

ELLIE NIGRO

The Ambassador of Joy

Written and Illustrated by Marcia Hendershot

Edited by John Hendershot



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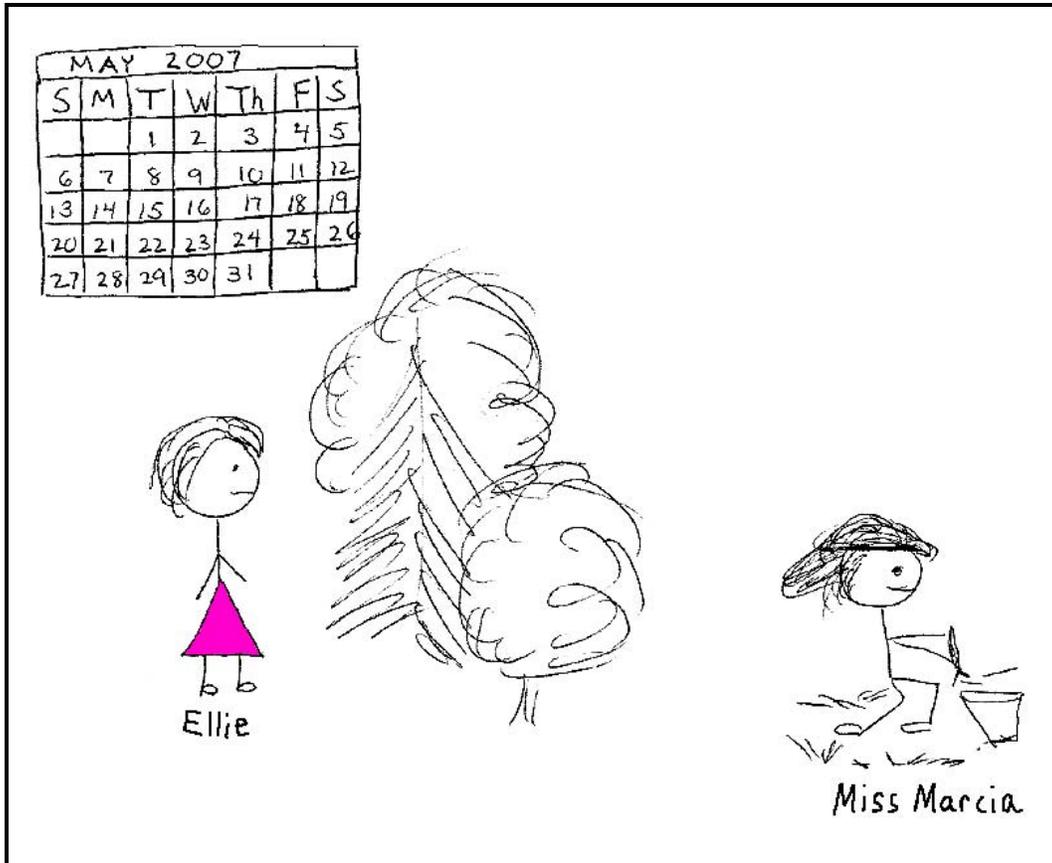
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DEDICATION

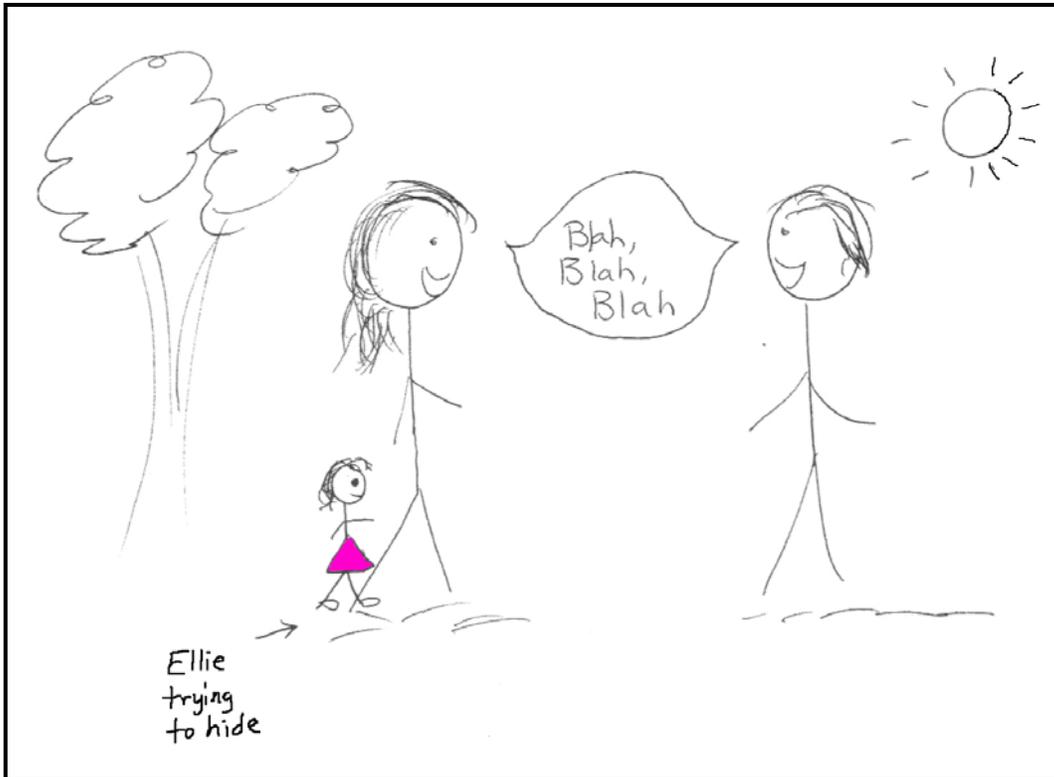
This is dedicated to Todd, Kristen, Tyler and Jake Nigro—
the people who made Ellie what she was.

