



## Cover Story from the Jan./Feb. 2007 issue

Written by **Anne-Marie Welsh**  
Photography by **Ed Bernick**

"When you are starting a family, you envision where you want it to go," says Jim Serafin, who married his wife, Kim, in 1996. They had known each other since high school, sharing a large group of friends who enjoyed a full and active social life. "You think about college, family, grandkids, even," he says. "I had things planned out way in advance." When the couple was expecting their first son, Jim sent an e-mail to friends and colleagues with a recording of Nathan's heartbeat made during a visit to the doctor's office. Nathan turned out to be a dream baby: a good sleeper with a laid-back, happy disposition. The story seemed to repeat itself a few years later when Mathew came along. But after months of what the Serafins and their doctor thought was colic followed by a diagnosis of acid reflux, Kim began to notice Mathew wasn't reaching for toys the way his older brother had. They took him to a developmental specialist in Pittsburgh who ordered an MRI.

"And then it was boom! They told us his brain had not developed normally," Kim remembers. "One physician told us this was going to wreck our marriage. During that very first meeting he said, 'You need to see a priest and a marriage counselor.'" Jim and Kim are now more than six years into their challenging lives as the parents of a special needs child. It's not easy, but this is one family that has a lot to teach the rest of us about what to do

## when life is not what you thought it would be.



There's not much sense trying to sugar-coat this story. "Mathew was miserable as a baby," Kim says, shaking her head at the memory. He slept very little during the first year, often arching his back in pain. "He would just lay in your arms and scream," Jim adds. Friends and family did what they could to give the couple a helping hand, especially once Mathew had been diagnosed with cerebral palsy. But in many ways, Kim and Jim found themselves at the center of a raging storm, very much alone. There were trips back and forth to Cleveland and Pittsburgh, mountains of paperwork and lots of therapy sessions in between. "I think early on, with the lack of sleep and all, we would just think, 'What has to be done today?'" Jim says. With the constant stretches they were assigned to do for Mathew, Jim and Kim felt more like therapists than parents at times. Even as they've adjusted to their situation—plugging into what they call the phenomenal resources in the Erie area and connecting with other parents of special needs children—they are constantly faced with new challenges. "It's one thing to deal with a toddler who can't walk," Kim explains. "But as he began to get older, we began facing a whole new set of feelings." Dealing with his first wheelchair was a rude awakening on a number of levels. "Our situation evolves constantly, and that means we are always making new



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adjustments.”

**Yet to see this family in operation is sheer**

**inspiration.** The enthusiasm Kim and Jim shared as high school friends is evident in the family’s calendar, crammed with activities. Mathew’s older brother Nathan is a remarkable young man, playful and bright. He is amazingly patient and loving with his little brother, always including him when friends come over to play. “We are very blessed,” says Jim. “The boys get along so well. They share something very special.” Active in basketball, baseball and scouts, Nathan is also a member of the Our Lady of Peace swim team. Early on, the Serafins decided to create as normal a life for their boys as possible, and they are happy to report people are generally very accepting. “Exposing other people to Mathew is a good thing,” says Kim. “It’s not something we do consciously, but we do realize that when they encounter Mathew, they learn a lot about themselves and a little about cerebral palsy.” Heading to a Saturday morning therapeutic riding session at Centaur Strides in Westfield, NY, the family is out the door at 8 am for the 90-mile roundtrip drive. At the stable they greet other families of children with special needs with an easy warmth that comes from sharing a bond more profound than families whom they refer to as raising “typical” children.

They have learned to celebrate each accomplishment. The breakthrough moment when Mathew used sign language for the first time, indicating he wanted chocolate milk. The therapist’s surprise at his ability to navigate his own wheelchair using a joystick. On Sunday morning they will attend Mass where again, they feel at home. “People at Our Lady of Peace go out of their way to come up and say hello to Mathew,” Jim says. “They’ll give him a high five or pat him on the head. He knows the ushers and looks for them.”

