A Child's View: My Brother-Different and Special
by Mary Ann Little

My big brother, Neal, is mentally retarded. That makes him different from most other people.

Doctors say that Neal has Cerebral Palsey because of a problem when he was born. Mom and Dad took him to clinics and other doctors trying to find help.

"You won't be able to take care of him," the doctors would tell them, "because he cannot take care of himself or do anything for himself."

But Mom and Dad both said, "All he needs is love!" They were right, but it wasn't easy.

Growing up was very hard for Neal. The entire right side of his body didn't work right. His hands couldn't grip or hold on to things like pens and pencils, or baseball bats. Even kicking a ball was too difficult. It was hard to do school work, hard to play sports, hard to make friends.

Neal would get so upset and discouraged because everything he tried to do was too hard, or didn't turn out right.

Because he couldn't hear well, he didn't like school. He couldn't hear the teachers, or what the other children were saying. It confused him, and made him get angry sometimes. When he would write or do anything with his hands, his face would twist out of shape. Children made fun of him, and hurt his feelings. By the eighth grade, Neal quit school.

"You are going to have to work for what you want," my dad would tell him. "You can do it."

Getting hearing aids helped a lot. After he had worn them for three days, Neal came running into the house laughing, "Mom, I heard a bird sing!" His dark brown-green eyes sparkled. He had never heard that sound before.

Later on, he went to a special school where he could learn to do things for himself. He is especially good with animals. He knows that all they need is love, too.

Other boys and girls ask me questions about Neal. Some of them say he is dumb because of his slurred speech, but he tells beautiful stories.

Some boys and girls say he is funny looking because of the way he moves. He doesn't walk smoothly like others. His jerky motions cause him to sway and lean to one side. But his face shines with pride. He is super strong, and very handsome.

I wish the doctors that said he couldn't do anything could see him now. He has a job at Goodwill Industries, and delivers newspapers. For extra money, he cuts grass for our neighbors. He is good at helping people, too. Anywhere, anytime, if he sees someone who needs help, or is having trouble, he stops to care for them.

But Neal is best at being a big brother. He wrestles with me, and helps me with my dance lessons. He teaches me to look at the stars, and make sounds like the owl and sea gull. He brings me gifts from work, takes me for rides on his motorcycle, and makes cookies for me. We listen to the radio together at night. When I'm scared from having a bad dream, he holds me. He taught me how to climb Grandma's buckeye tree, ride my bike, and how to talk with my hands (called sign language).

Some people say he is strange because he is mentally retarded. He may be different, but I say he is special.