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MILITARY SECTION

Daddy's Girl

Kurt Kondrich gave up his career as a police officer to fight for children with disabilities.

By Nancy Henderson

Kurt Kondrich could hear his newborn daughter Chloe crying in the adjacent hospital room just moments after his wife Margie had given birth. As a Pittsburgh police officer, he had once delivered a baby on a sidewalk, and he knew the crying was a good sign.

"But I could tell, with my sixth sense or whatever, there was something wrong because they kept looking over at us," Kondrich says. "And I kept saying, 'Is she okay?' Then the doctor walked over with his mask on and looked at us and said, 'Your baby has characteristics of Down syndrome.'"

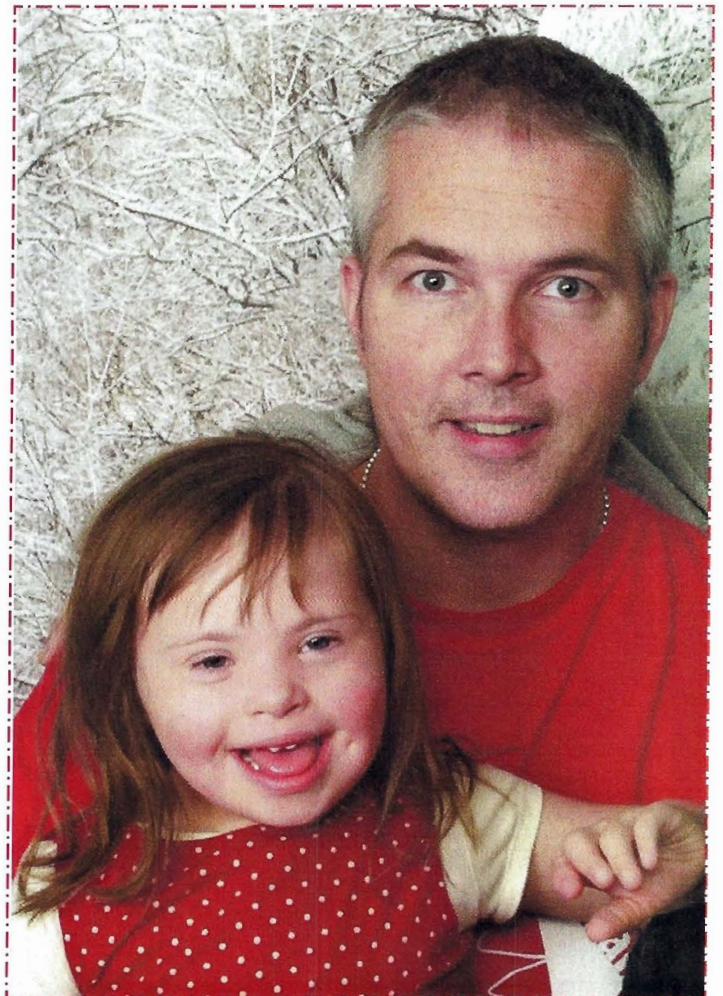
The doctor appeared to be startled that Kondrich would want to hold his child after hearing the news. "I would argue that she was prettier than the other girls there. She's a beautiful, beautiful angel," he recalls. "I was a cop then. I didn't know anything about Down syndrome or disabilities. But I'm always up for a mission and a challenge. So that was the beginning of my journey into the disability field."

From Cop to Crusader

A take-charge "people person," Kondrich began his career in law enforcement in 1985, when he graduated with a criminology degree and landed a job with the Atlanta Police Department. Six years later, he became deputy sheriff in Fort Meyers, Fla., but missed his family in Pittsburgh. So in 1993, when he heard that his hometown police department was hiring veteran officers, he applied for a job.

"I always loved community things," he says. "I used to walk the beat. I was a bicycle officer. I did the DARE program in some of the inner-city schools. I always enjoyed working with the community and doing that type of outreach. And that was probably preparing me for what I'm doing right now."

After Chloe was born in May 2003, Kondrich's wife diligently worked with the little girl to sharpen her learning skills. Chloe underwent physical therapy, participated in a reading program using books with sight words, and strongly bonded with her older brother Nolan, who nudged her along. "It was really neat to watch, you know. Even early on, Chloe wanted to be like her brother," Kondrich says. "Through positive peer modeling, he was able to pull her up. She does very well walking and running, and her speech is awesome. I'm sure we all aged a lot during those early years, but like anything in



life, if you put the hard work down early, it pays off in the long run."

Wanting to find out as much as he could about his daughter's preschool options, Kondrich attended gatherings of the Pittsburgh/Allegheny County Local Interagency Coordinating Council (LICC), an advisory group of parents, educators, service providers and agency representatives involved in early intervention services.

One of only a handful of fathers who came to the meetings, Kondrich began asking questions and soon found himself serving on the statewide ICC as a parent member. Later that year, he quit his job as a police officer and, when the chair of the Governor's Advisory Council for Early Intervention stepped down, he was asked to fill the vacancy. In 2007 he earned his masters degree in Early Intervention from the University of Pittsburgh.

