

I'm a combination of circumstances, experiences, and inner workings of the heart and soul.

So this is me.....I am proudly Jewish, I am the single mother of an adult child that has an intellectual disability, I am a people person, although initially shy when I first meet someone, I love animals, especially dogs, I like puzzles, mysteries, and games, and I have an inner strength that has stood me well throughout the years. I am a Southerner, a steel magnolia.

My story starts in Montgomery, AL in 1950; I was the youngest of three children and the only girl born to Conservative Jewish parents. My brothers were 6 and 13 years older than I and, at times, I felt like I was reared as an only child (in the South one rears children, raises cattle). My older brother left for college when I was 5 years old and never came back to live with the family. He made Aliyah to Israel in 1968 and although I loved him dearly, I never really got to have a brother/sister relationship with him. Unfortunately, he passed away in 2015, and that lack of relationship saddens me, but is something I must accept. My younger, older brother still lives in Montgomery, actually lives in the house where I was reared. We don't talk often, but as the gap in age has become less we have become closer.

I had what I believe was a wonderful childhood. I had many friends, mostly Jewish. I grew up in a Conservative Jewish household, not Kosher, but without pork, shellfish, or catfish (also a Southern thing). In those years, there were three synagogues in Montgomery, Reform, Sephardic, and Conservative. Although we were members of the Conservative synagogue, I had friends from all three. I attended Hebrew school, Sunday School, had a Bat Mitzvah, was confirmed, attended Friday night and Saturday morning services, joined a Jewish sorority in college, the whole schmear.

Unfortunately, life was ideal and I wasn't adequately or emotionally prepared for the trials that I would face later in life. I know now that G-d had instilled in me what I needed to manage the future. I've always been a "me do it" person, even as a toddler and I'm so glad I embraced that G-d given strength because I've so needed it.

As a young adult, out of the nest, I moved away from my Jewish upbringing. I felt like I had so much of it "pushed on me" as a child that I was trapped by the things that were required to be Jewish. I couldn't date on Friday nights, I couldn't go to the movies on Saturday mornings, I couldn't join Brownies when all the other girls did because I had to go to Hebrew school; so I guess I just rebelled; did what I wanted to do. Since hindsight is 20/20, I'm pretty sure this was not such a good idea.....and this is the rest of my story.

At a very young age I was married to a man who wasn't Jewish. He took an interest in Judaism, but I believe that converting from Baptist to Judaism would have been a difficult transition and his family probably would have been very, very upset. Unfortunately, we divorced after 5 years. We have a son who is now 47 years old. When he was little, he went to Sunday School at the reform temple and had some exposure to his Jewish religion, but to

this day, he claims the religion of his father. Periodically, I like to remind him that he is Jewish by birth.

I remarried a couple of years after my divorce. We had a son, Adam, and my older son, Edward, lived with us. I must tell you that I intuitively knew from the time I was expecting Adam, there was something “different” with this younger child. Although there was an 8 year gap between pregnancies, I knew this one was not like the first. The pregnancy progressed and my son was born after nine months, he had all his fingers and toes, and the only medical condition we knew about was jaundice. As time passed, he didn't seem as alert as other babies, he would drop his head when sitting up and was diagnosed with weak muscle tone, he developed a crossed eye at 6 months and was diagnosed with an eye condition called 6th nerve palsy, and he was a late walker. He had multiple ear infections from 4 months old and finally had tubes put in his ears. The doctor came out of surgery and said “he can hear now”. I had no idea the child couldn't hear, but it must have been true because that very afternoon after ear surgery, he started babbling, soon started talking, and talks quite a bit to this day!

The four of us moved to Houston for my husband's job. Culture shock! When I saw Houston the very first time, I cried real tears. Where were the trees, where was the green space, and o y vey, the traffic. We bought a home in Kingwood and I commuted to downtown for my job at AT&T. Times were hard for me when I lived in Kingwood, not financially, but emotionally. Adam was officially diagnosed at the Meyer Center with an Intellectual Developmental Disability, back then called Mental Retardation, and he was enrolled in an Humble ISD special ed program at 4 years old. I'll never forget being in McDonalds in Kingwood and one of the children from the daycare Adam attended came up to me and asked me if Adam was retarded; I was stunned and, of course, in denial. My how the adults at that daycare must have talked. My son Edward was a teenager, and he defied my husband one time too many, and without my knowledge, my husband packed him up and sent him to live with his father. To my dying day, I will regret that I did not take action to leave at that time, reasons aside, I feel all I have is excuses to offer. Two years later my son, Edward, was critically injured in an auto accident and basically bled out. It was a miracle and a blessing that a paramedic was visiting the fire station that was called, decided to go on the call, and this visiting paramedic saved my son's life. I was in Texas and let me tell you, there are limited flights from Houston to Montgomery, Alabama. After Edward's accident, my husband was transferred to South Georgia and I was able to transfer to Atlanta, four hours from my spouse and 3 hours from my injured son.

