

Family Of Easter Seal Ambassador Strives To Turn Handicap Into Positive Experience

LOU ANN GOOD

Lancaster Farming Staff
MANHEIM (Lancaster Co.) — Spinal bifida. The diagnosis sent an icy chill of dismay through Gary and Rita Witmyer when their first child was born five years ago.

Today the Witmyer's Manheim home bubbles with laughter, joy and action. Garrison's accomplishments have far exceeded doctors' prognosis. Recently he was chosen Lancaster County's Easter Seal Ambassador.

Despite Garrison's achievements, the past five years haven't been without tears, pain, and hard work.

Spinal bifida is the failure of spinal bones closing properly and paralysis results.

When Garrison was only one day old, he had the first of seven operations within six months of his life.

"It was so hard," Rita recalls. "Being a registered nurse helped me to understand medical terminology, on the other hand, I knew all the things that could go wrong."

When Garrison was only seven days old, something did go wrong. Doctors had closed the opening caused by spinal bifida, but pressure built up in Garrison's brain causing hydrocephalus. Doctors inserted a shunt or pressure valve between the brain and a major blood vessel to help drain the fluid.

Doctors warned the Witmyers that Garrison would never walk, not even with crutches, that children born with these disorders are often brain damaged, but the Witmyers clung to faith in God for their son's total wholeness.

Rita recalled the joy she and her husband felt when Garrison was only a week old. She was nursing him when Gary crumpled up a piece of paper and tossed it into the waste can. Garrison stopped nursing and turned his eyes toward the sound."

"At least he can hear," Rita rejoiced. From the beginning the parents noticed that Garrison followed them with his eyes. Time has confirmed that Garrison suffers no brain damage. Unusually bright, he learned to talk and do many tactile skills at an early age.

But "being bright" didn't fill the void that every parent desires — "a child completely whole."

"You want to see your child develop normally. To walk and run and grown independent," Rita said.

Doctors said those things would never happen for Garrison.

In addition to spinal bifida, which has an accompanying muscle and nerve weakness in the hip area that prevents bowel and bladder control, he was born without hip sockets and with club feet. Corrective surgery was performed on his feet, and he was fitted with braces to straighten his legs.

Garrison learned to crawl by pulling his body along with his arms.

Gary built a circular-shaped table that enabled Garrison to stand without falling when he was two-years-old.

When the therapist saw how well Garrison could stand, he suggested they let him try crutches. "Within two weeks," Rita said, "he was ripping around the house as fast as any other 3-year-old."

Today, Garrison enjoys the same things most other five-year-olds do. He has a special tricycle that he can operate with his hands, and he is learning to ride a regular



Better than anything else, Garrison Witmyer, the Lancaster County Easter Seal ambassador, likes to walk with his crutches — something doctors never thought he would do because he was born with spinal bifida and without hip sockets.

one at the Easter Seals pre-school program that he attends two days a week. He also attends kindergarten at Manheim Christian Day School two days a week.

His school mates are intrigued with trying out his crutches and they like to help Garrison when he needs it.

He likes to pretend he is cooking in his play kitchen. He likes playing in the sandbox and helping his dad in the work shop where Garrison said, "He fixes lots of things."

The Witmyers own a 15-acre farm where they have horses, sheep, mini lop rabbits, and show chickens. Garrison enjoys helping care for the animals.

"But you know what I like best?" he asked.

Then without a moment's hesitation, he answered. "I love to walk."

It has been two years since Garrison learned to walk, and his mother's eyes glow as she watches him. "I never get tired of watching him," she remarked.

With his hand-held crutches, Garrison propels himself in long, agile strides across the room.

The Witmyers have a another child, Gabrielle, 2, and another on the way. "It is so wonderful to have a healthy baby," Rita said. "We are enjoying watching her do so many things."

Gabrielle and Garrison are close friends and play well together.

"I teach her to do things," Garrison said.

As the Easter Seal ambassador child, Garrison will attend public functions to increase the public's awareness programs for special needs children.

