

Angel Unaware and Down Syndrome Awareness

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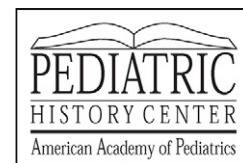
On August 26, 1950, Dale Evans Rogers, wife of Roy Rogers, gave birth to a daughter, Robin. Known as the “King of the Cowboys” and the “Queen of the West,” the Rogers were film, television, and rodeo megastars whose brand rivaled Disney in popularity. Overjoyed at Robin’s arrival, Roy announced the good news that day to 90 000 people attending a rodeo.¹ Their happiness, however, turned to worry, when a nurse urged Dale to “tell your doctor to tell you the truth about her.”² The truth was that Robin had Down syndrome (DS), or “Mongolism” as it was commonly called throughout most of the 20th century.³ Little did they know that their infant would play a key role in altering the perception of children with DS across America.

Fearing the negative publicity and shame surrounding DS, Roy and Dale initially kept Robin’s diagnosis secret. Many midcentury Americans felt that a child with intellectual disability indicated deeper inherited problems. The stigma was so strong that most pediatricians recommended early or even immediate institutionalization for affected newborns. Dale recalled 1 doctor advising them “to put the baby in a ‘home’; they’d have to give the child up sometime, anyway, and it was easier to do it quickly, before the child became entrenched in their hearts. He said that mothers gave children like this all their attention and were likely to

neglect the other children in the family.”⁴

This counsel to institutionalize pervaded pediatric textbooks, journal reports, and popular magazine articles for most of the 20th century. Influential Americans like developmental psychologist Erik Erikson⁵ and playwright Arthur Miller⁶ chose to institutionalize their infant sons. In Benjamin Spock’s⁷ 1946 child-rearing bestseller, he recommended, “if the family can afford to place the Mongolian baby in a special home, it is usually recommended that this be done right after birth. Then the parents will not become too wrapped up in a child who will never develop very far.”⁷ Doctors explained the necessity of institutionalization by using the reasoning that Dale recalled: mothers would become overwhelmed and neglect their wifely and maternal duties, and siblings would feel ostracized and ignored. Describing DS as hopeless and incurable, doctors emphasized that the diagnosis would threaten the image of the “normal” or ideal family.

Despite their physicians’ advice, Dale and Roy took Robin home. Over the next 2 years, they frequently sought medical advice for Robin’s DS and her congenital heart defect, but her doctors warned that “no operation could help.”⁸ The Rogers hired round-the-clock nurses and moved to a nearby valley hoping its better



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Drs Evans and Rice conceptualized and designed the research project, collected data, conducted the analyses, drafted, reviewed, and revised the manuscript, and approved the final manuscript as submitted and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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climate would help their fragile daughter. Despite all their efforts, Robin died of mumps encephalitis 2 days shy of her second birthday.

Grief-stricken, Dale felt called by God to write about their experience with Robin. In part inspired by Pearl Buck's⁹ book about raising her mentally disabled daughter, Dale took a more religious tack and told her story from the perspective of Robin as an angel looking down on her family from Heaven and described how Robin brought their family closer and deepened their Christian faith. A small religious press, Fleming H. Revell, published it in 1953. Although only 63 pages long, *Angel Unaware* became a runaway hit, staying on bestseller lists for months. Significantly, it represents the first time a parent wrote a book about raising a child with DS.

This tiny book with its inspirational message reflected common midcentury religious values and appealed to parents undergoing similar experiences. Thousands of letters from grateful fans poured in, thanking Dale for giving voice to their own struggles as well as the joy and sadness of raising a child with a disability. One mother of a child with DS poignantly expressed her gratitude, saying, "your book has shown me through your Angel into my Angel's heart. By reading it, I understand so much better."¹⁰ Dale and Roy claimed that *Angel Unaware* inspired families to bring their children out from hiding, and described the hundreds of children with DS who began regularly appearing at their rodeos and public appearances.¹¹

With an unassuming price tag of \$1, *Angel Unaware* sold over 2 million copies and went through more than 2 dozen printings. Doctors gave it to their patients; friends purchased it for neighbors. One doctor read it and immediately ordered 200 copies, saying, "the hardest part of my job . . . is to tell parents that a child is

handicapped, or that a child has died. If I can give them this book, it will help more than anything I have ever found to say to them."¹²

The timing could not have been better. DS was the most common cause of childhood intellectual disability, affecting 1 in 700 births. In the 1930s and 1940s, parents of affected children began to convene across the country in small support groups that coalesced in 1950 to form the National Association for Retarded Children.¹³ Dale donated proceeds from *Angel Unaware* to the National Association for Retarded Children, and she and Roy supported DS research.¹⁴ Through these organizations and testimonials like *Angel Unaware*, America began to see DS through a different lens.

Why is the story of Robin Rogers and *Angel Unaware* important? Although its religious message is clear, the book became more than a heartbreaking story about the power of faith to overcome difficulty. It marked a new era empowering parents to talk openly about raising children with DS. It reminded readers that the reality of DS was not as dire as commonly presented. It inspired families who felt alone and shunned to share the joys of raising affected children. It became a vehicle for people to discuss a stigmatized condition and in so doing diminish that shame. It launched a movement to defy doctors' advice regarding institutionalization and induced parents to raise their children at home. Robin's story, and others like it, contributed to calls for doctors to be more sensitive and open when discussing DS, to avoid disturbing labels such as idiot and moron, and to note the benefits of raising a child with DS as well as the challenges.¹⁵ This small work recast the diagnosis in a more hopeful light; instead of focusing on what affected children couldn't do, it emphasized the rewards that accompanied raising them.

The world of Robin Rogers differs remarkably from today's world. Institutionalization of children with DS continued well into the 1960s, but the numbers rapidly declined. *Angel Unaware* signaled a shift in public and professional attitudes about children with DS toward supporting them with therapeutic, educational, and community resources. Robin's story reminds us of the importance of listening to our patients' families and recognizing that what we take for fact may in fact not be so.

ABBREVIATION

DS: Down syndrome

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