Kondrich, 47, is now director of Community and Family Outreach at Early Intervention Specialists, a certified provider serving several Pennsylvania counties. He attends community fairs, baseball games and other events, where he educates the public about the importance of early childhood intervention. He often speaks to large crowds and has no qualms about calling on state legislators to win support for programs that affect children with disabilities.

"A lot of times lobbyists don't really believe in what they're doing. They're just doing it because they're getting paid big money," Kondrich points out. "I'm not a lobbyist. I'm a father who's on a mission to make sure that long after I'm gone, I'm gonna leave behind these programs that are really entrenched. I'm kind of fearless. People say, 'How do you do that?' I just do it."

The law enforcement experience serves him well, he says. "I do move quickly," Kondrich says. "When I was a policeman and worked the night shift, especially in Atlanta, we'd be backed up on calls and I'd arrive at a house at 2:00 in the morning and people would be drunk or high and there'd be a fight. I'd have like 10 seconds to assess the situation, figure out if I needed backup, figure out if there are any weapons and if I could take this guy if I had to arrest him. I had to think real, real quick." In his current work, he says, "The message needs to get out there. It's not like you can do early intervention from age 5 to 8, or 8 to 11. It's that important that parents know about it."

Last December, Kondrich won two major awards for his efforts. The state ICC gave him the Ronald Cowell Award for Excellence in Service to Young Children with Disabilities and Their Families, while the Infant and Toddler Coordinators Association (ITCA) honored him with its 2009 Regional Parent Leadership Award at a conference in Washington, D.C. "He is tireless in his mission of acceptance and inclusion for special needs children," wrote one supporter. "In a very short time he has become well known throughout Pennsylvania as the parent advocate for children," said another. "Of all the parents I have ever worked with in 20 years, I have never met a parent more deserving of this award."

Living Proof

Chloe, now 7, is almost as well known as her father, from whom she apparently inherited her love of people. Now in second grade at a mainstream school, she frequently appears in video clips on her dad's blog (<http://chloesmessage.blogspot.com>), where she dances, reads and enthusi-



astically meets her state senators, some of whom now keep her photograph on their desks. When she visits them, she often autographs copies of *Making a Case for Life* by author Stephanie Wincik. She is, after all, the girl on the cover. (EP reviewed the book in the June issue.) "It's very powerful because a lot of these legislators are older and they didn't grow up with kids with Down syndrome in their schools," Kondrich says. "As a matter of fact, they were sent to institutions. So now a little girl walks in there and shakes their hand. She calls everybody 'buddy.'"

Chloe has also become a walking billboard for early childhood intervention. "It'll save the tax-

payers hundreds of thousands of dollars over the course of her education by the fact that she's not being bussed and doesn't have to go to a special school," Kondrich says. "She reads better than some of the policemen I used to work with. I'm not kidding. She loves books. She just digests them. ... Chloe's gonna be running a school someday or she might run for office and get some sanity back in the state capitol."

Until then, she'll keep winning over the lawmakers and high-profile celebrities. Pittsburgh Pirates third baseman Andy LaRoche, for example, featured her on a television show that aired in the U.S. and Canada. Her videos have garnered kudos from around the world. She even drew the attention of the Republican vice presidential candidate two years ago. When Sarah Palin, whose son Trig was born with Down syndrome, came to town for a political rally, she spotted Chloe waving and holding a sign that read, "We love kids with Down syndrome."

"So the Secret Service came over and said that they wanted to meet us," recalls Kondrich. "They did not want to meet us for money or for our politics. You know why she wanted to meet us? Because Sarah saw a child with Down syndrome, a little girl who captivated her." When Palin returned to Pittsburgh to deliver a speech on disabilities, she once again singled out Chloe. "There was nothing mentioned about the campaign and the election," Kondrich says, referring to the conversation that ensued between his wife Margie and Palin. "It was two mothers talking."

"She's changed people's attitudes," Kondrich proudly says of his daughter. "I honestly believe that in seven years, this child has done more and planted more positive seeds than most of the miserable people I've met in my lifetime, and I've met a lot of miserable people. She has unconditional love, purity and goodness. She just takes off and goes. I think that energy and passion is what drives me."

"It's just amazing to watch this child," he adds. "I tell people, 'Don't ever feel sorry for me! If God showed up tomorrow and said, 'You know, we made a mistake. Here's your daughter and she's going to be on *American Idol*, I'd say, 'No, no, no, you're not taking this one. She's all mine.' •"

Nancy Henderson is an award-winning writer whose articles have appeared in *Smithsonian*, *The New York Times*, *Parade*, *US Airways* magazine and many other publications. She is the author of *Able! How One Company's Extraordinary Workforce Changed the Way We Look at Disability Today* (BenBella Books). Nancy often writes about disability issues and people who are making a difference through their work.