
Lifebeat

A SPECIAL BOY - IN A SHORT LIFE, HE TAUGHT HIS FAMILY A LOT

By Mark Patinkin

The Providence Journal

Tuesday, 06/03/2003

One of Matt Siravo's special needs was that he couldn't sit still. It was hard for him to watch his brothers play a whole soccer game, or even a few minutes of one. But church was different.

He would stand in the aisle for the whole service, mesmerized by the music. The family went to Christ The King, near URI. It's where Matt was baptized and where, three weeks ago, he was buried. He died on Mother's Day.

He was five years old.

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When he had his first seizure, his doctors hoped it would be a one-time episode. Then he had a second, and a third, and it was clear Matty had a seizure disorder. It was just after his first birthday.

It was hard to adjust his medication, and even when they did, a simple cold could throw off his system, bringing on more seizures than usual. They did more tests and found Matty had other special needs. He had speech and motor issues, and attention issues, too.

Matt was Richard and Debra Siravo's fourth son. Debra was a high school teacher in Cranston when he was born, and Richard an independent insurance adjuster. They were both in their late 30s and focused on athletics for their three older boys, who are now 14, 12 and 10.

It became clear early on that Matt would be unable to play regular sports. More than once, the parents asked why this had happened to them. They wondered what kind of life Matty would have. It was difficult for them to face having a special needs child after three sons who were progressing so well.

Then, they say, they came to see that God gave them Matty for a reason. The Siravos had built a solid, supportive family. What better place for such a child?

Early on, Matty taught his parents something valuable. He couldn't throw a ball, or speak normally, or even walk unassisted, but he seemed always happy. Richard and Debra knew few children who smiled as much.

Debra was a full-time Spanish teacher in Cranston, but traded it for a part-time teaching job at South Kingstown High so she could be more available to Matty. She wanted to be nearby in case he had a seizure. Richard made his own schedule more flexible, too. It meant a financial sacrifice for the family. Richard and Debra felt it didn't matter. Other things had become more important. Matty taught them that, as well.

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By age 3, he was going to school at a special needs classroom at the Hazard Pre-School in South Kingstown. The teachers would often come in early to work with Matty individually. The goal was for him to say an entire simple sentence, like "I see a school bus," but his brain had trouble processing language. If you put up a picture, he'd simply say "schoolbus." Maybe next month, his father would think.

A second goal was for him to walk down a few steps without assistance. Two days a week, he had physical therapy at school to work on such things. The therapists would

hold onto both his hands to help him down the steps. Maybe next year, his dad told himself.

Matty was easily fatigued - that was another of his special needs. By noon, he didn't have much left. Despite that, he had a special animation to him. He'd walk around the school and say "hi" to everyone. He did the same to strangers at the supermarket. Richard and Debra nicknamed him "The Mayor." Matty brightened whoever he approached, and not just because he was so friendly. He seemed to have an aura about him.

His parents, who had been used to sons who made all-star athletic teams, came to look upon Matty's more modest goals with just as much excitement.

Perhaps his son would never learn to ride a bike, but it was huge moment for Richard when Matty began this year to say four-word sentences. And cut a straight line with a scissors.

When Matty began walking down a few steps unassisted, it was like seeing him hit a home run. "You did it, buddy," Richard kept telling his son. It was a proud moment for him as a father.

And then there was church.

On Sunday mornings, Matty would wake up saying "church," and "priest." Richard would look at his wife and say, "Well, I guess we're going." That didn't make the three older boys very happy. They were due in Sunday school at 10:30, but now had to go to the 9:15 service first.

It was the one place where Matty was different. In other areas, he could not remain focused for more than five or ten minutes, but in church, he was that way for an hour. During services, he would stand in the aisle transfixed, often motionless. Afterward, people would come up to Richard and Debra and say that Matty seemed a truly spiritual child.

Sometimes, when the choir would sing, Matty would raise both arms. The priest told Richard and Debra it was a gesture that means one is giving oneself completely to God.

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On May 9, at the recommendation of doctors, Matty underwent brain surgery at Boston Children's Hospital in the hope of reducing his seizures. The surgery seemed to go well. But while in recovery, Matty had a seizure that lasted over an hour. It caused his heart to stop. The doctors stabilized him, and things looked hopeful. But scans showed there had been brain damage, and his system eventually failed..

Matty's family was at his side when he died.

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There was one other time, outside church, that made his parents wonder whether there was something spiritual about Matthew Siravo.

Debra remembers being in his bedroom, putting clothes in his bureau, when he would suddenly say "hi" as if someone was nearby. She'd ask who he was talking to, but he'd just smile.

Since losing Matty, the family has talked often about such moments. And about the way he was in church.

And that's the final thing Matty taught his parents. He taught them about spirituality. Richard has come to believe that a family can have a guardian angel.

It's almost an irony, he says, that a child who had so many special needs is now the one who's looking after them.