Written in honor of what would have been Ellie's 8th birthday
(February 15, 2013).

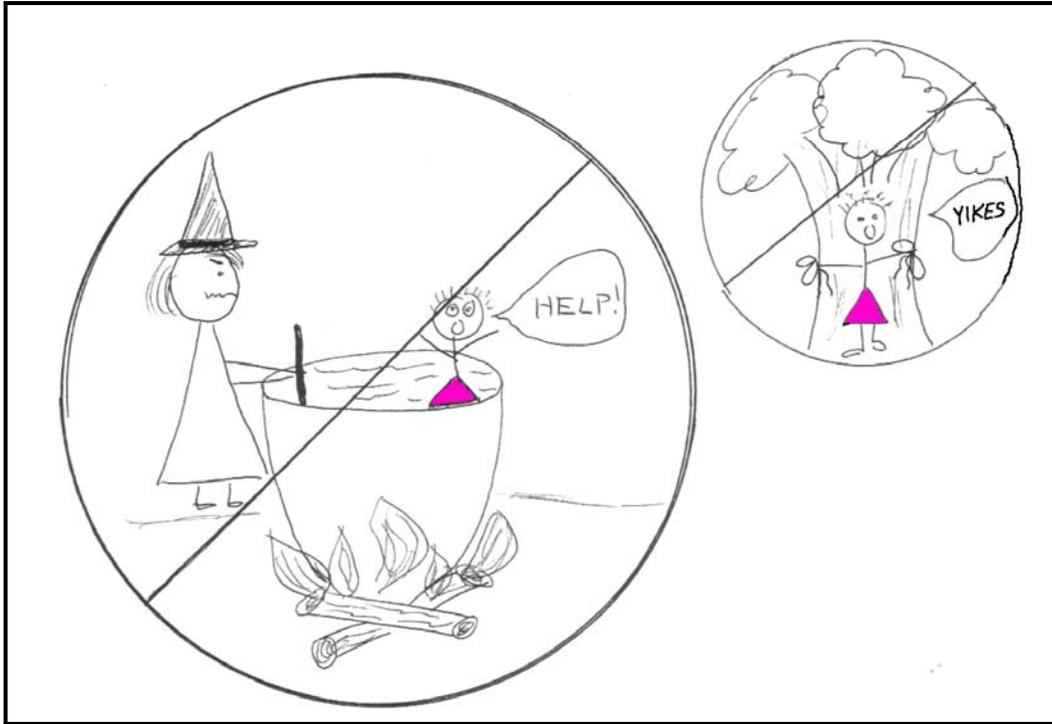


Ellie Nigro entered this world on February 15, 2005. She lived on a short street on a hill but I didn't even know she existed until after we moved next door to her family in April 2007. I honestly don't remember the first time I saw her, but my guess is that it was sometime in May or June.

Now, for those of you who knew her it may be hard to believe, but at one point in time she was SHY. She was still in that shy stage when we moved in, so even though I was out in the yard a lot and even though we'd see each other frequently, she was reluctant to talk to me. She usually "hovered" nearby.



At first she would just watch me from a distance, so I had no idea what she looked like up close. But every once in awhile her mom or dad would come over to talk to me, and she would hide behind their legs as we talked. She'd peek out now and then, so I eventually pieced together an image of a pixie-face lit up with sparkling eyes and a coy smile.

