

(From Page A 19)

Goepel took her to the Staten Island Mall to get her picture taken. "The photographer was trying to get her to look at the camera by waving stuffed animals in front of her. She had an upward gaze that didn't move," Mrs. Goepel said.

A fixed gaze became Jackie's passport into numerous hospitals, from which she didn't emerge for a year. After countless tests, doctors diagnosed her with a "failure to thrive" and said Jackie would live as a "vegetable" for no longer than a year.

"Then we decided to take the reigns. We said no more invasive tests. If Jackie was going to die, she's going to be at home where she can get love and attention," said Ms. Goepel.

When Jackie was 18 months old she was diagnosed by a doctor who was covering for her regular pediatrician. The doctor placed the tiny baby in the palm of his hand, and she folded over like a seshoe.

"How long have you known your daughter has cerebral palsy?" the doctor told a stunned Mrs. Goepel, then pregnant with her third child.

'Cute ... and sad'

Jackie's little sister, Elizabeth, was as precocious as Jackie was delayed. She walked and talked at 10 months old. "Bethy used to try and make Jackie walk. She'd grab her legs and put her in a walking position," said Jackie's father, John Goepel. "It was cute ... and sad."

Jackie waged her first rebellion from the seat of her high chair. She was looking down at her little sister, who was seated at the table without a bib.

"Jackie started to rip off her



ADVANCE PHOTOS/MIKE FALCO

Jackie is wheeled down a PS 52 hallway by para-professional Nancy Delaney and students Christina Devoll, Allison Heedles and Dominick Volpe, left to right.

own bib. She knocked the fork out of John's hand," Mrs. Goepel recalled.

Six months after Johnny was born, 5-year-old Jackie watched him glide across the carpet on all fours. "Johnny and Bethy would put Jackie on her stomach. One would hold her legs, the other would hold her hands and they taught her to crawl," said Mrs. Goepel. "I told my husband, 'She's learning from them,'" she said.

At the time, Jackie was enrolled at PS 37, a special education

school in Great Kills.

The same year, 1991, Mrs. Goepel heard two educators from Syracuse talk about inclusion during a parent conference. "I was scared to death about it. I thought it would never be for Jackie," she said.

Visited school in Syracuse

Out of curiosity, Mrs. Goepel drove to Syracuse to visit an inclusive school. "The first thing we saw was a little boy with cerebral palsy and all these kids around him reading stories, touching him and hugging him."

"I had this feeling I wasn't doing the right thing for Jackie," Mrs. Goepel said.

One day, Jackie surprised her parents while they were toilet training Johnny. "She started screaming. She wanted to get out of the bathtub, but she wouldn't leave the bathroom. So I told my husband to put her on the bowl," said Mrs. Goepel.

And Jackie went to the bathroom. "She started laughing hysterically," said Mrs. Goepel, whose own thoughts turned to inclusion.

"I said even if we give her a shot, and she can't do it, at least we

niche," said Dominick Volpe, friend of Jackie's.

Dominick often interprets Jackie for the adults around her. "She speaks better to children than to parents. Because she understands us better," he said.

Most popular in class

By the end of the year, Jackie became the most popular girl in class. On the last day of school, Jackie returned home with a crown on her head and a Minnie Mouse necklace, gifts from Stephanie. Two Pathmark bags stuffed with letters were tied to her wheelchair. "You made our fourth-grade class the best class ever." "You're the most fun" and "Please be our friend forever," the children wrote.

Last June, Stephanie graduated to fifth grade, leaving Jackie behind in Mrs. Tate's class. Everyone agreed to keep Jackie in the fourth grade for another year to give her more time to adjust. Her new classmates turned out to be eager to show her the ropes.

"You can teach Jackie different kinds of stuff. The whole class taught her to talk, and now she can say 'panda' and 'teddy bear,'" said