

# “I’ve learned that grace is bigger than any disability!”

Born with a rare condition that caused her to have only two usable fingers on each hand, Joanna Joy Costa faced many challenges. But that hasn’t stopped her from making her dream come true!

In the OR, as her obstetrician was about to deliver her daughter via C-section, all Nancy Costa could think was: *As long as I hear her cry . . .*

For the last few months of her pregnancy, the Voorhees, New Jersey, mom had known her second child would be born with arthrogryposis multiplex congenita (AMC), a condition that causes nearly immobile joints. There was even a chance she might not survive being born. So now, as Joanna Joy came into the world with a hearty wail, tears welled in Nancy’s eyes.

You’re here! You *made* it! she breathed in relief. No matter what you face, Joanna, we will never give up on you . . .

## Miracle after miracle!

Before Nancy could even hold her, baby Joanna was whisked away for testing and evaluation.

Doctors discovered her tiny arms and legs were curved and underdeveloped. Her muscles would always be weak, so that it would be a challenge for Joanna to use her limbs. But most affected were her hands, where the joints were so stiff, six of her fingers would be unusable.

Joanna would live; for that, Nancy and her husband, Roy, were grateful. But what kind of life would she have? Could she ever be independent? they worried.

Would she never feel *normal*?

Yet as Joanna grew, she truly lived up to her middle name, “Joy.” With time, therapy and surgery, she began taking steps on her own as Nancy and Roy cheered her on.

While in public, though, people would often stare. It broke Nancy’s heart when Joanna would look down at her arms, realizing she was different. Yet it never affected her for long. At home, surrounded by music—Roy played guitar; Nancy, the piano—the little girl sang at the top of her lungs.

Then, when Joanna was five, they learned about the WREX, a robotic device designed to help those with neuromuscular disabilities. Built to fit over Joanna’s arms, the WREX had a framework that provided the balance and strength her body lacked.

For the first time, Joanna could lift her arms! “I can do it myself!” she marveled as she fed herself.

By the time Joanna was seven, though, she had a much bigger dream. “I want to play the piano!”

Though Nancy was a piano teacher, she was reluctant. She wanted Joanna to believe in herself. To see everything she *could* do, not what she couldn’t. But how could someone who could use only four fingers—her thumbs and forefingers—play music?

But Joanna was determined to play piano. So Nancy turned to

“Believe you can and you’re halfway there.”

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT

“Knowing what Joanna’s overcome makes her music extra beautiful!” beams her mom, Nancy.



Janet Robertson, a music therapist.

Taking Joanna’s challenges into account, Janet began adapting a few classical pieces. “Even if you can’t play a piece exactly the way it was written, play it your own way,” she encouraged. And as Joanna sat on the piano bench, lost in the music as she played flawlessly, all Nancy could think was: That’s our extraordinary girl!

## “You are an inspiration!”

Soon, Joanna was invited to do a church concert. As she played a series of hymns, eyes widened in awe. “That was incredible!” people marveled afterward.

Eager to share her gift, Joanna created a YouTube video of herself called *Limitations*, to prove that the only limits we face are the ones we place on ourselves. And recently, at just 15, Joanna released a CD collection of classical

sonatas called *Four Fingers, Two Hands, One Piano*.

*You truly are an inspiration!* one listener wrote to Joanna.

*I think it is amazing that you have taken what God has given you and have done something so beautiful with it,* another said.

Joanna’s muscles still get tired easily. Even so, she’s now teaching herself other instruments. And between performances, she’s just a regular teenage girl.

“I’m mastering straightening my hair. I can do all of it myself but the very back!” she smiles. “I used to get depressed that my body didn’t work like everybody else’s. But I’ve learned that grace is bigger than any disability. I now know that there is a purpose for me!”

“I couldn’t be more proud,” Nancy adds. “Joanna’s taught us all that we shouldn’t let *anything* stand in our way!”

—Sarah Kovac

## Overcome your obstacles! Conquer your biggest challenges, like Joanna did, by . . .

### ✔ Building a “try team”!

Share your dream with friends and ask for their support. Struggling? Call your “try team,” who will encourage you to keep trying until you reach your goal!

### ✔ Thinking positive thoughts!

Beat what psychologists call the “negativity bias”—focusing on struggles, even imaginary ones—by thinking of one good thing you accomplished instead!

### ✔ Labeling your feelings!

Bad day? Say out loud what you’re feeling. A UCLA study found voicing negative emotions reduces their intensity, helping you get over a setback quicker!



Read or heard a human interest story you think belongs in Woman’s World? Send it to us! If you’re the first to share it, and we publish it, we’ll pay you \$100! E-mail the story with your name, address and phone number to: WWFeatures@WomansWorldMag.com. Or mail to: Scoop, Woman’s World, 270 Sylvan Ave., Englewood Cliffs, NJ 07632.

Photos: Bill Kovnat/Ikonik Pix (2).