

‘Pioneers’ in parenting Down Syndrome kids featured in new book

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After Connie Cronin gave birth to her son, Jimmy, her doctor told her, “It is best if you do not see him. You do not want to get attached.”

Jimmy had Down Syndrome. At the time, from the 1960s to early 80s, health professionals would frequently advised parents to place children born with Down Syndrome in institutions.

“What families were told back forty years ago was ‘don’t take your child home... forget them, put them in an institution,’” Beth Moran, area director of the Department of Developmental Services Brockton Area Office, said.

Cronin, of Hanson, decided instead to raise her son at home. She is one of five local mothers featured in “Five Courageous Women; Raising Children with Down Syndrome,” by Anne Tucker Roberts of Scituate.

Roberts said the mothers in her book were “pioneers.”

“Women are... spectacularly capable, but I never heard this kind of courage,” Roberts said. She said the book honors mothers that were doing the unthinkable.

Hazel Straughn, of Hanover, whose story is part of the book, was advised by doctors to place her son Edward in an institution. She was prevented from nursing her baby in the hospital and was peppered with questions from doctors, nurses and social workers about how she would cope if she took her child home.

“The next few weeks were hell,” Straughn told Roberts, but “I was on a mission.”

Straughn took Edward’s education into her own hands, even acting out characters for him so he could develop critical thinking skills. Like the other children with Down Syndrome profiled in the book, Edward has grown to be a successful, independent adult, Roberts said.

Other mothers features in the book are Ann Carroll of Rockland, Lisa Whalen of Bridgewater and Jane Carey of Norwell.

Cronin faced similar roadblocks in providing a good education for Jimmy, who was doing poorly in middle school. “I knew his potential was untapped,” Cronin said in the book. She found a special education program for children with Down Syndrome and petitioned

administrators to enroll her son.

Roberts was then a special needs teacher in the program. She said she was reluctant to admit Jimmy initially, but later agreed it was the right move.

He “developed fabulous vocational skills,” said Cronin of her son’s six years in the program. “He really was a success, and I think she ([Roberts) saw how hard these things came, because systems were not in place to meet the needs of people with special needs.”

Roberts’ inspiration to write the book came as she was sitting in the car with Straughn, who was explaining the effort it took to support her son’s development. “My jaw dropped,” said Roberts. “These mothers were the reason (students) were sitting in front of me with such unique skills.”

Parents who raised their children with Down Syndrome at home helped create better health care, said Moran. They had to fight to make sure there were services, she said.

Today, services are more readily available in Massachusetts. “Some states are doing as well as we are, but many are not,” Moran said.

“This seems to be a population that gets cut very easily from funding even though they have a place and... a position (in society) and they want to contribute,” Cronin said.

Roberts said society is in a good place right now in helping those with Down Syndrome move forward. But “there’s so much more that needs to happen,” Roberts said.