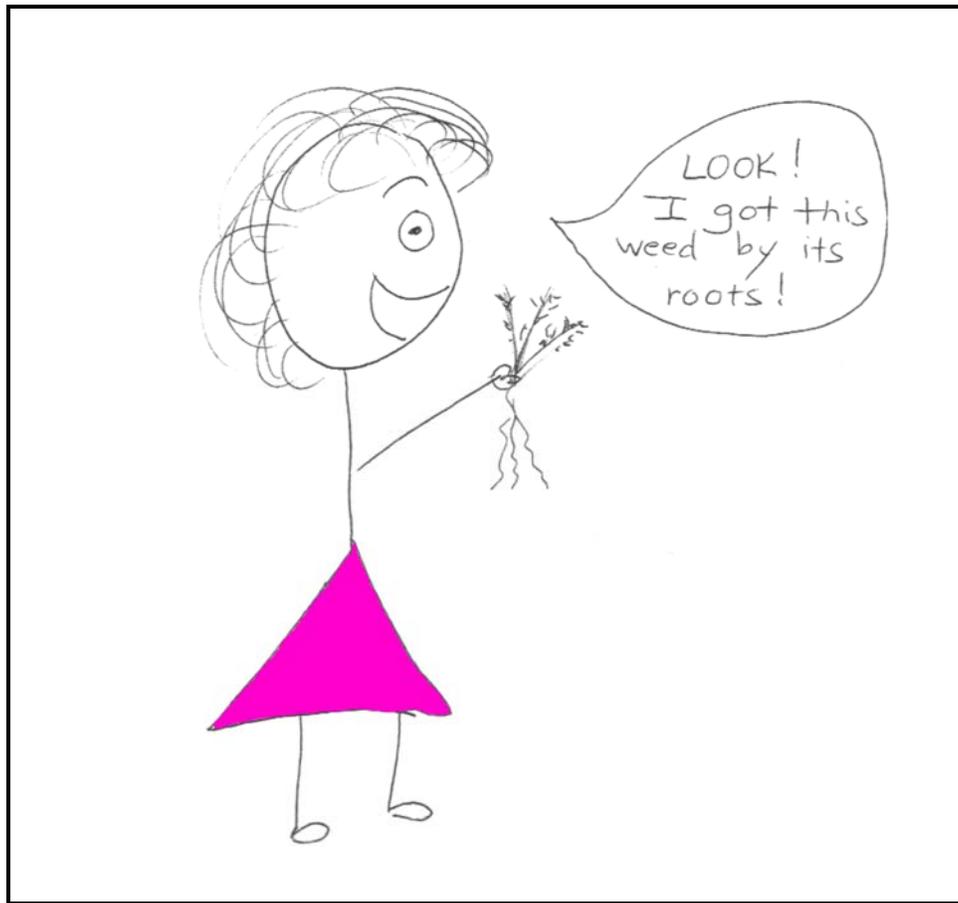


Eventually, after multiple conversations with her parents and multiple times multiple times of seeing me in the yard, she realized I was NOT a witch, I was NOT going to make Ellie Stew out of her and eat her, and I was NOT going to tie her up to a tree.



Instead, she came to realize that I was actually pretty boring—just sitting on the ground with some kind of tool that I used to poke holes in the ground. She wasn't brave enough to approach me yet, so she would hide between bushes that separated our houses and just watch me.

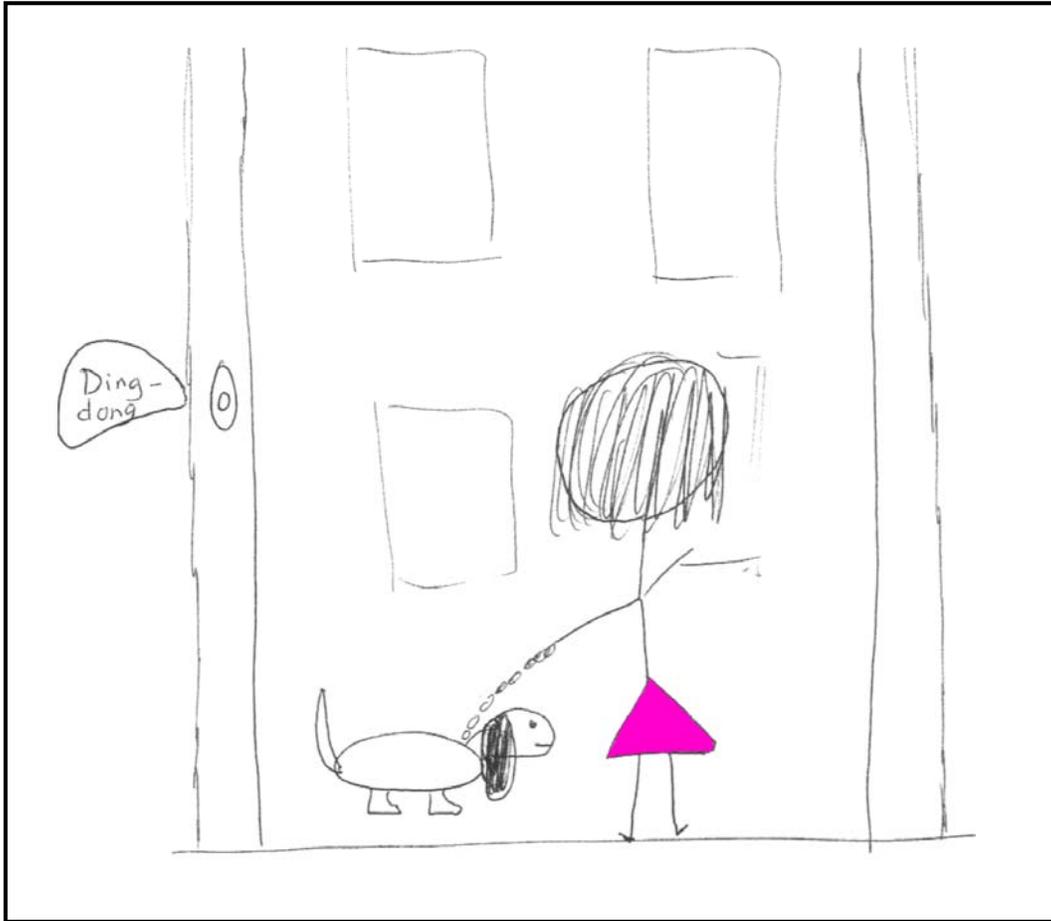
I would always say "hi", but more often than not she would duck her head back behind the bushes and just continue to watch me.



