verbal and could not communicate. She had lots of issues in school. One day she bit one of her classmates on the arm. Another time she poked her teacher's arm with a pencil. At home she would break a lot of things, throw porcelain plates, mugs and glasses. One day she played with some of my 18 Karat jewelry, threw it away and we could not locate them. She had started to talk with the help she received at school but when we tried to ask her about the jewelry, she would

simply repeat our question. She used to escape outside our home without our knowledge and we called 911 many times to locate her. One time she was found on our neighbor's deck. She would walk down our street and wander into the next community. We had to install a door alarm that would sound when it was opened. She used to cry and scream in the middle of the night and randomly during the day. She would bite herself and bang her head on the wall. She used to bite and push me.

When we were invited to parties at friends' homes, she used to break and damage their property, open their refrigerator and go up to their bedrooms. As a result, our friends stopped inviting us. She used to roll on the floor and rip her clothes off when upset. When we went to church, she made a lot of noise and could not keep still. One time while attending mass, Alora took off her shoes and threw them at the altar, narrowly missing the priest. Another time while receiving Holy Communion, she hit

Alora





Alora advanced so well that she was promoted to move to a regular school with special education. She was transferred to a local high school which was closer to our new home. Unfortunately, she became overwhelmed with the boisterous atmosphere. One day I got a report from her teacher that she hit a student with a broom. Another time she poked one of the student teachers with a pencil. Then another time she pulled the fire alarm and the whole school had to evacuate. She got suspended many times by the assistant principal and had to undergo a behavioral modification

states that has a program called Autism Waiver and Alora qualified for it. Another program called The Whole Self Center also provided services to her. They came to our home and trained Alora to take a bath independently, do household chores, such as washing dishes and doing laundry, and helped her with math and reading. Now she can do a 500 piece puzzle and sings beautifully. She no longer rips her clothes off but knows how to mend and sew them. She even knows how to do embroidery. She is currently attending a day program for adults with disabilities. A van picks her up in the morning and drops her back home in the afternoon. Alora dresses herself, prepares her own breakfast, packs her lunch independently, then waits for the van to pick her up. They do various activities and community service projects. The government offers a lot of services to individuals with inborn disabilities. Now, she helps me a lot at home in doing household chores and is so clean and organized. She is sociable and loves to dance. She can memorize all our birthdays and all the dates of our vacations. She has technical skills and is a talented lady who knows how to download music from the

the ciborium and all the hosts fell to the floor. The priest had to scoop up the spilled hosts and use the reserved ones from the tabernacle to distribute to the people. We had a lot of stress in our life from her outbursts and unusual behavior but this did not stop us from going to church. We did not turn away from God. Our strong Catholic faith was deeply rooted in us by our parents from childhood and our Filipino culture helped us to withstand the trials and hardships. It made us even closer to God. Our fervent prayers and deep love of God prevented us from drifting away. God gave us light, hope and rewards. In spite of the difficulties, Alora made progress at school. She received her Sacrament of Confirmation after attending Sunday school with her sisters. During the Christmas program, I suggested to her music teacher to let Alora sing a solo. She sang "Silver and Gold" with piano accompaniment and memorized the whole song with the right tempo. Everyone applauded with tears her performance and accomplishment.

program. A bright spot was that her special education teacher was soft spoken, patient and did an excellent job. Alora liked her very much. Her technician also helped her with her homework, teaching her math, english, grammar and literature. She successfully graduated from high school along with her younger sister.

At the end of the dark tunnel there is a bright light. Maryland is one of the few



computer to her Ipod. Alora turned 26 this past December 28, 2018 and was filled with joy while blowing out her birthday candles. She regularly attends Mass with us and receives Holy Communion. She is so close to her 3 sisters and they are tightly bonded.

Now we realize that Alora is not a burden but a precious gift and a blessing to us from God. We love her and are confident that she will be taken care of. She has three younger sisters who love her and will look after her when my husband and I can no longer attend to her. And above all, God will always be there to love, guide and take care of her until the end of time.

I know that some parents are going through

similar challenges with raising autistic children. Our story is meant to encourage such parents and families. We didn't find it easy to endure Alora's behavioral issues. But she taught us to be patient. We encourage such parents to be patient. Children like Alora understand the language of love and care even though it is hard for them to express. Just be patient, loving, caring and optimistic with your child. There are many available resources provided by the government to help you so you aren't alone. We explored the resources that Maryland provides and it was very helpful. Faith in God is one big piece. The more you believe, the more you garner strength for the difficult times. Yes, it might be discouraging at times, but faith ignites our hidden energy. Always look up

to God since He knows all things. Children like Alora bring special blessings to the family because they help us to express our faith, love, and hope in the most intimate manner. Caring for them demonstrates our real sacrificial love that connects us with Christ's suffering and death on the Cross. Such is the symbol of love for humanity including those physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually challenged. In the words of Saint Paul, we can do all things in Christ who strengthens us.

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