

Congratulations To Our Winners

Grand Prize Winners



Brittany L. Bakersfield, CA
Caregiver for her daughter



Lesley B. Bellingham, WA
Registered Nurse and Caregiver



Yolanda C. Los Angeles, CA
Caregiver for her daughter

Runner-ups



Marianne S. Chicago, IL
Caregiver for her daughter



Marte G. Aurora, CO
Caregiver for her husband

Shield Healthcare is pleased to announce the winners of its 2009 caregiver story contest, chosen by celebrity contest judge Sandra Mitchell, KCAL 9/CBS 2 News Anchor. The contest presents a special opportunity to hear the voice of exceptional people, who have played a dedicated role in the lives of loved ones or patients with special needs. With more than 200 touching stories to choose from, the selection of our winners was given the utmost consideration.

The three grand prize winners received \$1,000 in American Express Gift Checks, a commemorative plaque, and an annual subscription to Today's Caregiver Magazine. The 2 runner-ups received \$250 in American Express Gift Checks and an annual subscription to Today's Caregiver Magazine. All contest entrants received a commemorative, "I Care" heart lapel pin.

Sincerest thanks to all who shared their caregiving story.

Grand Prize Winner

Brittany's Story



“What Makes Caregiving Rewarding?”

Being a caregiver means everything to me, but sometimes there are things that have to be sacrificed and lessons to be learned in order to truly understand what a gift it is. Even before I had a disabled child, I chose caregiving as my profession. I started working in a convalescent home as a nursing assistant. I realized these people I cared for everyday were not just my patients, they became my friends. I spent time with their families, was with them during holidays, and helped them with their most personal and emotional obstacles they overcame daily. I learned that these people just needed someone to love them and truly care for them.

After one of the ladies I cared for suddenly died, I was so upset and couldn't face it, so I ended up going back to school. At the age of 23, I found out that my two year old daughter had a devastating neurological disorder, called Rett Syndrome. I was use to caring for the elderly but now I had to face new issues with my own child. I watched her as she began to loose her hand coordination, forgot how to talk, walk, feed herself, and even play. It was heartbreaking. I thought about how strong I'd have to become to care for her. I tried to continue to work but after spending days in the hospital with my daughter as she underwent surgery and missing many days from work, I was let go from my job. I knew then that most people didn't understand how much physical, emotional and financial responsibilities it takes to be a caregiver. As I looked at my daughter and just prayed she will one day be able to say “ Mommy, I love you !” I decided then to stay home and care for her everyday needs. And it was the best decision I ever made. Just one look into her eyes and I am overwhelmed with love, joy, and appreciation to God for choosing to give me an Angel.

Caregiving has made me become a more understanding and compassionate person and I found my true calling in life. My husband and I have such a stronger bond and the way we see others and truly care for them is something we would have never learned without caregiving. My 7 year old son has learned so much with how to help his little sister, he even knows how to vent her G-tube. He sees others in wheelchairs as people, not objects, and I truly believe he will grow up to be a caregiver one day. I feel so empowered and worthwhile because I am a caregiver. It may bring tears, and it may bring pain, but it will definitely bring a hug, a friend, and knowing that someone is depending on you. I have learned so much from the people that cannot speak, about strength, life, and what we are truly here on this earth to do: to care for others, and I will spend the rest of my life doing that!

Grand Prize Winner

Lesley's Story

“What Makes Caregiving Rewarding?”

When I met my client, a 44 year old victim of a massive brain stem stroke, I knew that this case was going to be a challenge. She was left unable to move or talk, but her cognitive ability was intact, which is termed “locked in.” I quickly learned her communication system, which was slow and tedious and involved narrowing down the alphabet to spell out words one letter at a time. She'd often cry and say, “I'm hopeless, I want to die.” It was painful to hear. I encouraged her to say more. Letter by letter, her words poured out. I learned how a medication error had her on a blood pressure dose that was too low, which she realized too late. And how after the first mild warning stroke, the hospital sent her home 3 times saying it was just a headache, amongst other information, “locked in”, since the accident. I was fascinated by what I was uncovering, which felt like detective work. She looked forward to my shifts and the time flew by for me. We spent hours solving crossword puzzles on the computer together. It made her feel intelligent again and I'd notice a twinkle in her eye. She made all her own decisions, and with my assistance, she was able to pay bills online, stay in and maintain her own home, schedule appointments, and eventually fly to CA to attend her granddaughters wedding. (Which was at the top of her bucket list.)