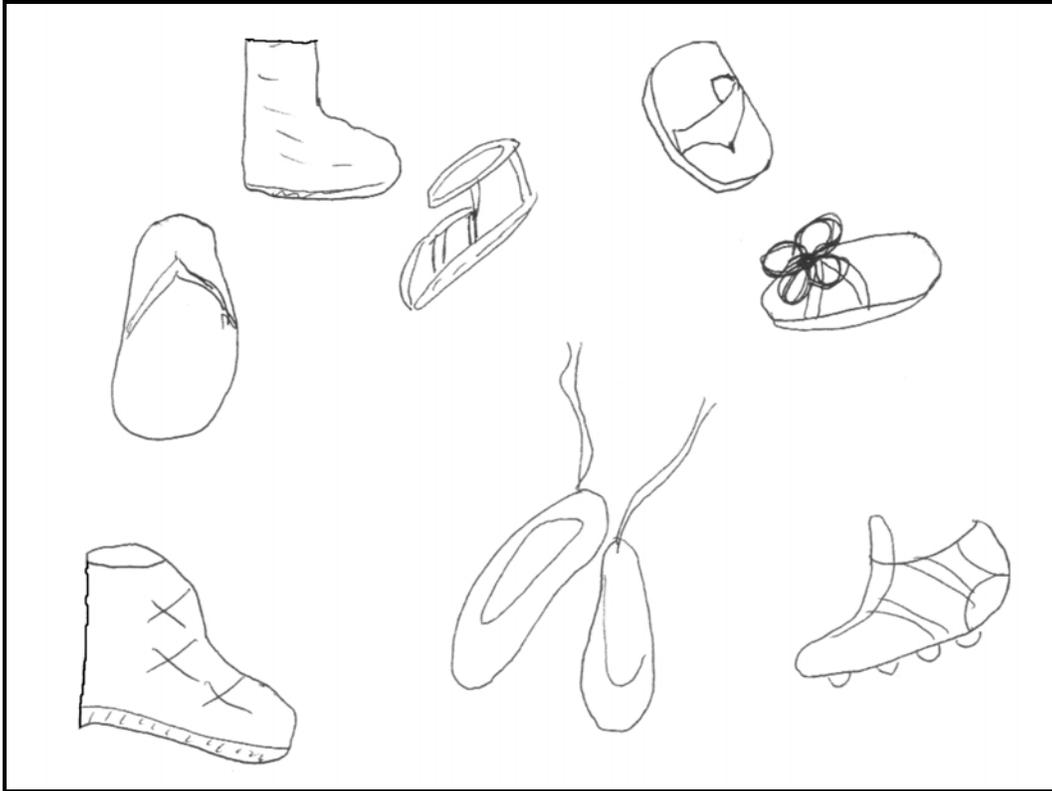
Her curiosity must have gotten the better of her, because one day she walked toward me, stopped about 3 feet away and just stood there. I said, "Hi, Ellie" and, to my amazement, she said, "What are you doing with that stick?" I explained to her that it was a weeder, and that I didn't like weeds and it helped me dig them out of the ground. I showed her the difference between pulling a weed out of the ground willy-nilly and pulling a weed out of the ground *by its roots*. She gave it a try and darned if she didn't get a poa anna by the root on her first attempt! She grinned ear to ear when I praised her for her skill. That was our bonding moment.



Subsequent to that, initially she was still a bit shy. She was still a "bush lurker", but it was obvious that she wanted to get my attention. One day she sang as she lurked, and I said (without looking up), "Hmm ... I hear somebody singing. I wonder if it's Ellie". And she came popping out of the bushes. For the next couple weeks, that's the technique she would use to get my attention. Shortly after that it was . . .



Ding-dong, ding-dong. She soon had me trained to associate our doorbell with her presence on our doorstep. She always had such an eager look on her face, and was usually bursting with news of some type (an upcoming visit to see Grandma and Grandpa, or a new bracelet, or new shoes). And speaking of those shoes . . .