"Easter Seals is a terrific sup-



Rita Witmyer

port," Rita said. "The therapy and training the program provides is remarkable. And we are so grateful for it." Every family with a handicapped child can benefit from the counseling and programs that the organization provides. The Lancaster chapter can be contacted at 625 Community Way, Lancaster, PA 17603.

But most of all, the Witmyers insist, "God deserves the praise for all Garrison has achieved. We know that and we want everyone else to know it."

The Witmyers are part of a spiritual support group called Parents of Handicapped Children, that has helped them learn to cope by turning a disappointment into a positive experience. If you are interested in knowing more about this group, contact the Witmyers at 2734 Pinch Road, Manheim, PA 17543.

See your nearest
NEW HOLLAND

Dealer for Dependable
Equipment and
Dependable Service:

PENNSYLVANIA

Annville, PA
BHM Farm
Equipment, Inc.
RD1, Rte. 934
717-867-2211

Hughesville, PA
Farnsworth Farm
Supplies, Inc.
103 Cemetery Street
717-584-2106

Beavertown, PA
B&R Farm
Equipment, Inc.
RD 1, Box 217A
717-658-7024

Loyersville, PA
Paul Shovers, Inc.
Loyersville, PA
717-789-3117

Belleville, PA
Ivan J. Zook
Farm Equipment
Belleville, Pa.
717-935-2948

New Holland, PA
A.B.C. Groff, Inc.
110 South Railroad
717-354-4191

Canton, PA
Hess Farm Equipment
717-673-5143

Oley, PA
C.J. Wonsidler Bros.
R.D. 2
215-987-6257

Carlisle, PA
R&W Equipment Co.
35 East Willow Street
717-243-2686

Pitman, PA
Schreffler Equipment
Pitman, PA
717-648-1120

Chambersburg, PA
Clugston
Implement, Inc.
R.D. 1
717-263-4103

Quakertown, PA
C.J. Wonsidler Bros.
R.D. 1
215-536-1935

Davidburg, PA
George N. Gross, Inc.
R.D. 2, Dover, PA
717-292-1673

Ringtown, PA
Ringtown Farm
Equipment
Ringtown, PA
717-889-3184

Elizabethtown, PA
Messick Farm
Equipment, Inc.
Rt. 283 - Rheem's Exit
717-367-1319

Tamaqua, PA
Charles S. Snyder, Inc.
R.D. 3
717-386-5945

Gettysburg, PA
Yingling Implements,
Inc.
3291 Taneytown Rd.
717-359-4848

West Grove, PA
S.G. Lewis & Son, Inc.
R.D. 2, Box 66
215-869-2214

Greencastle, PA
Meyers
Implement's Inc.
400 N. Antrim Way
P.O. Box 97
717-597-2176

MARYLAND

Churchville, MD
Walter G. Coale, Inc.
2849-53
Churchville Rd.
301-838-6470

Hallfax, PA
Sweigard Bros.
R.D. 3, Box 13
717-896-3414

Frederick, MD
Ceresville
Ford New Holland, Inc.
Rt. 26 East
301-662-4197
Outside MD,
800-331-9122

Hamburg, PA
Shartlesville
Farm Service
R.D. 1, Box 1392
215-488-1025

Hagerstown, MD
Antietam Ford Tractor
301-791-1200

NEW JERSEY

Bridgeton, N.J.
Leslie G. Fogg, Inc.
Canton & Stow Creek
Landing Rd.
609-451-2727
609-935-5145

Honey Brook, PA
Dependable Motor Co.
East Main Street
215-273-3131
215-273-3737

Washington, NJ
Smith Tractor &
Equip., Inc.
15 Hillcrest Ave.
201-689-7900

Honey Grove, PA
Norman D. Clark
& Son, Inc.
Honey Grove, PA
717-734-3682

Woodstown, NJ
Owen Supply Co.
Broad Street &
East Avenue
609-769-0308