

## A WORLD OF SILENCE

### Deafness doesn't stop three girls from living full lives

By RENAE KILLION

P.O. Neighbors Editor

**STOP FOR A MINUTE.** Listen to everything that is going on around you, the TV is on, the neighbors dog is barking, the kids are picking on each other, someone just opened the refrigerator. Now imagine not hearing it. Not hearing anything. Silence.

That is what Jamie, Vicki and Amy hear, nothing. These three young Watertown girls are deaf, but each of them lives a full life, together. At a young age, they were each sent to the School for the Deaf in Sioux Falls. There, they not only found a way to learn and communicate, but they also found a second family.

Jamie Greve appeared to be perfectly healthy when she was born. Her mother Debi said she was like a monkey, climbing on everything and walking all over at the normal ages, but by 18 months, she knew something was wrong with her daughter. She took her to many doctors and talked to schools, but no one could be convinced of what Debi feared.

**JAMIE WENT THROUGH** many tests, but she soon had found ways to "cheat" on them. Finally, the doctors were certain of the problem. Jamie had bilateral central neural loss in both ears from an unknown origin. She had only about 25 percent of her hearing.

Amy Adams began her life in a similar way. Her parents, Roger and Betty, didn't realize for some time that there was a problem. Amy wasn't as active as Jamie, however, and never spoke. But she learned so quickly to read lips and actions that she fooled her parents into thinking she was ok because she could respond to them



**BEST OF FRIENDS** — Jamie Greve, Vicki Bleeker and Amy Adams come home every weekend and spend much of their time together. (Public Opinion photo by Renae Killion)

but Lynn Bleeker's worst moment came at another time. "The hardest part for me was sending her away to school," Lynn said. "We'd cry on the way down to Sioux Falls and back. I cried all the time for the first six or seven years. I missed so much of her life."

Debi agreed. "We had to send them away, but it was hard because there was no one around here to ask questions, to know if we

ern U.S.

Amy, 15, went to Sioux Falls at the age of three after specialists from the Sioux Falls school came to Watertown once a week to help her recognize what a sound is. She started public school by the fourth grade.

**ALL THREE GIRLS** go to public school at Sioux Falls Washington. Jamie takes algebra; Vicki takes chemistry, gov-

Debi said. "And if they did I would have been mad," Jamie replied.

"They are more independent," said Betty. "But I think they are too trusting of people. They aren't always aware of what's going on out there. The best thing is that you won't find people with a better sense of humor than the deaf."

The girls are finding out quickly that life will not be easy, though. Amy has already



# Watertown Public Opinion - Sept. 27, 1996 (cont.)

QUICKLY TO READ UPS AND ACTIONS THAT SHE  
fooled her parents into thinking she was  
ok because she could respond to them.

Before she was two years old, Amy's  
parents brought her to the University of  
Minnesota where they tested her hearing.  
On the day of her second birthday, Betty  
found out that her little daughter suffered  
bio-censoral nerve damage. She was pro-  
foundly deaf, meaning she could hear noth-  
ing and never would.

Vicki Bleeker's story is different, but no  
less tragic. When she was only a year old,  
Vicki suffered from Spinal Meningitis. The  
high fever that accompanied her illness  
damaged her nerves and left her with about  
30 percent of her hearing.

**EACH OF THEIR** stories are differ-  
ent, but the pain they and their families felt  
had a familiarity that came rushing back  
when they remembered it together.

"It was devastating," said Amy's mom  
Betty. "The doctors said you would go  
through a period of grieving because your  
child could never do all you wanted them to,  
like listen to music or dance. It was hardest  
to accept that it was nothing we had done,  
but it was a gift to us. It's hard to know that  
she'll never hear me say 'I love you,'" she  
said with tears in her eyes.

Vicki's mom and dad felt much the same,

but it was hard because there was no one  
around here to ask questions, to know if we  
were doing the right thing."

**THE DOCTORS TOLD** Betty that she  
might as well give up and institutionalize  
Amy. But she refused to believe that and  
instead gave up all the years she might have  
had with her child to send her to the School  
for the Deaf where she might have a chance  
at a normal life.

"We lost the time most people have with  
their kids," Betty said, revealing the feelings  
of the other two women.

But the three women gave up what they  
wanted most. Jamie, now 15, began school  
at age three. She went to Garfield for speech  
classes and Lake Area Technical Institute,  
which had a school at that time for very  
young deaf children. From there, she went  
on to the School for the Deaf in Sioux Falls.