After months of preparations, we planned our first outing together; Christmas shopping. She wanted to buy an oil lamp for her daughter and asked my opinion. I wanted her to decide. So, careful not to sway her opinion, I read her the information listed on the boxes. She studied my face and finally made her decision. It was a busy Christmas morning at home and amongst the chatter, good food and unwrapping of gifts, I began to unwrap the unexpected gift from my client. Then I noticed a familiar box. It was the oil lamp. The very one I liked best. The oil lamp we both had worked so hard to get. The only gift she had bought that day, and she gave it to me, to say thank you.

I felt so appreciated and honored to have made such a difference in her life. She had gone from severely depressed to strong and empowered. She was finally able to have a voice to exert her will and to find joy. She never gave up and chose to remain a full code throughout her 17 years that she lived after the stroke. It was by far, the most difficult and the most rewarding experience of my life.



Grand Prize Winner

Yolanda's Story



“What Makes Caregiving Rewarding?”

It's been years since I've seen the stars. I can't bend my neck back far enough to raise my eyes to the heavens any more. My spine is stiffened from the strain of helping my daughter Stacy stand on her own two feet, if only for a few seconds, while I transfer her from her wheelchair to her bed. Stacy's warm smile soothes my aching muscles and gives me a burst of strength as I gently lower her onto the rose-colored sheets, tuck her soft pink comforter around her shoulders, and begin singing her favorite song. She giggles at our nightly ritual that ends Team Stacy's day with hugs and laughter. My efforts to serve as her arms and legs, to feed her, to keep her clean and dry, and safe and happy, are trifling compared to the gift she has given me, her mother. I can never repay her enough for teaching me the meaning of unconditional love.

As my first pregnancy approached its due date, I couldn't help but fantasize about the daughter I would get to know in a few weeks. Would she have my auburn hair, and my husband's brown eyes? Would she grow into a voracious reader like her mother, a handy engineer like her dad; would she bloom as a ballerina, or blossom as a goalie in soccer? Would she dabble at life's buffet as a teenager, and slide into a B+ average, or get straight A's and have a shot at the Ivy League school that didn't welcome Mom's B+ grades? I had so many dreams about the life Stacy and I would share together-and so many prayers they all would come true. My obstetrician told me that Stacy's sonogram at 9 months showed her at 6 pounds. She was born the next day at 3 pounds 13 ounces. Somehow, the OB had missed the large clot in my placenta that had destroyed almost half of the vital organ that provided oxygen and nutrition to my little girl in my womb, starving her body and brain. Following Greek tradition, we had named our daughter after her grandmother, Anastasia. The meaning of Stacy's name now resonated poignantly--"resurrection". The brain damage caused by the lack of oxygen during my pregnancy meant that the youngster we had imagined would join our family was now lost, along with our dreams for her life-and ours. The tiny, needy baby I clutched in my arms heralded a new life born-for us all. A life without expectations, but with surprising joys.

Our mourning for "normality" was briefer than we'd expected. Stacy rolled over, Stacy sat up, Stacy slept through the night. Granted, she was seven years old and not seven months, but watching Stacy discover her world, one literal baby step at a time, helped our sadness slowly evolve into cheers. By the time Stacy'd reached her teens, our fantasy daughter had long since been forgotten-we were now thrilled to help our real Stacy enjoy her life at her own developmental speed, and share her glee at the ride. I didn't need words to hear Stacy's 'thank you' after a meal, a hug, a diaper change, or a bath-her grin was the best reward. On her 18th birthday this year, we celebrated the only achievements that mattered-our beloved little girl had grown into a unique and wonderful young woman, who returns our "I love you's" every day with her smile. Team Stacy, her father and I, have had the pleasure and the blessing of caring for and helping our daughter grow into a happy adult. As long as we are physically able, we will stand by her side to physically and emotionally support her as she engages in the voyage of her life. On a warm September day at the park, I sat Stacy next to me as I stretched out on the fragrant grass and watched her excited fingers relish the cool texture of the green leaves. Rolling on my back and looking up at the blue sky, I felt an uninvited twinge - not from my muscles, but my heart. The responsibilities of caring for Stacy have been challenging, demanding sacrifices that our younger selves would have been loath to embrace, but, our lives had been enriched, our values redefined, as we struggled to grow up with her. Now, with our golden years looming on the horizon, my only sadness remains the reality that we will not always have the strength or the capacity to meet her needs, and that, someday, when we get the call from the heavens above, we will have to say good-bye.