After living in Atlanta for 4 years, my husband, Adam, and I moved back to Houston. Again, my emotional stress prevailed. My son Edward had been married and divorced. Nonsensical arguments between me and my husband occurred frequently. I enrolled Adam in special education classes at Red Elementary. It took a year, but I finally found a Special Olympics team in our area that Adam joined and he is still a member of the same team 27 years later. And this is the period when I finally, in my heart of hearts, realized that my son had a developmental disability that I was going to have to deal with for the rest of our lives. With the help of a wonderful therapist, who I had known since the eighties, I learned that I had to

grieve the idea of a “normal” child, that I had to go down a road that I had never considered, nor had I been reared to understand, and that I had to accept the situation so that I could give my son opportunities for him to live the best life possible given his limited abilities.

Moving forward 5 tumultuous years, my husband and I separated. After a year of drama and major expense, we were divorced. He used to see his son regularly, but slowly, has weaned that down to texting and very infrequent phone calls.

Post-divorce, Adam and I lived in my house near Beth Israel. I didn't know how at the time, but I was able to pay expenses, keep my house and even retire. So Adam and I now had two dogs, were living in our house, Adam had activities that kept him engaged, and I'd started making new friends and had even started going back to religious services, but, so far, only on the high holidays and with Adam in tow. Things were going along fairly smoothly and boom, Hurricane Ike. Thank goodness the house did not sustain damage, but we were without power for 11 days. I had Adam with me the whole time, and made it like a big adventure, he even went to work with me for an entire week before he was able to get back into his routine.

Life again moved along for us. I continued to talk and visit with my son Edward in Alabama, who was remarried. I was feeling more confident, I learned to worry less, and (mostly) accepted the lifetime responsibility of taking care of my son. I went to shul with my friends, out to eat, played Mahjong regularly, and took Adam to his activities, and made friends with the mothers and fathers of other children and adults with disabilities.

All along the way, I was feeling more rooted in my Judaism and wanted to grow that feeling. I liked the temple I was attending, I liked the clergy, and I liked the congregation. So I joined. I didn't feel like just a new member, I felt the community pulling me in. I was finally myself again, part of something I believed in and was born into. I discussed this with my brother, who also joined the temple in his hometown. We half joked about a lot of folks our age who had gone back to their Jewish faith figuring it was because we were getting closer to “the end”.

Then came Hurricane Harvey....and we did sustain major damage to our home. As the house filled with water, I had to figure out how to care for Adam and our two dogs and how to get rescued. I packed important papers, some clothes, our medicines, toilet articles, and got out a life jacket I had in the closet for Adam. I put harnesses on the dogs and got their leashes ready. I had friends calling around trying to get us rescued, I put a sign in the front window. All along the house is filling with more water. I turned down a canoe and an inflatable raft, but when the fishing boat with an outboard motor came along, I knew I had to get us out of there. Adam, two dogs and I climbed aboard with others and left. We were delivered to 610 at Meyerland Plaza. We took a ride with a stranger who somehow got us to the George R. Brown. From there circumstances were looking a little dicey and I heard someone say there were openings at Embassy Suites. Thank goodness for credit cards, we were able to check in there and stayed for a week. My niece from Fort Worth and my son Edward and his wife came from Alabama and they helped kick start me to get the house cleaned out. Edward and his wife decided to take Adam and my dogs back to Alabama with them so I could have the

time and space to get our lives back in order. Notice I say “our” because I must provide a safe and clean environment for Adam. All this time, Adam is a trooper, seems to go with the flow, and only had 1 or 2 meltdowns.

As traumatic as Hurricane Harvey has been, my family, friends and the Jewish community were the ones that gave me hope and put my life back together. Of course, in any situation you have to help yourself if you can; you have to make the calls and fill out the paperwork. Thank you Beth Israel for the emotional support and the funds and gift cards that sustained us. Thank you Jewish Federation and Jewish Family Service for the funds to get temporary housing and for giving us a place to lay our heads and store our clothes, and put our home back in order. As inconvenienced and displaced as we have been and for all the material things we lost, I recognize the blessings. It has certainly shown me what is important in life, and has shown me how something as simple as a neighbor handing out homemade chocolate chip cookies during a disaster helps recovery. I have learned the importance of giving back and pray for success in doing so.

My life has certainly been down a road less traveled, but being part of a Jewish community, my faith in G-d even during tough times, by personal belief that I am blessed with certain characteristics that I've chosen to own, have made this life's journey a learning experience. I am content with my life; I pray to remain living strong and sensitive to those in need, and to remain a steel magnolia.

And my prayer for all of you is Shalom.