Vicki, 18, had to relearn everything after  
she recovered from her illness. But after  
she did, she went to both Roosevelt and  
Grant schools and then to the School for the  
Deaf at age nine. She will graduate from the  
school this year and plans to attend Gal-  
laudet University in Washington, D.C., the  
only deaf college in the world. She wants to  
major in deaf psychology, get a doctorate  
degree and become a counselor. Vicki  
would like to move somewhere in the west-

school at Sioux Falls Washington. Jamie  
takes algebra; Vicki takes chemistry, gov-  
ernment, psychology and ecology; Amy  
takes geometry and physical science. They  
say Sioux Falls Washington is very  
respectable. They each have an interpreter  
to help them with their class work. They  
have never felt discrimination there. They  
feel that their being there is a challenge  
and a learning experience for the other kids  
as well as themselves.

The girls really enjoy public school  
because of its faster pace. Betty said that for  
Amy, the challenge of learning is mentally  
draining for her. But Betty, Debi and Lynn  
have no doubt that they did the right thing.

"What they learned there they couldn't  
have learned here," said Debi. "They have  
formed their own family in Sioux Falls."

"Vicki will achieve her goals. We have no  
doubt about that," Betty said of her daugh-  
ter's friend. "When Amy was young, I had  
many doubts about sending her to school.  
She refused to sign for so long I just got  
frustrated. So one night we finally gave up,  
and when I put her to bed I walked away  
from her without telling her I loved her.  
She 'squawked' to get my attention, and I  
turned around angrily. She made her first  
sign, 'I love you.' It was amazing."

**THE SCHOOL FOR** the Deaf is a small  
school that pays careful attention to its stu-  
dents. The three girls stayed in foster homes  
in Sioux Falls for the first 10 years. Now  
they live in dorms which currently house  
about 30 kids. Since they spend most of  
their time at school, all the kids there are  
like a family to each other.

The girls enjoy the dorms because they  
are more independent and have a lot of  
responsibility. Vicki lives in independent  
apartment living since she is older, but  
Amy and Jamie could have a room of their  
own if their behavior is good.

Even though it has been hard for the  
girls' families to live so much of their lives  
without them, they know they did the right  
thing. It has made the girls more independ-  
ent and given them a chance to have the  
same opportunities that everyone else has.

"Sometimes Vicki would ask me why I  
had sent her down there, but now she knows  
it was for the best. And so do I," Lynn said.  
"We didn't do any family activities until  
the weekend so we could include Jamie,"

The girls are running out quickly that life  
will not be easy, though. Amy has already  
had trouble finding summer jobs. But when  
she did work with her mother at her office,  
the management was pleased with how  
hard she worked.

**VICKI HAS BEEN** able to find jobs.  
She currently works at Red Lobster while  
she goes to school. With all the things that  
are going on in their lives, the three best  
friends often only see each other after school  
and on weekends.

Amy, it seems, may struggle the most  
since she can only sign to others. But she  
will do whatever she can to help people  
understand her. She will often write for  
those who do not sign. However, all three  
of the girls have had problems communi-  
cating with others.

"That's the hard part when kids walk  
away or don't try to talk to them," Debi said.  
"In Watertown, the girls don't have many  
friends because they aren't here enough to  
start those friendships."

The girls have to use a lot of special  
equipment in order to function through the  
day. Things like alarm clocks, phones, tv's  
and fire alarms must have lights on them or  
some other means of getting their atten-  
tion. The girls can type very well which  
helps when they call home on their special  
phones. They could also get a trained dog to  
help them similar to what a seeing-eye-dog  
does for a blind person, but they run about  
\$4,000.

The School for the Deaf in Sioux Falls  
has declared this week Deaf Awareness  
Week in South Dakota. The kids at the  
school have been enjoying many activities  
all week in celebration. For these three  
girls, it means something special.

**"WE CAN DO** everything except hear,"  
Amy signed. "We are proud to be deaf."

"There are a lot of people who are afraid  
of us," Jamie said. "But all it is that we  
can't hear."

"People should provide for a deaf child.  
Many people are not aware of what we are  
like," Vicki said. "There is a lot of deaf in  
the world besides those who can't hear."

The girls have given up much to learn and  
reach their highest potential. They've lost  
their childhood, but they gained the knowl-  
edge to succeed through the rest of their  
lives.



**DEAF NOT DUMB** — Vicki and Amy communicate well by signing to each other about the weather. (Public Opinion photo by Renae Killion)



# Today I will do a random act of kindness, Pass it on

By RENAE KILLION  
P.O. Neighbors Editor

**KIDS THESE DAYS** seem to take and take and take, never giving, never helping. But that's not entirely true, and fifth graders at Garfield Elementary School are out to change that image and better themselves in the process.

For the third year in a row, this class is kicking off its Acts of Kindness Campaign. This program gets the kids out into the community doing things to help others. Each month the kids perform one main "kindness" for the community, and every Friday they write in their journals about what else they did during the week, such as helping around the house or playing with a younger sibling.

