

# Beautifully average: Dorothy Corder's only special need is to be another face in the crowd

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# Beautifully average

## Dorothy Corder's only special need is to be another face in the crowd

*By Taylor Garstad*

A few times in our interview, Dorothy Corder decided she was done answering my questions and that it was time to go to coffee. It was as if she had assumed celebrity status when I asked her to answer a few questions for me on a tape recorder.

I was at her house on a Monday.

On Mondays, 59-year-old Corder attends her day program until 2 in the afternoon.

She didn't really waste any time getting out of the car and into her spot on the couch. Wearing a sparkly sequin shirt with matching tights, she slumped sideways with her mismatched socks sticking out into the hallway. She proudly clung to two shoelaces with her right hand. When she wasn't talking my ear off, she was giggling quietly to herself and her laces. She later introduced her shoelaces to me as her "suzies." She scrunched her eyes together and dragged the string across the surface of her face.

People with autism or any sort of behavioural disability may have many different little rituals or habits that make them feel safe. Whether it's brushing their hair, licking their hands, or even wearing four pairs of socks, it may not make sense to us, but to them it means home.

Corder's habit happens to be her passionate love of small



strings. She cherishes them dearly. For example, her roommate, Christina, is no longer allowed to have pajama pants with drawstrings, because Corder sneaks into her room and takes them.

*Dorothy and her family recently had a photo shoot before the snow fell. Her sister picked out this bright purple shirt while the rest of the family dressed in all black. Pretty sure that's adorable. (Photo by Lauri Beer)*

Corder's tights used to have a drawstring to hold them up, too. It looked as if she had removed them and was holding them in her hands. After spending five days with her, I learned that every single pair of pants she wore was missing this drawstring.

"So, Dorothy, what would you like to talk about first?" I asked. "Maybe those strings. What are those?"

"Noooo, I don't wanna talk. No. What's for dinner I'm *starrrrring*." She replied.

It was Day 1 and I was quickly getting an idea about how my next five were going to play out.

Corder has been diagnosed as developmentally disabled with autistic tendencies. Though some of the things she does are not necessarily commonplace for you or me, she is extremely independent. She can comfortably hold a conversation with someone she likes. She has a boyfriend named Robert, whom she has fetching her hot drinks at every turn. Every once in a while, you'll hear her mutter his name under her breath and you know she's probably daydreaming about him. She gets annoyed when people tell her to exercise when she doesn't want to. She would rather sit on the couch and watch crime shows on TV than go for a walk or a run. Aside from her drawer full of "suzies," she and I are very much alike.

While I tried to get her to speak, she stared at the "suzies." They remind her of her old life at the Michener Centre in Red Deer, where her only friends or acquaintances were

shoelaces or bits of string, say her adoptive parents, Judy and Henry Burdzy. Corder left Red Deer in 2000.

The Michener Centre is an institution for people with moderate to severe disabilities. Though its reputation has improved, it was long considered a place people could bring children with disabilities and leave them. Many of these children lost social skills, because no one would engage them in conversation. In August, it was announced that the centre would close down.

Though most of the Michener residents had nowhere to go, many were unable to live independently, said Marie Renaud, executive director of the Lo Se Ca Foundation in St. Albert, where Corder lives. However, in September, the Alberta government formally announced its decision to keep the centre open.

“This came as a huge victory for the special needs community in Central Alberta,” Renaud said.

After moving to St. Albert, Corder was placed Lo Se Ca, which cares for many adults with disabilities. She shares her group home with one roommate, Christina, who functions at the level of a six-month-old infant.

**“She’s changed our lives, our entire family. She brings everyone together”**

Despite the cognitive difference, they have been roommates for over 10 years and care very deeply for each other.

During my time in the house, I couldn’t help but notice what Corder kept calling Christina. She would lay on the couch and look over at Christina across the room and call her “baby gibber.” Jessica, one of the support workers in the group home, has been working with the ladies for about three years now. She laughs and jokes with them like an older sister and somehow she can understand every word out of Corder’s mouth. When Corder speaks, it is like a tornado of high-pitched words coming at you at

lightening speed. Usually one of the discernable words is “coffee” or “tea,” clearly her favorite things.

Jessica told me that Corder’s odd nickname for her roommate had started about three years earlier.