Runner-up

Marte's Story



“It’s All About A Promise”

It was a perfect September fall evening. As we stood together under a beautiful old cottonwood tree, we were filled with highest hopes and the promise of an enduring second marriage. We repeated our vows “for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part” with hearts full of newfound love and the highest of expectations. We were serious as we made those promises to one another. Unbeknown to us, there was a disastrous disease developing in my husband’s body, even as we spoke those words.

When his Parkinson’s became more pronounced, we tried various ways to help him persevere and cope. He fell often and everyday mobility became harder and harder. His symptoms ebbed and flowed and there were good days and bad days. “I’m useless,” he would mutter, “really, you should leave me.”

“ A promise is a promise,” I would reply. “I’m not going anywhere.”

We prayed, we laughed, we cried, we tried several options: home healthcare, nursing home stays, different combinations, some helpful and some horror stories! The promise that I would always be there became even more important as I became an advocate, supporter, giver of love and hope, and a caretaker of physical and mental stresses and needs.

Because I am a mother of six, I was all too familiar with the nurturing and care that infancy requires. Those same needs reappear in an adult with severe disabilities. But hidden in the day-to-day challenges of changing, feeding, dressing, excess laundry, and helping with everyday tasks are many rewarding moments. “We did it” became our daily mantra of little victories! We had the reward every evening of knowing we had lived out our “promises” one more day in a very real, tangible way.

On a perfect September afternoon, we recently celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary. We greeted many friends and family and we were rewarded by their expressions of respect and admiration for a marriage that has withstood many obstacles and storms.

After all, “a promise is a promise.”

Runner-up

Marianne's Story



“What Makes Caregiving Rewarding?”

My daughter, now 3 years old, is the most beautiful, inspiring gift I've ever received. Born into a family with various mental health issues, Bi-Polar, Autism Spectrum, and Schizophrenia disorders are few of the many daily concerns our family faces.

After a long, labor-induced delivery, there I was at 41 years old holding my newborn baby girl. I laughed and cried at the sight of her with an overflow of emotion; she is beautiful and perfect as can be, I thought. She spent her first week of life in the hospital for observation of possible pulmonary bleeding, and was treated for an unknown infection and jaundice. After that first, scary week of life, she was sent home with a clean bill of health. She cried and screamed all the time as if she were being tortured, ate very little, and hardly slept for about a year and a half. I was exhausted and frustrated since she always checked out “healthy” at her doctor's check-ups.

All I wanted to do was to love and nurture her cries. I had no prior experience with infants and did what I thought was my job as her mother. My days and nights blended together as if it was always the same day. I pushed my friends and family away, gave up my job and our home to a one room apartment to be there for her the only way I knew how by giving her my unconditional love and time.

She now attends Special Education pre-school 5 days per week, receives disability benefits, attends feeding therapy, and eats a gluten/casein free diet after spending the last year working with 7 different therapists and a nutritionist trying to discover the causes of her behaviors. She suffers from extreme sensory sensitivities and has behaviors that place her on the Autism Spectrum that cause her great difficulty with speech, coordination, concentration and eating, to name a few.

What I have learned from my daughter is that the most important things to any person, big or small, are dignity and respect. She has taught me much patience, the true meaning of unconditional love, and how important family and friends are through the sleepless nights and the horror-filled cries, to the ever-frustrating continual tantrums throughout our days. We've learned to organize our lives in order to help her cope with her difficulties through much sacrifice and by trial and error. I am grateful every day I wake up to have her there beside me and to hold her in my arms and smile at her knowing she feels safe. She inspires me to be a better person by appreciating the simple things like walks in the park and following her lead. She has shown me the beauty of the grass and trees, and puddles after the rain. Every time I look at her whether she is smiling or crying, I am thankful for the sacrifices that are made in order to help her cope. It humbles me to see her blossoming in her talents. She is an amazing singer, dances and plays the piano, and has lots of fun with her toys. She has quite a sense of humor, despite her difficulties, and is finding helpful strategies through the many positive influences we've learned from and created, to get through our day. She IS the most BEAUTIFUL gift in my life. I have no regrets and would regret if I hadn't been there to help her realize her true potential despite her challenges. Thank you for this opportunity to tell our story and hope it will inspire others, as well.