

CAMILLE GIRALDI: BIG HEART, SMALLER BODY

"I used to tell people I needed a big body to carry my big heart." That's the way Camille Giraldi would answer people who questioned why she was so heavy. It was a logical question, since as recently as July, 1991, Camille Giraldi weighed 370 pounds!

One of the people who couldn't help but notice Camille's weight was Philip Voluck, Florida and Georgia representative for the weight loss specialists, Nutri/System, Inc. Voluck saw a picture of Camille on the front page of the Miami Herald, which had named her "Mother of the Year" for her adoption of children with Down Syndrome and other serious disabilities. Voluck not only sent a donation to Camille's "Up With Down Syndrome Foundation," he also wrote a personal note to her. "I would like to help you," he offered.

In some ways, Camille's weight had helped her relate to the children with disabilities she had cared for all her life. "It made me learn how to live with a handicap," she said. But the health risks posed by her 370 pounds were something she could no longer deny. She had already started a diet of her own, but she accepted Philip Voluck's offer and began the Nutri/System weight loss program in July, 1991.

The results have been dramatic. Camille Giraldi lost more than 230 pounds on the Nutri/System program, and has kept the weight off for more than 11 months. "My diet was something I never thought I would be successful at," she said. "But something happened and my life turned around." Camille has appeared in television commercials for the company.

Nutri/System continues to support her efforts to provide medical care and a loving home for the many disabled children she and her husband adopt. Nutri/System is donating the services of its corporate public relations firm, Burson-Marsteller, to work in behalf of the "Up With Down Syndrome Foundation."

At the age of 14 she began volunteering with a religious order that cared for children, and as soon as she was old enough to drive she started taking disabled youngsters home for the weekend. But her father had other plans for his daughter, and literally disowned Camille when she insisted on pursuing a career in social work. After working her way through nursing school, she got a job at Miami Children's Hospital. Two things happened there. She got more involved with sick children, and she met her future husband, then a young pediatrician. "Everything really changed for me," she remembered. Her husband's income has made it possible for the Giraldis to open their home as wide as their hearts. In 1986 they started the "Up With Down Syndrome Foundation."

Like any mother, Camille loves to boast about her beautiful children. Jo-Layne was born in July, 1988 with Down Syndrome, a serious heart defect and other severe medical problems. She refused to eat. Within the first six months of her life she underwent two major heart operations and a colostomy. Five years later, Camille describes Jo-Layne with one word, "Unbelievable!"

Then there is four-year-old Adelle. She has undergone six operations, including two heart operations and major stomach surgery. Today, says Camille, "she's cute as a button!"

Last year, the Giraldis' homes were destroyed by Hurricane Andrew, forcing the family to re-locate while the homes were re-built. Now they dream of buying a ranch in South Florida in order to expand their services and be able to accommodate an even larger family. Camille would eventually like to work more with adults with disabilities. "They need a nice, secure place to live, too," she said.

But her life maintains the same focus it's had since she was a five-year-old girl at her father's picnics. "I know what love can give to these children," she said. "I want to give them love and security. And I want people to accept them a little more than they do right now."

CAMILLE GIRALDI: "DOING WHAT I WAS BORN TO DO"

Camille Giraldi often has a difficult time remembering dates. For example, she can't always recall exactly when she started the "Up With Down Syndrome Foundation." But she has a perfectly good reason. "This Foundation is my life," she said. "I don't know when it started and it will never end. I can't give you dates because it has always been my life."

It's a life that began 45 years ago as the daughter of a Miami clothing manufacturer, and is now entirely devoted to providing medical care, training, love, security and dignity to children with Down Syndrome and other serious disabilities.

Camille and her husband, Dr. Michael Giraldi, have currently adopted ten children with Down Syndrome (they have two biological children, neither of whom has Down Syndrome), are caring for three as permanent guardians, and have 14 others in the final process of adoption. The entire family lives in the Giraldis' two homes in Dade County, Florida. All services are provided free of charge. The Giraldis pay for everything from their own personal finances.

The cost is enormous -- at least \$35,000 per month for staff and all other expenses. In the hot Miami summer, the monthly electric bill alone can run \$4,000. Food costs about \$3,000 per month and \$900 each month goes for diapers. Then there are the staggering medical bills. Most of the Giraldis' children are "medically involved," according to Camille, suffering serious heart and lung disorders. Open heart surgery -- a common requirement for children with Down Syndrome -- costs at least \$60,000.

The Giraldis cannot cover the children under their own health insurance policy because the children have "pre-existing conditions." Once the children are legally adopted by the Giraldis, they no longer qualify for Medicaid. The family supports changing the law in both areas in order to enable more families to bear the tremendous cost of adopting medically involved children. This will help more children find loving homes. For now, Camille and Michael pay for everything out of their own funds, as well as receiving occasional -- and greatly welcomed -- donations.

