

“A Tender Story for a Special Time”

by Maria Johnson

There are people in this world so perfect that their existence feels like a personal gift.

All Americans have a story about where they were, what they heard and how they felt when learning of the attack on the World Trade Center.

September 11 was personalized for me with the introduction of Vivienne Knobel into my life. Vivi's mother was lost in the tragedy on her second day back to work after maternity leave.

Anita Canzano, director of admissions at the Princeton Montessori School, interviewed Vivi's father, Tom, after he applied to the infant center. He and his wife, Tu-Ahn, had previously visited the school and decided that they would place her when she was 1 year old.

“I was struck by Tom's ability to separate all the trauma he was going through and to focus on what was best for Vivi,” Anita remembers. Vivi entered the program in November.

Vivi was special from the beginning. It was not only from the circumstances surrounding her birth. Tom and Tu-ahn had tried for 10 years to have a baby. She was all of 9 lbs. at 4 months of age.

Vivi was characterized as a “failure to thrive baby” because she was born with a cleft lip. Her mother was Vietnamese. She contributed the dark hair and bright eyes that highlight her diminutive stature.

Vivi advanced quickly in the milestones of early development. She sat, crawled, walked and talked with amazing ability. Milestones aside, she exuded a certain energy and quality of being that is not often identified in an infant. Her eyes reveal this life energy the most.

She captivated visitors to the infant center. Vivi moved actively around the room. This coupled with her small size drew immediate attention from visitors. Just as they watched her, she watched them, greeting them with her smile.

At such an early age she possesses nothing less than charisma. Her character is much bigger than her physical self. Vivi is an infant that actually gives energy rather than takes it.

For the past 15 years, I have had the pleasure of working with very young children ages 6 weeks to 2 years. Young children present a kaleidoscope of behaviors and nuances that make them so endearing. My knowledge of child development coupled with years of experience enables me to be forever fascinated and appreciative of the unique qualities of each infant.

As a teacher I have prided myself on never “playing favorites.” I concede that some children are “easier” than others to care for but it has never interfered with my response to them. My role is not to take the place of parents in the infant program. I see my role as being partners with them.

I admit that something happened in me so compelling that it continues to take me by surprise. Caring for Vivi came as naturally and unconditionally as it did for my own daughter. My daughter was also very petite. I remember such harmony in our physical

and emotional relationship. I was surprised to feel something akin to those same feelings with regard to Vivi.

It wasn't that I wanted to take the place of her mother. It is just that it felt so familiar being with her. She rekindled feelings of goodness and spiritual oneness.

I think that Vivi was a reflection of the relationship I enjoyed with my infant daughter. It is particularly bittersweet because it is a relationship that her mother will never know.

The bonding and love between Vivi and her father is beautiful. He stepped into his role as sole parent with commitment and determination. Each morning Tom wrote out what food Vivi had eaten the day before. We discussed the new foods he had introduced. Papaya, mandarin oranges and French ham being some of her favorites. Tom told me that the first thing Vivi did when she woke in the morning was to look over the side of her crib to find her cat, Ziggy, sleeping soundly.

She has an attached and deeply meaningful primary relationship with Tom. They are a harmonious couple. She is thriving. Tom moved back to upstate New York where he grew up. Vivi has extended family in the area and a small town community that will contribute to both their lives.

Vivi is gone from my daily work life. The spark that made each day a little brighter has dimmed. Though the love of my job and infants that are in my care each year are all held in sacred trust, Vivi has a separate place in my heart. Being with her daily expanded and enhanced my life by interaction with her. She brought me joy and unexpected pleasure. She taught me about the fragility and purity of life as represented by her existence. She taught me the value of being in the moment. As a teacher, it is perhaps the most important aspect of being with infants.

It has been difficult to give myself permission to feel the way I do about Vivi. As a professional caregiver, I also have my personal history and experience that define me. The relationship with a child like Vivi has been one of the rewards of a life dedicated to loving and being with infants. I'd like to think that I contributed to her life in some small way by just being there to safeguard her growth. I know that I will always remember her as a personal gift in mine.