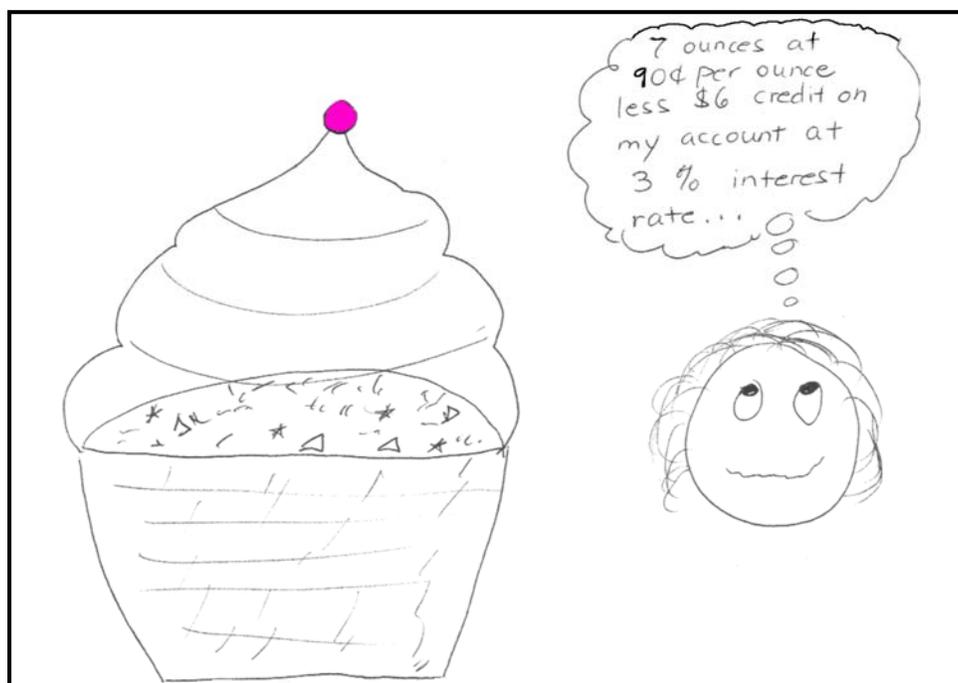
It seemed like every time I saw her she was sporting footwear I'd never seen before. In fact, one day I remarked, "It seems like every time I see you, you have a different pair of shoes on. How many pair of shoes do you have, anyway?" She just shrugged and said, "I don't know." Later, as she was leaving our house I said, "Here's your homework assignment. I want you to go home and count how many pairs of shoes you have. Next time you see me you can tell me how many pairs of shoes you own." I should have known: The conscientious little girl proudly announced, "I have 19 pair of shoes. But I think I have more. I might have some in the car." That was pretty typical: She was VERY detail-oriented.



She had another personality trait that caught me off guard early on in getting to know each other. She was watching me weed (yet again!) and I thought, "This poor child must be bored out of her mind", so I said, "Have you ever played Simon Says?" She shook her head no, so I taught her how to play. After a couple practice rounds, we played "for real". Well, I gave her a non-Simon command and when she performed it to perfection I said, "Oh-oh. Simon didn't say to do that." Tears welled up in her eyes. I felt horrible. I had to give her a hug, tell her it was okay, and suggest we play the game some other time—which we eventually did, at which time she was VERY proficient. (Is it any wonder?) That girl was so smart. When she discovered my phone had a calculator she was thrilled and wanted me to give her problems to solve. I started out with 3 times 2 and quickly learned that was WAY below her skill level. She said, "Give me something like 316 times 8".

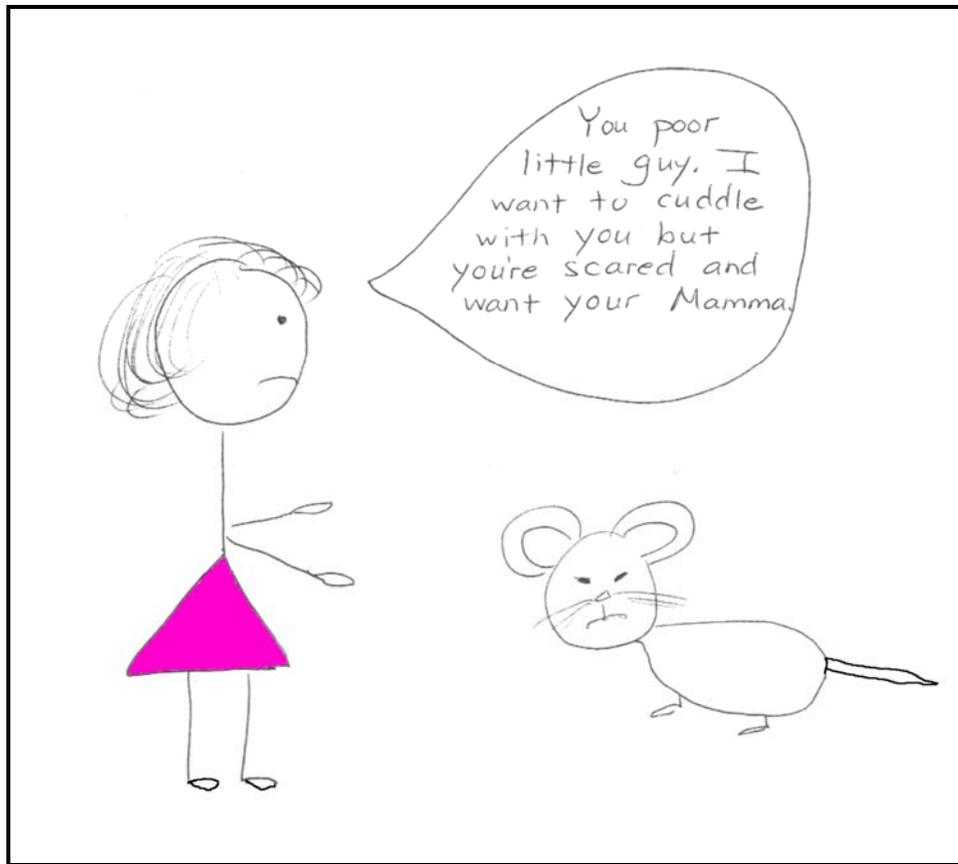


To my regret, Ellie and I shared only a couple adventures together outside our neighborhood. One was the day she went with me to the recycling center. One of the volunteers there knows me and tried to joke around with Ellie. She wanted NO PART of his jests. She kept a poker face and wouldn't crack a smile. (And mind you: This guy is a professional Santa who tried to impress her by showing her his Santa driver's license, sporting a picture in his best Santa suit!) She may have found him intimidating, but she came across as totally unimpressed by such a mundane activity as meeting a Santa.