But despite what many would consider hardships, Camille can truthfully say, "I'm doing what I was born to do." When she was 5 or 6 years old, she explained, her father used to host picnics for children with disabilities. "I would really look forward to the picnics," she said. "I knew this was something I really wanted to do, to devote my life to, not just do it as a job."

"UP WITH DOWN SYNDROME FOUNDATION" and CAMILLE GERALDI

- Founded in 1986 by Dr. Michael and Camille Geraldini as a non-profit, tax-exempt organization the Foundation is dedicated to providing a variety of services to individuals with Down Syndrome and other disabling conditions.

As of October 11, 1993, 27 children were under the Geraldinis' care.

- **The cost of housing a disabled child in the state of Florida runs from \$25,000-to-\$40,000 per year.**
- Camille Geraldini is seeking two important changes in the law that would not only help her Foundation, but would make it possible for more families to provide the same type of loving care the Geraldinis provide to adopted children with disabilities.
- **First, Camille wants a family that adopts a disabled child to receive Medicaid and Social Security for that child.** Currently, these children are not eligible for assistance. The Geraldinis pay for everything and the cost is enormous -- at least \$35,000 per month for staff and all other expenses. In the hot Miami summer, the monthly electric bill alone can run \$4,000. Food costs about \$3,000 per month and \$900 each month goes for diapers. Making adopted children eligible for Medicaid would help more families cope with the tremendous expenses, allowing more children with disabilities to be adopted into loving environments.
- **Second, Camille would like to see the law on "pre-existing conditions" changed so families in their position can receive coverage for these children.** The Geraldinis cannot get private health insurance coverage for their adoptive children because the children have "pre-existing conditions." Most of the Geraldini's children are "medically involved," suffering serious heart and lung disorders. Open heart surgery -- a common requirement for children with Down Syndrome -- costs at least \$60,000.
- The entire Geraldini family currently lives in three homes in Dade County, Florida, but is hoping to move to a 40-acre farm. The homes were destroyed by Hurricane Andrew, but are being rebuilt.
- Camille and her family have received a great deal of media coverage. Their story has been told by many newspapers and magazines, including *People* magazine, and many television news programs, including a wholly positive report by Leslie Stahl on *60 Minutes*.

THE POSSIBLE DREAM FOUNDATION, INC.

Formerly Up With Down Syndrome Foundation

MISSION STATEMENT

The Possible Dream Foundation, Inc., a non-profit, non-sectarian, organization was founded in 1987 to provide a loving, nurturing home for severely mentally, physically and developmentally disabled children and adults and to foster independence by teaching life skills that promote self-sufficiency.

Second, Camille and her husband are unable to obtain private health insurance coverage for their adopted children because the children have "pre-existing conditions." For a Down Syndrome child, these conditions often include heart defects, severe lung disorders and other serious medical problems. Camille would like to see the law on "pre-existing conditions" changed so families in their position can receive coverage for these children.

- The entire Giraldi family currently lives in two homes in Dade County, Florida, but is hoping to move to a 40-acre ranch. While the Giraldis will continue to contribute their own personal finances toward the Foundation, they are hoping that changes in the law and the generosity of the public will enable them to expand their services and welcome more special needs children to the warmth of their home.
- Camille and her family have received a great deal of media coverage. Their story has been told by many newspapers and magazines, including People magazine, and many television news programs, including 60 Minutes.

"UP WITH DOWN SYNDROME FOUNDATION"

- Founded in 1986 by Dr. Michael and Camille Giraldis as a non-profit, tax-exempt organization dedicated to providing a variety of services to individuals with Down Syndrome and other disabling conditions.
- Long before the Foundation was established, the Giraldis began taking infants with Down Syndrome into their own home and caring for them at no charge. Currently the Giraldis have their own two biological children (they do not have Down Syndrome), 10 adopted children, 3 living under permanent guardianship and 14 pending final adoption. As of October 11, 1993, 27 children with severe disabilities were under the Giraldis' care.
- Services include -- but are not limited to -- medical care. Just as importantly, the Giraldis also provide love, a caring home environment, training, security and dignity for hard-to-place and medically involved children with disabilities.

The Giraldis' goal is to encourage each individual toward independence or semi-independence, teaching them to function socially and "fit in" with society.

The Foundation also provides counseling and support to families of children with disabilities.

- All services are still provided free, with the Foundation surviving on the personal finances of the Giraldis.

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First, Camille thinks a family that adopts a disabled child should receive Medicaid and Social Security for that child. Currently, these children are not eligible for assistance. The Giraldis pay for everything -- including enormous medical bills -- out of their own pocket. This includes paying for expensive heart and lung operations often required by children with Down Syndrome. Making adopted children eligible for Medicaid would help more families cope with the tremendous expenses, allowing more children with disabilities to be adopted into loving environments.