

Newsweek

Quinn's Great Expectations

Quinn Bradlee

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What does it feel like to be different from other people? When he was 14, after years of unexplained health problems and severe learning disabilities, Quinn Bradlee was diagnosed with VCFS, a random genetic mutation that afflicts one in 2,000 people. Now 26, Quinn examines the unique circumstances of his life. The son of the writer Sally Quinn and the former Washington Post editor Ben Bradlee, Quinn has lived with both privilege and limitations. This is his story.

When I was first born, everyone thought I was totally and completely normal. According to my mom, the nurses called me "Mr. Mellow," because while all the other babies would scream and cry I would just kind of look around. She also says that when she first had me in her arms, she told me that she loved me and that I could be anything I wanted to be in the world. I hope that is still true. But pretty soon after I was born, my doctor detected a heart murmur, and when I was about three months old, I had to have open-heart surgery. I think this was a pretty crappy time for my parents. They thought I might die, and I could have died. My mom says the night before my heart operation was one of the worst nights of her life. She wasn't allowed to nurse me. She could barely even hold me. When they took me into the operating room the next day, she basically fainted. Apparently my dad turned to her and said, "Just think of it this way. He'll never have to go to war."

After the heart surgery, I was always sick with something. I think my parents thought that once they did the surgery I'd be fine, but it didn't work out that way.

First, there were the seizures, a lot of them, starting when I was almost two. My parents put me into a regular nursery school but within a week the teachers told my mom that I couldn't hack it. They gave me my own tutor and everything but it still didn't work. I started with speech therapy. The doctors did some testing on me for various known genetic conditions, but I didn't have anything anybody recognized.

When I was eight or nine, my school, which was called the Lab School and is for learning disabled kids, sent me out to a psychiatrist or psychologist to have a look at me. I have no memory of the experience, but my parents sure do. After about six months the woman called my parents in and basically told them that I was retarded. She'd done some tests, and she had determined that I was never going to be able to function as an adult in any meaningful way. Never graduate from high school, never even go to high school, never work or have a job or be

married or have kids or any of the things you dream about. She told my parents they needed to put me in an institution in Maryland, where she had already reserved a spot for me.

I can't really imagine what my mom and dad felt like.

I hope they didn't believe it. I don't think they did. Either way, they didn't tell me about it, and luckily the Lab School didn't agree with this woman's assessment. They told my mom that the psychologist was wrong. I stayed there.

Because I was so sick, I was much closer to my parents in my early years, because I *had* to be. And now I'm just breaking off from my parents at 26, which is a time when a lot of other kids are just starting to come back. And when I say I'm a rich prick, it's easy to say, "Oh, he doesn't mean that," or whatever. But it's true. I was pretty spoiled. Ever since I was a little kid, I've had people doing things for me. It is taking me a while to get used to having to do them myself now. Subconsciously, I guess, I just kind of make people do things for me. It's kind of hard to complain about it, even if I want it to be different.

Can I hold down a "regular" job? The truth is that I've never had to yet. I don't know if I can. I know that's the first huge step into independence, but it's something I've never done. I've directed a movie about VCFS and I'm launching a website a community for learning disabled kids called FriendsOfQuinn.com. I imagine in my mind that I'll have a regular job someday. But I haven't done it yet.

As far as independence from my parents goes, my dad's not really the issue. He gives me s--t about money, or some dad stuff about how I should be working harder, but at this point I'm pretty used to that. I don't really take it personally.

It's my mom who is more involved in the day to day. When I think of independence, it's her I think about getting away from. Small things, and big things too. Like if I want to go to my therapist once a week but she wants me to go twice, we will butt our heads quite a bit. That has been happening lately. If my mom had it her way, I'd probably go every day. It's like, "Mom, I'm not *that* ---ed up."

And, obviously, she's always a little terrified for me. I'm her only child. And I've got these problems that she wants to help me with, always help me with. My whole life, she's been the one who saves me. She'll probably be terrified for me even after she's dead, She'll haunt my ass.

She's a very powerful woman. She's like a bulldog, or a lioness. You don't want to mess with her. She has controlled a lot of my life. Sometimes I'm angry about that, because I feel I'm in the passenger seat of the car and I have to ride wherever the driver wants me to go. Sometimes I feel as if I have no freedom.

But there is a flip side to everything. And there is truth in everything that we say. I couldn't have lived without my

mom. She's saved my ass a million times. She has been like an archangel to me. She had the wings that I didn't. And she's basically carried me everywhere I've been.

If it weren't for both of my parents, I would have a much harder time. I don't mean my parents' money. I mean their love and attention. It's because of my parents that I don't put myself down every day.

Do I want to be independent of them? Yes. Will I ever be truly independent of them? I don't know. It's one of the biggest riddles of my existence.

From the book *A Different Life* by Quinn Bradlee. Excerpted by arrangement with PublicAffairs, a member of the Perseus Books Group. Copyright © 2009.

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