

# Living with a handicap – My true story

Translation by Laura Villwock, (2012)

## It`s normal to be different

My name is Carina and I am 26 years old. I have the down-syndrome, which is why I am different from other people. That is to say, I have not 46, but 47 chromosomes. Number 21 is present three times, which is one time more than other people have it. Still, I like to live.

In Germany, there are about 50.000 people living with the down-syndrome. When doctors detect the down-syndrome during a pregnancy, nine out of ten fetuses are aborted. My parent had also been very sad when they heard that I was going to be disabled. Everyone wants perfect children, after all. Only for my brother I was a completely normal little sister with whom you could cuddle and whom you could carry around wherever you went. My parents worried about the future. They had been told that I might never be able to walk and that I most likely will never learn to read, to write or to count. That is why I would be better off in a home.

I was born too early and developed only very slowly. My mother still wanted to keep me. I could only eat with music being played and so my brother always had to play the piano. To build up more muscles, I had to go to physiotherapy and was allowed to go baby-swimming. This is why I learned to sit, to walk and to run like any other child. While my brother had started walking with 8 months, it took me exactly 2 years and a day. My entire family was extremely happy about it.

My mother always treated me like a normal child. She didn't make a difference between me and my brother. To be sure, I needed more help and support, but I was able to learn quite a lot. I was able to go to a normal

Kindergarten and grew and developed not very different from other children. I loved every entertainment, even when the other kids had enough - I wanted to go on.

Because my eyes were often inflamed, I had to visit the eye clinic a lot. There, my sight was also tested. When I didn't react to the doctors, they simply said: "Well, she has the down-syndrome, she doesn't want to!" Only shortly before my first day at school did they notice that I was very long-sighted (6,5 diopter). So I had not been able to see!

Usually children with down-syndrome have to visit a special school. I was lucky and was allowed to visit a normal elementary school. Here, I was able to learn together with the other children. This was really important for me, because I was able to copy what they did. I had the chance to learn the same things as other children and I had much fun and liked to go to school. This is why I also wanted to visit an integrative middle school. This was not easy to organize, because we had to find a school that would ask the government for a special permission to allow me in. First it didn't work and I was sent into a special school for "compulsory admission", which means that they forced me to go there.

But we didn't give up and managed to at least let me repeat the fourth grade. According to the school inspector this is not allowed, since children with down-syndrome cannot accomplish learning anything, but we were lucky. And we also found a middle school that would take me. At first, in English class for example, I was only allowed to sit in the back with a special educator, because people didn't expect me to get along. This was a great mistake, however, because I got along very well.

English was my favorite subject and I was the best of the class and got an "A" on my school report. In the end, I completed my junior high school with a grade of 2,3 which is better than what many of the other children had. I was extremely happy about that. Nobody had believed it possible.

In a special school, you don't even get to learn what other children learn. There is no way for you to prove what you can do, because you are not confronted with the things other children have to learn. I am a true fan of integration and wish it would be possible for all children with or without a disability to be given the same chance and visit a normal school.

## **I am a waitress and I play the piano**

After school it didn't get much easier. I had many different jobs and it took time until I was able to settle somewhere where I was also accepted. Now I work in a Café, I am a waitress and I also play the piano for the guests and am very happy.

My mother always says that if she had known what she knows now when I was born, she would have shed fewer tears and would have had fewer worries. Certainly, I would rather not have the down-syndrome, but I suffer more from the rejection of my fellow men and women than from the one-too-many chromosomes of the number 21. I can still learn, love and live, and I don't feel disabled – but I am sometimes disabled by the people around me.

When you think about it, all people are different. Even identical twins. Men are, and women are, too. There are white people and colored people, Chinese, Indians and many more. Everyone is different and everyone has got something he cannot do. Nobody knows if he will break a leg tomorrow. It is basic law that everyone has the same rights and I think everyone should also be given a chance. Our world would be poorer, if there wouldn't be people with down-syndrome any more.

It is normal to be different. Everybody wants to belong.