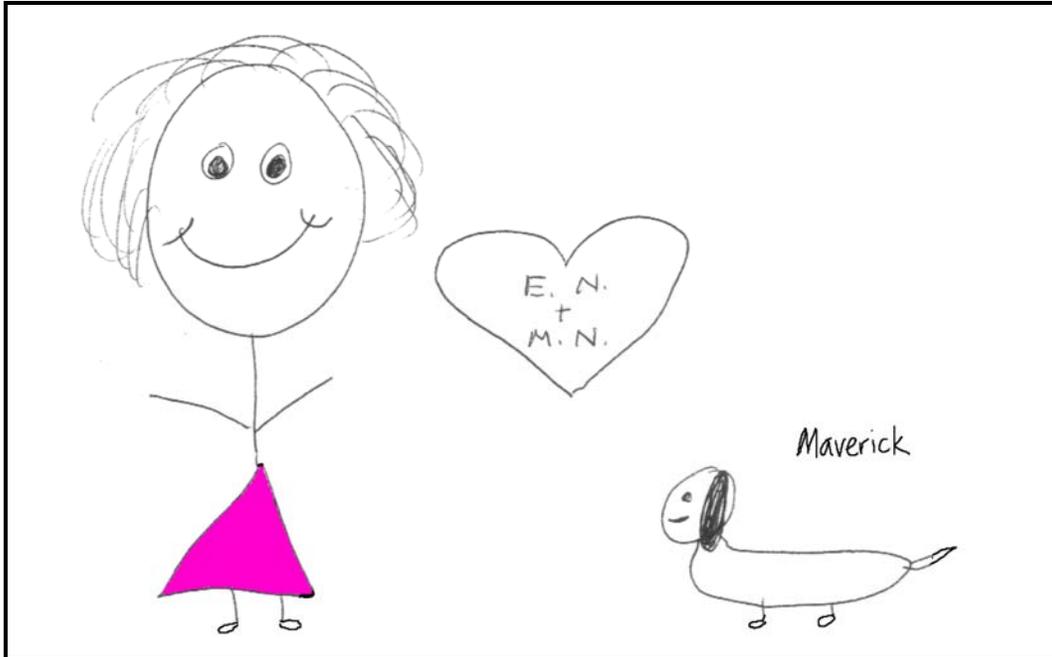


Another time I took her to TCBY in the golf cart. Her excitement about "our date" was contagious. She hopped in our golf cart, clutching her TCBY gift card. (She was not ABOUT to lose it!) She was absolutely giddy and it made my heart sing to be with her.

She was quite independent in choosing her yogurt and toppings (it was obvious she'd been to the shop before.) She was quite the mathematician and was figuring out how many ounces she could purchase, which blew me away. The other thing that amazed me: The amount of whipped cream she put on top of her yogurt. In fact, I could hear the people behind me chuckling as they watched her squirt on more, and more, and more. We all got a kick out of her final creation. I always suspected she knew whipped cream was lightweight so she could pack it on and not cut into her allotted ounces.



Here's my favorite Ellie story: While planting flowers one day I had my back to her, and all of a sudden she said, "Oh, my gosh—a RAT!" I whirled around and, sure enough, there was a gray critter with round ears and a long tail moving along a sidewalk in our backyard. But he wasn't *scurrying* like a rat; instead, he was *waddling* like a possum. Sure enough, a baby possum it was. His mom started calling to him (actually, it sounded like chirping), and the little guy stopped amongst a pile of rocks and looked up toward a branch from which Momma's sound was emanating. He was squinting and blinking his little eyes in search of her. Ellie SOOOO wanted to pet him/capture him, but I explained that his momma was afraid we were going to hurt her baby and that we should probably walk way and leave him alone.