For the first month, the fifth grade class, under the instruction of Mrs. Carol Dagele and student teacher Mrs. Tanya Maag, has been collecting consumable products for the Women's Resource Center. Things like towels, dish towels, soap, kleenex, shampoo, color books, tooth paste and even diapers have been piling up in the front landing of the Garfield School as people from the community bring in their gifts.

**"WE TOOK** A field trip to the Women's Resource Center and realized how little these people had, and that what they needed were the simple things

t-shirts. The PTO got them for us because they believe in what we are doing."

The purple shirts, which the kids wear for special events and every Friday, carry a simple but powerful message: "Today I will do a random act of kindness, Pass it on." So far, the kids have been doing their part.

"Through this program, the kids are more aware of how their actions effect others and how they can make a difference," Maag said.

**AND THE KIDS** are learning exactly that. "I've learned it's more important to give than take from people," said Jennifer Morgan, 11. "I'm nicer to my little sister, too. People think it's good that we are helping others."

"I've learned to not be stubborn and give to other people that don't have stuff that we have more of," Ryan Oldfield, 10, added. He is also nicer to his sister and has been helping at home with the dishes.

Matt Robinson, 11, has found the real joy in giving. "It's nice to help people in need. It makes me feel good," he said.

Dagele and Maag try to work with all ages in the community and work the program into the curriculum along the way. They have plans for Acts of Kindness for each month for the rest of the year. They will do such things as serving at the Banquet, serving tea at Benet Place and making



**RANDOM ACTORS** — The Garfield fifth grade class gathers around the piles of goods they've collected for the Women's Resource Center. In back row from left is Eric Grimes, Jennifer Morgan, Libby Hegge, Mark Woertink, Katie Clark, Mrs. Maag, Ashley Ramsey, Matt Grant, Tyler Janzen, Adam Wianties, Matt Robinson, Eric Meyer. In front kneeling is Josh Brenden, Ricky Wietzema, Dennis Etheridge, Amanda Feuerstein, Amanda Lightfield, Mallory Kludt, and Eric Schwinger. Sitting in the front is Jeremy Kerkvliet, Chris Migge, Ryan Oldfield and Stacey Keintz. (Public Opinion photos by Renae Killion)



**"WE TOOK** A field trip to the Women's Resource Center and realized how little these people had, and that what they needed were the simple things we all take for granted," said Maag. "We decided we wanted to help them, so we started our collection."

All of the 23 kids are involved in the program in some way. Everyone is on a committee and takes part; some are on the radio, some pick up collections around town, and all of them made a poster to put up in the school. KELO News even paid them a visit last Monday. Maag said they haven't been short volunteers yet.

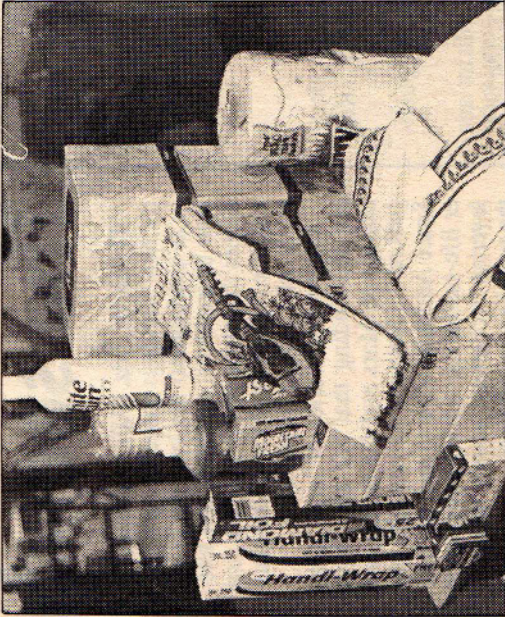
"I'm so impressed with their willingness to take part in this program," she said.

**DAGEL STARTED** the program because she feels it's important to get the kids involved in the community. She bases the program on the Watertown Public School District Mission statement. One of the missions is to encourage the children to contribute to the school, community and nation.

"I think we need to teach our kids to be givers rather than always taking," Dagel said. "This is the first year we've had

class gainers around the piles of goods they've collected for the Women's Resource Center. In back from left is Eric Grimes, Jennifer Morgan, Libby Hegge, Mark Woertink, Katie Clark, Mrs. Maag, Ashley Ramsey, Matt Grant, Tyler Janzen, Adam Wientjes, Matt Robinson, Eric Meyer. In front

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touch everyone in the community.

**THE GARFIELD FIFTH** grade class will be delivering the collected items for the Women's Resource Center to them Oct. 31. Their goal is to have 400 items. Currently they have about 250 and are asking for your help to get it to 400. Items can be brought to Garfield School or one of the radio stations.

Watch for these kids around town. They are doing acts of kindness, pass it on.

**FOR THOSE IN NEED** — Piles of goods stand stacked in the Garfield School landing waiting to be delivered to those who need them.

## Watertown Public Opinion Oct. 25, 1996 (cont.)