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(From left) Lisa Barich, physical therapist, holds Claire Dana, 5, while Claire's mother Julie Schrage of Wilmette looks on.



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Documentary finds special needs bring special gifts

Three families with children who have special needs will tell the stories of their daily lives in a documentary titled "You're Not Alone," airing at 6 p.m. Sunday on WTTW, Channel 11. The one-hour program is the work of Julie Peterson of Wilmette, former television reporter for WTMJ in Milwaukee, who has a special needs child of her own.

"Our child went through years of physical therapy," she said. "She is fine now, but we went seven days a week and through all those waiting room visits and surgeries, I met many families who were forced to come to terms with very serious issues right after their children were born."

For her film Peterson chose a family from Wilmette, another from Chicago and a third from Flossmoor. Each faced different challenges and each has found a way to live with those challenges.

"The message of the film is 'hang in there,'" Peterson continued. "You can make it. The important thing is to talk about it, get it out there and try to find the silver linings."

Dr. Ken Moses, who served as a consultant to Peterson, spoke on the film. "He explained that the families are grieving the loss of the perfect child they thought they were going to have," she continued. "But they find joy in the little things."

"For example, when a child walks, after the family has been



Julie Peterson of Wilmette, producer of the documentary "You're Not Alone," airing on WTTW Channel 11 at 6 p.m. Sunday.

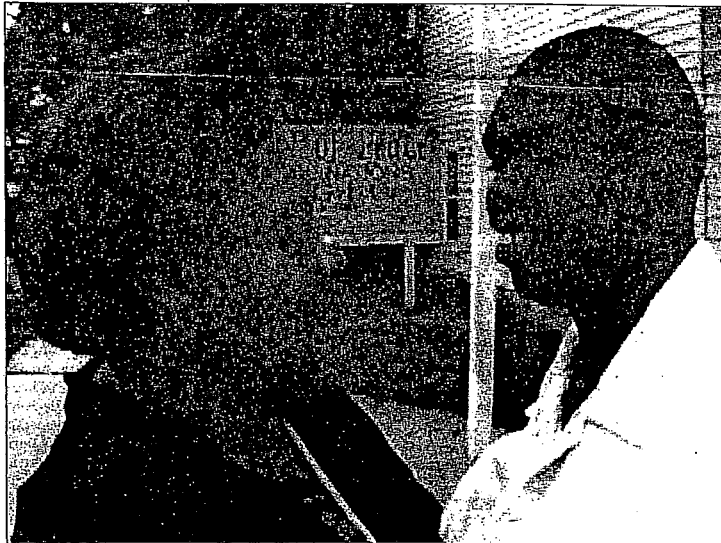
told he would never walk, that's a gift — that's the silver lining."

Three years

It took Peterson three years, with a budget of only \$40,000 to make the documentary. "I've worked in TV," she said, laughing, "I know how to work fast with a film crew."

Peterson knew the Wilmette family personally and found the other two families through United Cerebral Palsy and Tuesday's Child.

"I did a lot of networking," she admitted, "and I got wonderful help, all along the way. Northwestern University's Small Business Opportunity Center did my legal work pro



Mazola Simpson of Flossmoor with her son Thaddeus Simpson, 22.

bono and my production company was Maday, run by Terry Maday, who lives in Wilmette."

The film has already won a Telly Award and was scheduled to be shown to a group of special needs professionals in Chicago just prior to its premiere on Channel 11.

She and the three mothers featured in the documentary are scheduled to be interviewed by Steve Cochran on WGN at 12:40 p.m. Friday.

Peterson has done her home-

work. She quotes statistics which say that 11 percent of U.S. students between six and thirteen years of age receive special education services, and nearly 30 percent of all U.S. families have at least one member with a disability, if measured by an activity limitation.

But Dr. Moses says in the film "The (families') hope comes in recognizing that their child's worth, their child's beauty, their child's goodness, their child's impact on the world is

theirs to be had, simply because the child is there, and it's the same for all of us.

"It has nothing to do with what we earn or what we produce or what we do as human beings, it's who we are as human beings."

In anticipation of Sunday night, Peterson has mailed out 24,000 postcards to special needs families in the suburbs. "I want everyone to see this," she said. "It is very hopeful."

— Dorothy Andries