

## UNMASKING LENA

**F**or so many years, I wore an invisible mask. Before I came to Families Involved Together, the acronym F.I.T. meant Faking It 'Till (I make it). As a wounded child, one of my disguises was laughter. Unfortunately, I made poor choices in men that led me to becoming a single mother. Though I love my son very much, his special needs presented great challenges. The responsibility of motherhood brought on additional stress that caused me to indulge in unhealthy behavior. Years later, I finally sought help from a wonderful community program and I began to put my life's puzzle back together. While this process set my life on a better path, I had not totally let go of my mask.

One day, I ran into a friend who was working as a Parent Support Partner at Families Involved Together. She said FIT was looking for new support partners and that I should call for an interview. I was accepted and invited to participate in FIT's Parent Connections project. I attended many hours of training that prepared me to offer constructive encouragement toward growth and insight by parents just like myself. The sessions were quite intense at times. We were learning information and skills that I wished I had known while raising my son. Despite that regret, I noticed that something new was happening to me.

Eventually, I was matched with several parents who were going through what I had struggled with years before. Many began the Parent Connections workshops looking very down-

trodden. They felt as if they had come to the end of the line. They expressed great fear for their children's future—and their own.

My assigned parents and I spoke by phone during the week and met in-person at the scheduled workshops. These educational sessions presented

ideas and skill-building that these parents had never experienced. In time, the parents seemed to develop a sense of trust and affection when we spoke or met. When they graduated,

the mothers were no longer sad and apprehensive. They were bright and hopeful. They shared with me how much the program—and I—had meant to them. I listened to them tell me how much I had done for them and the changes they were able to make because of my friendship and support.

I was, of course, very proud and happy for their success knowing I had contributed to it. But more than that, I also began to realize that, somehow, my own life had also totally changed—a metamorphosis of sorts. I had dropped my wooly outer layer, which was my defense mechanism. I had emerged as something quite beautiful. Now clothed with knowledge and truth, I was able to fly above past circumstances and soar into my own fantasy. I had arrived! I finally had discovered my true "FIT" and become the person I was meant to be—one without a mask, one without pretense.

Lena Gladden

