AN INDEPENDENT WOMAN
"I haven’t let
Down syndrome
stop me," says
Jenny (in her
bedroom). "I need
some help sometimes, but
I can do a lot."

Deciding for Herself

A Family for Jenny

BORN WITH DOWN SYNDROME, JENNY HATCH, 29, WENT TO
COURT TO EMANCIPATE HERSELF FROM A GROUP HOME.
ALONG THE WAY, SHE FOUND THE PLACE WHERE SHE BELONGS.

Photographs by ELINOR CARUCCI

CHEERING HER ON "Jenny is capable of taking care of herself—we’re here to assist," says Kelly Morris (center, with fiancé Jim Talbert and
Jenny). The two give Jenny rides to work and church and help her balance her checkbook. "I don’t need a group home," says Jenny, who tears
up recalling her time there. "And they knew I don’t need one. A year of my life was taken away for no reason. I don’t ever want to go away again."
Bursting through the front door of the Village Thrift store in Newport News, Va., Jenny Hatch greets her coworkers with shouted hellos and hugs. Though it’s her day off, Jenny, 29, who has Down syndrome, can’t stay away. “I love my thrift store,” she says of the shop co-owned by Jim Talbert and fiancée Kelly Morris. Walking to the back office, the petite honey-haired young woman with the sunshine grin settles down at the computer and pulls up a video on YouTube, watching news footage of a court decision she has viewed hundreds of times before. “I watch it every day,” she says. “It was a happy day.”

Most Americans celebrate July 4, but Jenny marks Aug. 2, 2013, as her personal independence day. After a yearlong legal battle in which Jenny challenged her biological parents’ authority to keep her in a group home, a court granted Jenny’s wish: to have temporary guardianship awarded to Talbert, 54, and Morris, 45. Jenny’s victory made her a star in the developmentally disabled community and gave her what she wanted most: the right to choose her future. But in her fight for self-determination, she discovered in her employers a loving second family. “I love living with

Perfect for the Job
“she kept coming in, asking us to hire her. How could we say no?” says Morris of Jenny, who helps customers and organizes clothing at the shop (above). She just learned to work the register.

Tears and Triumph
“I got my freedom and my rights back,” Jenny (with lawyer Jonathan Martin) said in a Dec. 5 speech before a disability rights group in Washington, D.C. “I got my life back.”

Friends and Family
“I don’t want her ever to lose her independence, but I want her to feel protected and loved and a sense of belonging,” Morris says. Says Jenny: “I’m going to be here for a long time.”

MISS INDEPENDENT
When Jenny (above, at around age 5, with her dad, Richard Hatch) was born, “doctors told us to put her in an institution and get on with our lives,” Hatch says. “But there was no way we were going to do that.”

A GENTLE TOUCH
“She has such pretty hair, don’t you, sweetheart?” says Jenny (with Jordan). Brushing Jordan’s hair every night, “Jenny is so kind,” says Morris. “They have a special bond.”

Kelly and Jim,” Jenny says. “They helped me when everyone else treated me like a child. They always make me feel happy.” In turn, Jenny brings joy to Jordan, Morris’s 15-year-old daughter, who has cerebral palsy. “I’ve never met anybody with as much love in her heart as Jenny,” Talbert says. “She’s an example to all of us.”

She never set out to be a role model. Raised mostly by her mom (her parents are divorced), Jenny graduated from a mainstream high school, volunteered on political campaigns and loved riding her bike. But she had a difficult relationship with her mother, and at 13 got an apartment with a friend for a time. In 2012, after sustaining a back injury while cycling, she moved in with Talbert and Morris to recuperate at their invitation. Five months later her parents placed her in a group home. “We thought she’d be safe there,” says Jenny’s father, Richard Hatch, 53, who lives in North Carolina. Jenny’s mother declined comment.)

To Jenny, the group home felt like a prison. “They took away all my rights,” she says of the 24-hour supervision with no access to her computer, the church where she sings in choir or the salesclerk job she held two days a week since walking into the store and filling out an application five years ago. Hearing how unhappy she was, Talbert and Morris came up with a plan to help Jenny secure her ultimate independence.

Today Jenny is enjoying life with the family she chose for herself—going out to the local Olive Garden, baking cookies with Morris, helping Jordan with her hair. “I am very proud of Jenny,” says Hatch. The couple’s guardianship expires in August, but their embrace of Jenny is open-ended. Not surprisingly, Jenny knows exactly what she wants: “I don’t want to live anywhere except with Jim and Kelly. I’m so happy to be home.”

By Cathy Free and Jill Smolers