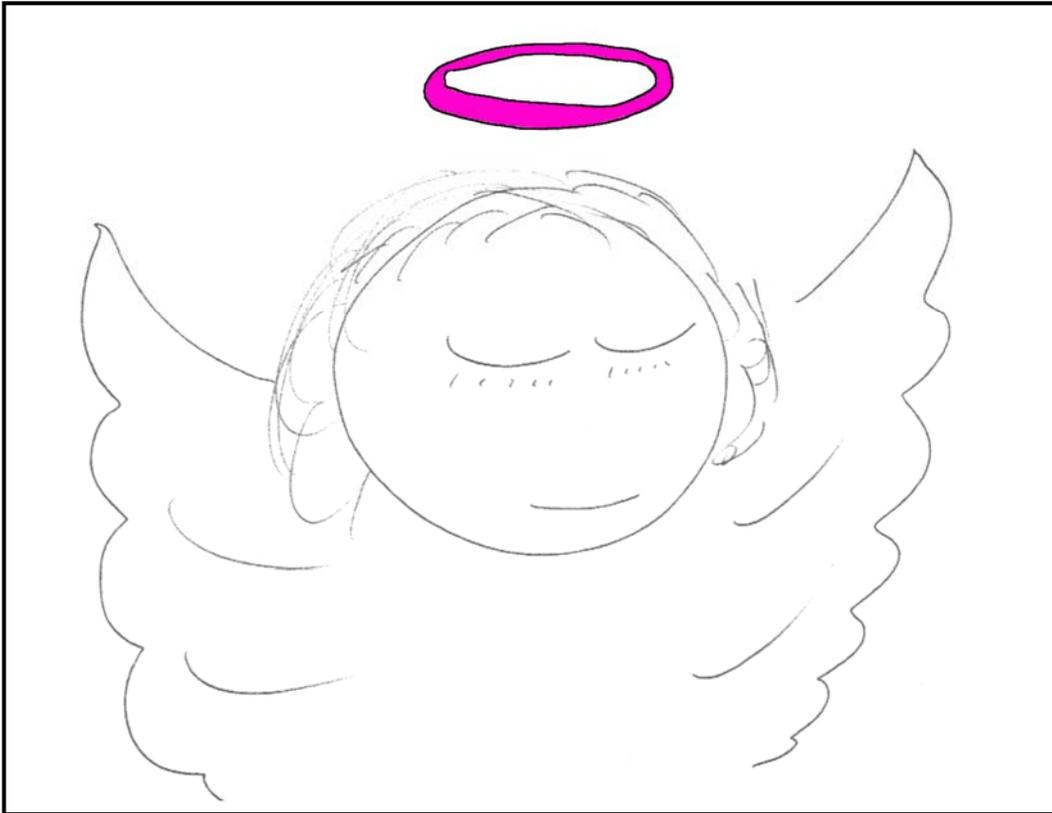
Ellie amazed me. She didn't argue; didn't try to convince me we should stay a couple more minutes. Instead, she compliantly said, "OK. I think we need to leave him alone", and she walked away. Talk about empathy!!! Not all 5-year-olds would have been so willing to walk away. But that was Ellie—considerate of small animals. And speaking of small animals ...

Boy, did she love Maverick. Once he became part of the Nigro family, I learned to associate the "Ding-dong" with both Ellie AND Maverick. She was so proud taking him on his walks.

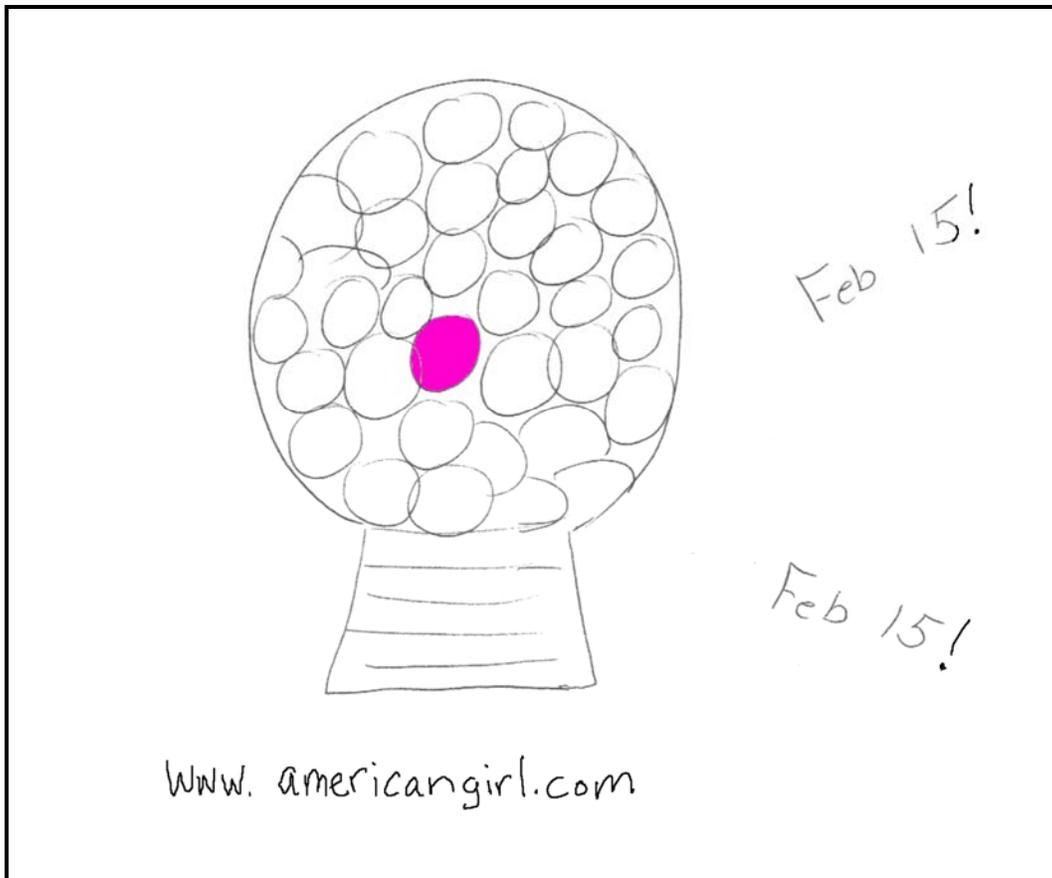


Her love of animals didn't stop with possums and dogs. She even like worms! She was infatuated with our compost pile from the get-go, but when I brought worms home and asked her if she wanted to help me put them in the compost pile, she jumped at the chance!

