

A Beautiful Story:  
A Dream Realized through the Power of Natural Supports and Faith in Oneself  
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**Abstract:** At a very young age, Shirley Doneza was diagnosed with developmental delay and a learning disability. Her parents, Ed and Martha, recall the obstetrician telling them in the vaguest of terms: “Something is wrong with her.” However, Ed and Martha knew the person that Shirley was becoming and never doubted her potential to work hard and realize whatever dreams she might hold dear. With their faith and support, Shirley passed through the grade levels in school apace with her peers and ultimately graduated from college with a degree as an Educational Assistant. Today, she has achieved a high quality of life with a competitive, and exceptionally gratifying, employment and a high quality of life. Her story is a model of the power of natural supports—defined as the people surrounding a person, not as professionals but as personal associations, i.e., family and friends who believe in the person (Stodden & Leake, 1994)—to impart self-confidence and self-efficacy, and the success that that belief can bring.

**Key Words:** postsecondary education, natural supports, transition to employment

While still a very small child, Shirley Doneza showed signs of developmental delay. “When someone spoke to her,” her parents, Ed and Martha, remember, “She would just look at the person and, sort of, not hear or understand.” At the prompting of her kindergarten teacher, Shirley was tested and diagnosed as having a learning disability.

The authors purposely are not being more specific about Shirley’s disability because, like others currently working with people with developmental disabilities, we try not to apply disability labels. Since the stigmas attached to these labels have been so harmful in the past, many of us have found that it is most important to form relationships with the people we are associated with, rather than focusing on any label. In addition, Shirley’s family wants her to be viewed as a person, not as her disability. A significant factor in Shirley’s story is that Ed and Martha Doneza are rooted in a Filipino community. They identify with traditional Filipino culture and attitudes and they raise their children in accordance with the heritage they hold dear, a heritage wherein children with disabilities are often stigmatized and seen by the community as evidence of transgression in the spiritual life of the family (MDAA, n.d.). Family members with disabilities are kept highly sheltered, sometimes even hidden, and viewed as the responsibility of parents and siblings, not as independent agents. To a lesser degree, the female members are also considered less capable of self-governance and more in need of protection than male counterparts. Therefore, as a female child, and one with a learning disability that might suggest a life of dependence and light domestic duties, it is remarkable that Shirley eventually came of age with the commitment to education that she did. This familial commitment, along with Shirley’s willingness to learn and everyone’s efforts to invoke her rights, propelled her through high school and on to college, where she ultimately earned the credentials to take on competitive employment as an educational assistant in a local school. Shirley is proud to relate that the vital factor

in her success was her family's unwavering belief in her and in her potential. Shirley's story is a testimony to perseverance, self-efficacy, faith in oneself, and the indispensable benefit of natural supports.

At the outset of her formal education, Shirley's teacher suggested holding her back for a second year in kindergarten and limiting the expectations put upon her. This position conveyed to Ed and Martha that the well-meaning teacher was less convinced of Shirley's potential than they were. Ed and Martha sought the help of a Special Education advocate. They were determined to become involved in Shirley's education, even if it meant they were occasionally perceived as meddlesome. Ed remembers how he inadvertently acquired a reputation for "making trouble" because he asked so many questions. When a parent has a child with a disability, there are many things to learn, such as state laws and federal Acts. Suddenly there is a lexicon of terms and phrases—IEP's, Section 504, No Child Left Behind, and so forth—in which to become conversant. In addition, there are issues of curricular content and delivery that parents of a student with a learning disability must inquire about and advocate for. Ed and Martha recognized early on that they must be proactive if they were to garner a free and equal public education (which the Donezas came to know by yet another common acronym, FAPE) for Shirley.

For instance, they insisted Shirley be given the opportunity to learn new material that would emphasize concepts, underlying meanings, and critical thinking, rather than the rote memorization and "drill" activities that too frequently, they believed, defined Special Education classrooms. Specifically, they advocated through the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) and, armed with the full awareness of the rights that Act conferred, obtained curricular and instructional modifications and supports. They called meetings with Shirley's teacher, the principal, representatives from the district SPED office, and local, government-funded disability support agencies and advocacy groups. The school, although located in Hawaii where various Polynesian cultures are widely represented, had never seen such involvement and assertiveness from a traditional Filipino family, where individual needs are typically subordinated to the larger community and girls' educations are not prioritized. Ed and Martha knew they had to defy traditional mores in the service of launching their daughter into satisfying, independent adulthood. They had to adapt as people, and they rose to the challenge.

With such firm parental support, Shirley's own faith in herself strengthened. She studied with the diligence and consistency of one resolved to defy typical expectations for someone with so significant a learning disability. This is a woman who was essentially written off as *uneducable* at birth. "I was determined," she says, "That I was going to finish." That determination, which had always been so supported at home, was beginning to convert the doubters. One teacher in particular, Shirley recalls, seemed to have a mantra just for Shirley: "You can do it, you can do it..."

Another factor that fueled Shirley's inner drive was the realization that her parents would not be with her forever. Even though she is a member of a strong Filipino community and can depend on members of that community for continued support,

Shirley felt a need to exercise some independence from her family. In a sense, she felt that she owed it to them to become self-reliant and thus free them of the need to extend their parental responsibility into her adulthood, and to free them from worry. It was her way of thanking them. That impetus never let her down. "It's like a voice within," she recalls, "Saying: 'You can do it, keep going, hang in there...'" After persevering in postsecondary education for eight years, taking the full number of credits per semester that her disability allowed (which was considerably fewer than the standard 15), Shirley obtained her Educational Assistant (EA) certificate in Early Childhood Education, where she could best impart to children with learning disabilities that they too must believe in themselves, and must find supporters who also believe. In Shirley's own words: "I was in special education, and I know how frustrating it is when you have a teacher who doesn't really understand you." She explains, "I am at a point in my life where I want to encourage others to keep working and learning so they can feel great and support themselves."

When asked if they could provide any advice for special education teachers, parents of youth with learning disabilities, and the youth themselves, the Doneza family underscored the need to find natural supporters who could convey to the student their belief in the student's ability to achieve dreams and aspirations. These natural supporters can be family, friends, clergy, community groups, and so forth. Shirley reflects that it was through seeing others' faith in her, and being continually encouraged, that her own self-efficacy never flagged. She adds that while she is not "happy" to have the weaknesses that she possesses, it is by virtue of having those weaknesses that she discovered and cultivated her strengths. She is steadfast, she celebrates herself and those around her, and she understands that everyone has something to offer. She feels humbled by the help she has received from her parents, who flouted the school's "not so great expectations," and by the support of her teachers. She is determined, now, to spread that to others.

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