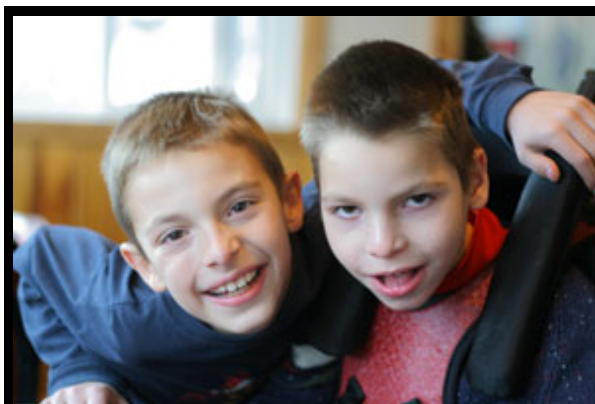
**There are still many daily aggravations, even**

**connected to their church.** Although the building is accessible, for instance, consider the extra effort involved on a night when Jim is working late and Kim has to drop Nathan off for a club meeting. If it’s in the church basement, she has no choice but to lug Mathew down and up the stairs to drop Nathan off, and again, when it’s time to pick him up. It’s easy to understand the Serafins’ one-day-at-a-time approach to life considering all that lies ahead. They will eventually have to build onto the tri-level home they purchased as newlyweds, adding a bed and bath onto the first floor to meet Mathew’s needs. And although Mathew had surgery this past year to lengthen the tendons in his legs, Kim and Jim were recently told he will be back in the operating room as early as next spring, having the bones in his hips repositioned to lessen the possibility of painful dislocations.

“When the children were younger I worked part time at a daycare center,” Kim says. “I used to hear parents complain about how their children were getting into everything because they were learning how to walk. And I would think, ‘Well, that’s a good thing. I wish my son was into everything!’ So we really do try to be grateful for every good thing in our lives.” Jim says he has learned not to get upset over the little things in life. “If I wake up and my boys are both happy and healthy for the day, that makes my day,” he says. “And,” he notes, “I’ve really changed the way I look at things. I’m not planning things out so far in advance anymore, I’m just taking things as they happen.”



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**resources**

**Catholic Charities Office of Disability,  
Deaf and Healing Ministries  
Erie Catholic Diocese  
429 E. Grandview Blvd., Erie, PA 16504**

If you would like to learn more about Disability of Deaf Ministry for yourself or a love one, or become involved with individuals with disabilities in your parish or diocese, please contact Jackie Johnson at:

**Phone: 814.824.1257  
TTY: 814.824.1266  
TTY Toll free: 800.374.3723, ext. 257  
Fax: 814.824.1264  
Email: [jjohnson@erieRCD.org](mailto:jjohnson@erieRCD.org)**

## Overcoming autism one song at a time

by Pam Parker

From the time she was in the third grade, Alyssa Zlotnicki sang at St. Stephen Church in Oil City – loud and clear. Now at age 13, she sings at Mass, participates in the Holey Jeans youth choir, handles cantor duties at St. Stephen school Masses, and performs in school plays and community theater. None of this is unusual for most youngsters, but Alyssa copes with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism that challenges her communication and motor skills.

Alyssa's parents, David and Theresa, credit the school and church families for encouraging Alyssa's gift of song. "Deb Mitchell, a teacher who handles school Masses, suggested voice lessons, and those private lessons led to more musical involvement in church, school and local groups," Theresa explained. While her mother talks, Alyssa hums a song and intermittently chats with her younger brother, David. Minutes later, she easily performs an impromptu concert for guests when

asked, and her big brown eyes maintain eye contact with her audience. "You'd never guess Alyssa has any problem at all," Deb Mitchell said. "We knew she loved to sing, so we asked her to be one of the cantors at our student Masses last year. This year, she handles it on her own." Although she maintains perfect rhythm when it comes to music, school is sometimes difficult for the seventh grader who exhibits classic signs of autism brought to light in the movie, "Rainman." Alyssa is very smart and easily memorizes songs, but she requires stringent order, rules and routine. To ensure that teachers understand Alyssa's needs, and how to deal with them, Theresa maintains close contact with the school and plans in advance for every school year. "Every once in awhile, Alyssa may get nervous or jittery, and be unable to explain why, but she can calm herself down," Theresa said. "Her teachers have been wonderful." With the help of the St. Stephen's family, a talented student found a perfect stage for a gift of song that started at Mass and branched into the Oil City community.

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