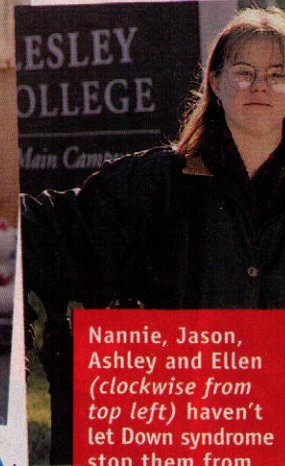


Special Triumphs

Imagine how proud you'd be if, before the age of 23, your child had run for public office, or had a book published to good reviews, or been in demand as a keynote speaker, or received national awards, or appeared on network TV. Now imagine that your child also had Down syndrome.

Increasingly, young people with Down syndrome are achieving great things, by holding down full-time jobs or making the honor roll at school. Yet not so long ago, doctors routinely advised new parents to institutionalize a baby born with Down syndrome: "Go home and forget about her. She will never sit or stand, walk or talk, have a meaningful thought or be a productive citizen. Tell relatives and friends your baby died at birth." Sadly, even today some ill-informed physicians give parents the same advice. But as the following four stories show—and as Nannie Sanchez articulates—"Down syndrome doesn't mean 'I can't.' It just means it takes me a little longer."



Nannie, Jason, Ashley and Ellen (clockwise from top left) haven't let Down syndrome stop them from making their dreams come true.

Down Syndrome Doesn't Mean "I Can't"

Four Success Stories

By Jan Goodwin

NANNIE SANCHEZ, age 24, Albuquerque, New Mexico

When Nannie was in high school, taunts of "retard" from other students, and even from teachers, were common. One classmate made her life hell, frequently sending Nannie home in tears. Last year she spotted him in a fast-food restaurant wiping tables for a living. The irony wasn't lost on her adoptive mother, RoseMarie Sanchez. "Look where you are today, and where he is," she advised.

Where Nannie was, was campaigning for the New Mexico Board of Education—the first time in the United States that a person with Down syndrome had ever run for public office. Like any other candidate, Nannie was intent on winning the hearts and minds of the people—and by all accounts, she was doing a great job. She walked the streets of Albuquerque canvassing, raising campaign funds and giving compelling speeches. Though ultimately she lost to a bilingual special ed teacher almost twice her age, with 18 years of

experience, Nannie won a respectable 38 percent of the vote.

"I lost on that occasion, but I won in many ways," says Nannie. "I've opened the door for people with disabilities who'd like to run for office. I've had experience in organizing a campaign and getting my message—safer schools, better facilities and school-to-work programs—across. I ran because I had concerns about our school system and how people with disabilities are treated. I'll run again next time and, eventually, I'll try for the state legislature. I want people like me to have full inclusion in the community."

Nannie says she learned early that when you're born with Down syndrome, people try to put you in a box. "Forcing you into special ed is easier for the schools, but it's not the best thing for you," says Nannie. Her mom had to sue to get her mainstreamed, and then sue again to get her into college even though Nannie had passed the entrance exam. "When you graduate, you're told there are only three suitable kinds of work for people with Down syndrome: fast food, cleaning up after others, or planting flowers. I think we deserve more choices," says Nannie. ▶▶▶▶▶

Award-winning journalist and author Jan Goodwin is a frequent contributor to FAMILY CIRCLE.

Photos (clockwise from top left): Darren Poore; Dwight Carter; Angela Coppola; Sai DiMarco/Black Star.