



# "I tell them that their **disability** becomes their **ability**."

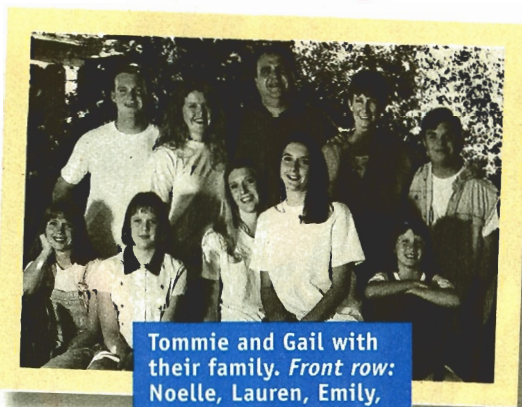
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the California Governor's office to increase the representation of the disabled in the entertainment industry. She spends hours advising young performers how to scout out sympathetic talent agents, then personally guides them as they hire acting coaches and eventually audition. Gail is also a strong force on the Screen Actors Guild's Young Performers Committee, which now has a section on the disabled in its handbook.

To the youngsters she works with, Gail is nothing short of a miracle. She says modestly, "I just tell them their 'disability' becomes the 'ability' I can sell to Hollywood." Take the case of a young man named Christopher Stevenson. When he was 4, an operating room accident left him with diffuse brain damage, a condition akin to cerebral palsy. Through Gail he found an agent, the courage to push himself forward—and a featured cameo in the Academy Award-nominated film *A Civil Action*. When he got the part, Christopher was thrilled because, he says, "they wanted me for my whole self"—wheelchair and all. He called Gail with the good news and said, "You have given me self-esteem."

Meanwhile, the staff of television's *ER* depends on Gail to help maintain the show's vaunted sense of authenticity by locating actors with a wide range of physical impairments. Says John Wells, the show's executive producer, "What Gail is doing is remarkable. Using actors without disabilities to play characters with disabilities we hope will soon be as unacceptable in Hollywood as suggesting white actors in blackface play African-American characters."

Fans of *Touched by an Angel* might even remember a script about the birth of a baby with Down syndrome. It directly quotes the encouraging words of Dr. Michael



**Tommie and Gail with their family. Front row: Noelle, Lauren, Emily, Blair Danielle, Carol. Back row: Tim, Jennie, Blair Nathan.**

Marcy, the Williamson family pediatrician, when he revealed Blair's condition to Gail. "Every disabled child is different," he told her, "and every day we find new ways to help them." Casting director David Giella says, "Gail made my job brilliantly easy by recruiting actors for casting calls and seeing to their on-set needs."

Chris Burke, Blair's hero, is a *Touched by an Angel* regular. Gail helps Chris work through difficult lines and cope with the

stress that comes from last-minute blocking changes. In the words of Chris's mother,

Marian, "Gail keeps balance between Chris and the production staff." Chris says, "Gail is an angel."

An angel, indeed. In 1995 she and her husband, Tommie, became legal guardians to her six nieces (aged 9-22): Gail's brother had recently died of degenerative melanoma, and eight years earlier the girls' mother had fallen victim to Lou Gehrig's disease. Gail simply had to step in. "There was just a bunch of little girls who needed a home and needed it fast," she says.

"The scariest thing that had happened in my life used to be Blair's diagnosis, but it also has been the biggest blessing," says Gail. "So, when we took in the girls, it was just as scary, but it, too, turned out to be just as big a blessing. They came to us angry, hurt children, and four years later they're our kids!"

She credits her endlessly patient husband, a sense of humor, religious faith—and even a song—for keeping her on an even keel. Citing her favorite musical, Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*, she explains that "you must go into the woods to grow." And, she says, ever appreciative of the experience, "I feel like I've spent a large part of my life in those woods." ■

## How to Learn More

Many children with special needs look to the arts as a source of enjoyment. Others might even find a career!

These arts agencies offer a wide range of programs and services for youngsters with disabilities:

### Accessible Arts, Inc.

1100 State Ave., Kansas City, KS 66102  
Phone: 913-281-1133  
Located at the Kansas State School for the Blind, this is a national resource for people with varying disabilities who need help finding teachers, mentors and contacts in fields related to movement, the visual arts, music, drama and storytelling.

### VSA Arts

1300 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036  
Phone: 1-800-933-8721  
For more than 24 years, this international nonprofit organization, formerly known as Very Special Arts, has been affiliated with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. VSA Arts offers courses in creative writing, drama, music and dance, as well as the visual arts, through its 47 state and 93 international affiliates.

### Young Performers Division of the Media Access Office

4640 Lankershim Blvd., Suite 301, North Hollywood, CA 91602  
Phone: 818-752-1196  
Created by Gail Williamson in 1991, this division of the MAO helps disabled actors find talent agents, hire acting coaches and assemble portfolios—all free of charge. Performers with disabilities are encouraged to request a new client packet, which includes a registration form (that will ask for details about one's talents and type of disability), plus employment eligibility and photo release forms. Seasoned

performers, meanwhile, should ask to be included in the Media Access talent files.

### Beautiful Kids, Inc.

3806 Rosewood Lane, Rochester Hills, MI 48309  
Phone: 248-375-2730  
This agency was founded in 1994 and was conceived originally to help get "differently abled" children, from birth to age 18, into print ads and commercials. Today it's also helping kids get acting jobs in TV, movies and videos. (Clients should be able to sit up straight, use their hands, control facial muscles, and focus both eyes).