



Jessica and Ava's Story

The beginning...

The reasons why children and families find themselves at Anchor Center vary. Children from all over Colorado and even surrounding states, come to Anchor Center with visual impairments. Some from birth, some from illness, and some from injury. We all have a story. My daughter Ava's story is ever-evolving and one that I am honored to share with you.

Ava is 5 years old and was a student at Anchor Center for three and a half years; she just graduated with the class of 2017 back in June! Something that was truly bittersweet.

Ava wasn't planned, but she was more than welcomed. I was so excited. I had a lucky pair of pink socks I wore to every appointment to ensure she'd be a girl. Sure enough they worked! I suppose like any mom-to-be my hopes and dreams were to have a healthy, happy, child to raise with all the love in the world.

Ava was born by way of an emergency c-section and medical complications immediately followed for both she and I. With both of us in crisis and needing medical treatment, I was not able to really see her until she was 6 hours old. I was thrilled when we were both finally released from the hospital about a week later, and I was able to take my baby girl home...briefly.

At two weeks old, we were told Ava was dropped. We were led to believe it was an accident, causing her to have a Traumatic Brain Injury; and that the broken ribs, legs, and arms were simply bi-products of medical malpractice. However, just this summer we learned that Ava's injuries were purposeful; caused by one person. And that person is now in prison. Ava was a victim of child abuse. Abuse that is the cause of Ava's visual impairments. This is our story, a very painful one. And though it is our truth, it does not and will not define us.

In those first weeks after Ava's birth, we were told Ava would never see. That she would never hear. That she might be forever bedridden. And that she would never lead a life anything near normal.

These are not words the mind can process. I had to leave the room. I became physically ill. There were tears. There was hopelessness. Most of all, there was disbelief.

When reality set in, I made it my mission to "get my masters in all things Ava". I learned as much as humanly possible about Ava's conditions, including her visual impairments. Where we lived in Virginia, vision services consisted of a small supply of therapy tools and toys. The items were dropped off at our home by a worker and I was instructed how to use them. A one-time appointment. And a wish of good luck.



At Anchor Center...

In early autumn of 2013 Ava and I transitioned from Virginia to Colorado to be closer to family. There were many services we needed to re-establish for Ava and, based on our previous experience in Virginia, vision was not at the top of that list. But when we were referred to Anchor Center, we came. I knew we were in for something different than our previous experience when I pulled up to the building.

From the very beginning, at Ava's assessment, I felt like I was finally being heard, understood and that Ava and I were in the right place. From that first experience at Anchor Center to watching my daughter graduate last month, I simply cannot imagine how our lives would have been without it.

More than anything else, because of Anchor Center, Ava is HAPPY. A smile is ever present on her face; and the number of hugs, cuddles, and kisses she has to give others is bountiful to say the least. The social butterfly she has become is a stark contrast to the tiny infant who would cry when other children would come near her, because she could not see them well enough to anticipate and predict how they would interact with her. **To put it mildly, Ava has flourished at Anchor Center.**

Ava is non-verbal. She has said a very small handful of words, each one its own rare occasion. One day as I was picking Ava up from Anchor, I had multiple staff members run up to me excitedly. During a class sing-a-long, they all had heard Ava clearly say "school!" at the appropriate time, twice! For a non-verbal child to sing the word "school" so loudly and clearly, just about says it all in reference to Ava's personal feelings about her favorite place on Earth.

Ava has made friends at Anchor Center who understand what it is like to see the world differently; the children are loving and patient with one another because they share in a unique perspective. Ava's very first order of business each and every school day was to go around, one by one, and give each friend a big hug. Like no other place, she felt she belonged and was accepted.

For me? Being around others who know the struggles, the triumphs, the heartbreak, and the unfathomable joy, that comes along with being the parent of a visually impaired child truly is a miracle. To walk in Anchor's doors and be able to chat, vent, share advice, spread information, give high-fives on the good days, and shoulders for tears on the hard days, is something this mother did not take for granted.

Anchor Center staff are unlike anyone we have ever met. The degree of special is almost tangible when you enter the building. Their compassion, skills, dedication, knowledge, empathy, patience, and love are unsurpassed by anything, anywhere, or anyone I have ever seen.

Ava's teachers have not only helped me to understand Ava and how to better address her needs and assist her in becoming more self-sufficient, but I took the most away from watching them teach my child and seeing her unwavering trust in them. From watching them in class through the one-way mirrors, to walking Ava down the hall, to cuddling her during a period of overstimulation. They are true examples of empathy, patience, and competent care. And I try to emulate that in my parenting every moment.



Ava walks herself to class



Ava meets Santa at Anchor Center's Holiday Party

With Gratitude...

To Anchor Center: thank you doesn't cover it. I have watched you change the lives of so many children, including my own. I feel the only way I can pay it forward outside of bringing awareness about visual impairments and Anchor Center itself, is to continue to help Ava navigate the world in a way that would make you all proud.

When I say "our Anchor family" it is not just an endearing term, but rather, a fact. They are family. And will forever continue to be.

Lastly, I would like you to take a moment. Think of your happiest memory. ... Do you have it? ... Now, imagine that memory, but take away the visual.

Now think of the person closest to your heart. Think about not knowing what their face looks like.

Moving on and still subtracting the visuals from the equations, how about crossing the street?

Writing a letter?

Can you imagine?

It's difficult to isn't it?

The students at Anchor Center have tremendous mountains to climb!

Being here in Colorado, how many people have climbed a mountain? If you have, you'll know this: When mountain climbing, the term "clipping in" refers to the process of attaching to anchors for protection. Anchor Center is THAT anchor! And YOU are that process!

I wish "thank you" was enough, but it doesn't begin to cover what a life-changing gift you are giving when you help Anchor Center. In supporting Anchor Center you are helping dramatically improve lives, like mine, like Ava's, and all of the other children with visual impairments and their families who have found a sanctuary in Anchor Center.

With your support, these children are able to "clip in" and reach new heights every single day.

Thank you for allowing me to share our story.

With my deepest gratitude,

Jessica Johnson

Parent of Anchor Center Graduate, Ava



Ava presents Jessica with a flower at her 2017 Anchor Center graduation