“The ladies were sitting in their spots and a baby food commercial came on.” She recalled. “It was a damn Gerber brand baby food commercial and Dorothy is literally so smart that she linked that to Christina.”

I popped around the corner into the office of Corder’s house for a moment to grab a new pen. By the time I had returned to my seat on the couch, she had snuck into the kitchen for a banana, peeled it, and stuffed it whole into her mouth as if nothing had happened.

Because of her tendency to talk a lot and very loudly, people may be leery about Corder when the first meet her. They wouldn’t see, at first glance, how intelligent and truly average she is.

In fact, during the week I spent with her, she and her mother went to the grocery store. She talked and talked the entire trip – and she said hi to almost everyone she saw.

Every male shopper got a “Hi buddy!” But for children, the reaction was even better.

“Awwwww look at the little girl (or boy). Awwwww, aren’t you so cute!”

Corder’s unconditional friendliness made people widen their eyes, and many darted down the nearest aisle. I don’t think I’ll ever know what it feels like to be on the receiving end of those looks. As it is, they made me uncomfortable. But she held her head high.

At one point over my week of visits, Corder’s adoptive sister, Erica Brudzy, stopped by to drop off a souvenir shirt, and brought a us all hot chocolate. Corder wasn’t pleased. Only she is supposed to receive hot beverages from her beloved “Dee Dee.” I later learned that this was a common occurrence for Corder since she had come to St. Albert.

Corder has huge issues with social interactions related to food, said Lo Se Ca staffer Sarah Jane Klein. She always has to be the first to eat no matter the circumstances. These idiosyncrasies resulted from her years at the Michener Centre, Klein said, and being unsure if she would even get to eat each evening.

“Those kinds of behaviours don’t just disappear. We could never put ourselves in her shoes. Ever.”

One of the employees at the Lo Se Ca Foundation fell even more in love with Corder than I had.

In 2007, Erica Burdzy, the foundation’s financial advisor, and her family fought for full guardianship of Corder, rather than her government appointed trustee. This isn’t really something that happens every day, especially for a woman in her mid 50s who has lived with her disability her entire life. It is especially touching and a little funny that Corder is actually a few years older than Burdzy, the woman she now calls mom.

“We didn’t know the impact she would have on our entire family,” Burdzy said. “People will say to us, ‘Oh what a great thing you’ve done, you changed a life so much.’ But she’s changed our lives, our entire family. She brings everyone together.”



On Sundays, Corder spends the afternoon with Burdzy and has dinner at

*The love that Judy Burdzy and her husband Henry have for Dorothy is hard to miss. There is an obvious mother-daughter bond. (Photo by Lauri Beer)*

the house. She has her own bedroom, which looks as if a pink bomb had exploded all over it.

When she showed me her room, before saying a word, she delved into what looked like a deep plastic drawer. She hunched her shoulders forward and guarded the compartment as she dug through what sounded like wrappers.

“She’s only a little spoiled,” Burdzy said sarcastically. “That’s her treat drawer, but I only fill it with those little, 100-calorie packs.”

I watched as Corder pulled out about three of the packs and sat down in her chair to eat all three.

Since the Burdzys adopted her, Corder’s circle has continued to grow. Even members of the extended family welcomed her.

“This summer, Dorothy and I had a girls’ weekend up at the cabin,” said her sister, Erica Burdzy, a young, hip, 30-something.

**“We stayed up until it was light outside and slept until 2 in the afternoon. My uncle’s cabin has a fire pit that everyone drinks around. Dorothy literally had everyone singing songs like ‘You Are My Sunshine’ around the fire until late into the night”**

While Burdzy told this story, Corder began to softly sing to herself in the corner of the living room. Her voice was very high pitched but subtle, and she just barely whispered as she sang the lyrics.

“Then there was a point in the night where most of the words out of everyone’s mouth were slurring really bad,” Burdzy said. “That’s when Dorothy and I headed back to our room.”

Dorothy Corder is an average middle-aged woman. She can't function without her morning coffee, and she's not herself when she's hungry. She takes trips with her sister to the cabin to indulge in possibly one too many baileys and coffee. And sometimes she's just not in the mood to do anything other than lounge in her chair and watch crime shows.

She is beautifully average. We are not so different, she and I. Oh how nice it would be to just sit on the couch watching TV, without feeling guilty about not exercising.