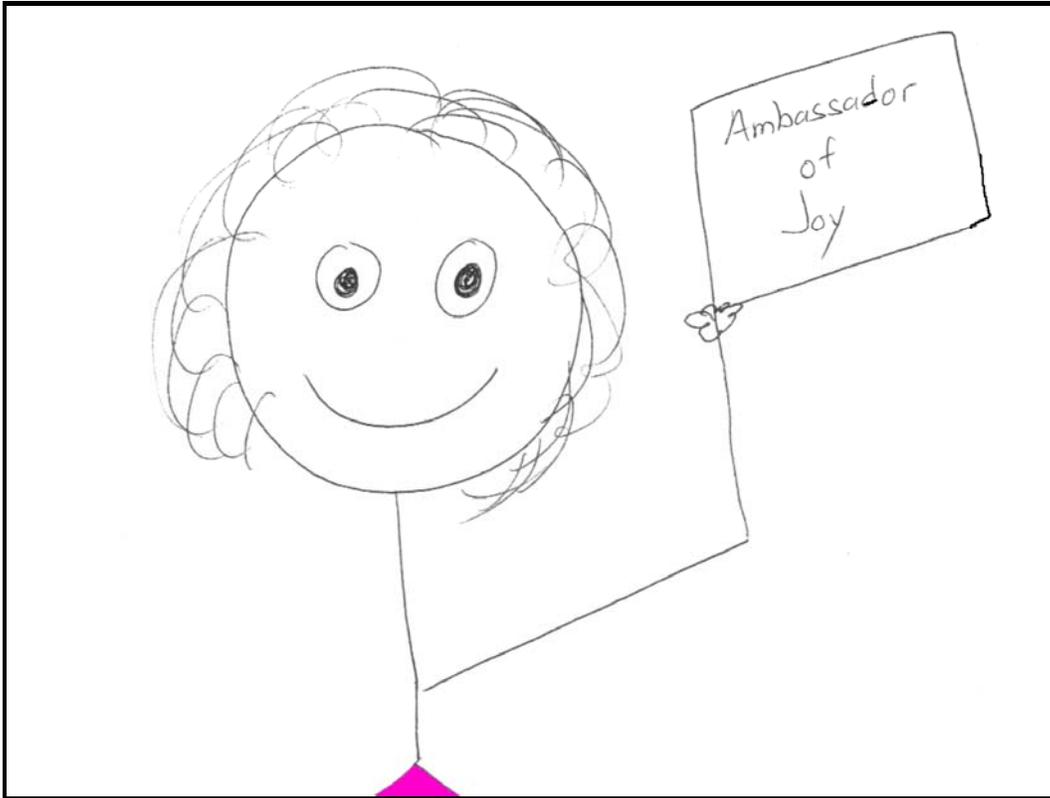
We divided the worm stash (I had four containers), and while I was carelessly strewing the droopy things here and there, she was carefully placing each one next to a food scrap "so it will have something to eat". Amazing—a child compassionate toward worms, afraid they might starve if not placed near a food source. It was so endearing.



Sometime in January 2012, Ellie and her friend Ryan blessed us with a concert. Ryan played piano and Ellie played cello. They were in our great room mid-afternoon, and the sun was shining through the window behind Ellie. She was totally immersed in her playing—the "human and instrument were one" type phenomenon. She looked so at peace, and I remember thinking at the time, "Between the contented look on her face and the back lighting from the sun, she looks like an angel." To this day I wonder if that was a premonition.



My last conversation with Ellie revolved around two things: (1) It was January, but she was already looking ahead to her birthday. She was giving me ideas as to what I might give her for her birthday, and she was leaving nothing to chance: She told me the web site where I could find American Girl accessories!!! (2) She was excited to get home so she could practice her cello—not that the actual practicing was such a big deal, but rather because each time she practiced a song she got to color a gumball on a drawing of a gumball machine her cello teacher had given her. As I watched her run down our hill and race home, I remember thinking, "Her enthusiasm keeps me young."



How does one end a story about such an endearing child? Actually, when you think about it, the Ellie story never ends. It lives on in the memories of everyone who knew her and will continue to bring smiles to our faces.

John referred to her as the Ambassador of Joy, and that was based solely on observations of how she interacted with people in our neighborhood. We know she touched lives everywhere she went. In fact, my guess is that she positively impacted more lives in her short lifetime than most of us will in our lengthier lifetimes. Truly: Ellie is a hard act to follow.

Thank you Todd, Kristen, Tyler, and Jake for sharing her with the rest of us.

A NOTE FROM THE NIGROS

We received this book as a gift on what would have been Ellie's 8th birthday. The amount of thought and effort was impressive.

We knew that Ellie loved her friend Marcia. She couldn't wait to see her. There were so many times when Ellie would disappear and we would have to retrieve her from Marcia's yard. We always enjoyed hearing the funny stories Marcia would share about Ellie.

Since we no longer are creating new memories with Ellie, this book is a treasure beyond description. We want to thank our terrific neighbors, John and Marcia, for loving our daughter and remembering her with us.

Todd, Kristen, Tyler, and Jake



Nigro Family Photo – Christmas 2011