

Kissed by the President

When she was born, people didn't give Debbie Chadwick much of a chance to do anything significant in this world. Why would they? She was born with Down syndrome, a genetic disorder caused by the presence of all or part of an extra 21st chromosome. The condition is characterized by a combination of major and minor differences in body structure.

A doctor even suggested to her mother, Mary, that she consider placing Debbie in an institution. Mary would have none of that. She – not strangers – would raise and love her daughter.

The people who were counting Debbie out were wrong. On Wednesday, February 21, she accomplished what very few individuals in this world could ever do. She received a kiss and hugs from the most powerful man in the world, the President of the United States, George W. Bush. But the nation's commander-in-chief came to face Debbie, her mother and her sister, Barbara, for more than a tender emotional moment. He was there to present Debbie with the President's Volunteer Award, the nation's highest recognition of extraordinary achievement in voluntarism.

President Bush was in Chattanooga for two purposes: (1) to honor Debbie, and (2) to promote his Affordable Health Care initiative in two locations, Erlanger Hospital and a public forum at the Trade and Convention Center.

It was Debbie who stole the show, however, in the televised reports of Bush's visit. In addition to the hug and the kiss from the President, when he handed her the award cradled in an attractive case, she pointed to her cardigan sweater's lapel, indicating she wanted him to personally pin on the award. The Chief Executive complied. It was later learned that this was the first instance in more than 550 award presentations of this kind that the President had ever pinned the award on its recipient.

Debbie, 43, has been a volunteer for 10 years at Life Care Center of Missionary Ridge, where she assists Mae Petty, the activities director, with her programs. She developed two programs for the residents – HATs (Hugs and Touches) to make them feel loved, and SSAP (Silent, Sightless Angel Program), which encourages blind residents to learn to read Braille books and assists the hearing impaired to communicate by sign language. Her communication system has aided the facility in providing targeted, quality care for these residents.

This wasn't her first award. In 2005, Debbie won the Volunteer of the Year award from the Tennessee Health Care Association, and last year, she received the top

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volunteer award from the American Health Care Association meeting in San Antonio, Texas.

As Mae Petty describes her award-winning volunteer: "If residents, or staff, are having problems or stresses, those things go out the door when Debbie comes in."

Or as Debbie's mother puts it: She dispenses joy to all she meets.

Can there be any better assessment of a life well-lived?

--Beecher Hunter