

With neither arms nor legs, Jan Taylor Garrett, early in life, taught family, friends and colleagues never to assume there is anything she cannot do.



Lynette Lobban:1

Born With a Purpose

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

Few people can match the accomplishments of University of Oklahoma alumna Jan Taylor Garrett. A Phi Beta Kappa with a 1984 degree in international relations from Scripps College, she graduated with honors from the OU College of Law. By the time she was 26, she had worked for a Chief Justice of the Oklahoma Supreme Court, a federal district judge and an OU president.

A powerful advocate for the disabled, she initiated her first lawsuit at 17 and now directs the Center for Independent Living in Berkeley, California. As impressive for her compassion as she is for her intellect, Garrett is also a congenital quadruple amputee, born without arms and legs.

On a snowy evening in February 1962, Oklahoma City residents Jack and Ann Taylor rushed to the hospital anticipating the joyful arrival of their fourth child. But as the delivery progressed, Ann knew there was something terribly wrong. Instead of letting her see the baby, a nurse administered a sedative to make her sleep. Hours later Ann learned that her beautiful baby girl had severe birth defects.

"They thought she wouldn't live," recalls Ann. "They wouldn't even allow her to go home with us because she was so small." Desperate for help, the Taylors sought the advice of numerous doctors and specialists, all of whom advised institutionalizing the infant. That is, all but one, who told them, "Take her home and love her. She'll be all right."

Ann says that in those frightening first months she could only hold her tiny baby and cry. "Here I was with three other children I was responsible for, and I didn't know what I was going to do," recalls Ann. "But Jan would look at me with those great big eyes as if to say, 'I know what I'm doing. Just give me time.'"

It did not take long for the entire Taylor household to find that what Jan lacked in limbs, she made up for in spirit and determination. Her three older siblings, Kay, Doug and Jerry, focused not so much on what Jan could not do, but what she could learn to do. Kay and Doug, who were 8 and 12 when Jan was born, taught their baby sister to sit up and eventually climb stairs by pulling up with her chin.

"My brother Doug taught me to be fearless," says Jan.

At times, almost too fearless. Ann recalls returning home one day and finding her three-year-old sitting happily in the branches of a tree high above the first story of their house. "See, Mama," said Jan proudly. "I can even climb trees." Doug, who doted on his younger sister, thought Jan might enjoy a higher perspective for a change and helped her up with the aid of a friend.

Tragically for the Taylor family, Doug was severely injured in a motorcycle accident when he was 16, with irreversible damage



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Two-year-old Jan sits before one of the many inventions her maternal grandfather, Everett Eaton, designed to make her life easier.

to his brain and body. He died 17 years later. Although Jan was only four at the time of the accident, her brother's attitude of making every moment count has been a credo her entire life. "Doug showed me that you have to try new things even if they might be risky," she says. Over the years, her repertoire has expanded to include horseback riding, skiing, camping, swimming, and even scuba diving.

Once, Ann made the mistake of arriving a few minutes early to pick up Jan after choir practice and witnessed her daughter and two friends racing down the steep driveway in front of the church. "One of the girls was running with Jan's books, and the other was pushing the wheelchair as fast as she could," says Ann. "They were going about 40 miles an hour with hair flying and all of them laughing like crazy. I kept thinking, 'What if they hit a bump?' But that was Jan."

Another family mentor was maternal grandfather Everett Eaton, a retired teacher and high school principal. "He was wonderful at making 'low-tech assistive technology,' although we didn't know to call it that then," says Jan. "It was just 'stuff that made my life easier.'"

Eaton made drawing easier for Jan by putting a crayon in one end of a spent Roman candle and wrapping it with a rubber band so she could hold the tube under her chin. Then he would get down on the floor and color with her. He also made a table that was her height and a pencil holder at an angle so she could more easily grab writing tools using her chin and chest.

"My favorite quote of his was, 'If you can't make it out of rubber bands and paperclips, you don't need to make it,'" says Jan. "He was a MacGyver kind of guy." *continued*

OPPOSITE: A typical day for the executive director for the Center for Independent Living in Berkeley, California, might include helping disabled clients find housing or a job, equip a home with assistive technologies, or helping a high school student with independent living skills.



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Jan Taylor attends the 1981 Beaux Arts Ball in Oklahoma City with her father, OU alumnus Jack Taylor.

In addition to the nurturing environment provided by her family, Jan attended Mary Free Bed Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which specialized in physical therapy for amputees. She had been going there with her mother since infancy, but by the time she was 11, Jan felt that she could handle the trip home on her own.

"We called the airlines to make sure it was OK, but when Jan showed up at the airport, the flight attendant wouldn't take her because she was flying alone," recalls Ann. Jan returned to the hospital with her attendant and was snowed in for several days, giving her mother plenty of time to get "good and mad." Ann, a former mayor of Nichols Hills, called both the airlines and a U.S. senator, outraged at the treatment her capable daughter had received.

"People think that if you're in a wheelchair you are deaf, dumb and blind," Ann says, annoyance still in her voice. "Often



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Jan Taylor as a student at Heritage Hall, a private school in Oklahoma City. When her mother was asked if Jan had any hobbies, she replied, "If Jan collects anything, I think it would be friends."

"Jan always felt that she came packaged that way for a reason. And that reason was to educate those who were not disabled and help those who were."

people won't even make eye contact with you, so Jan learned to speak up. The following year, she flew by herself."

When Jan was 15, she was returning to Oklahoma City from Portland, Oregon, when another flight attendant would not let her board. This time she asked to speak to the pilot. The diminutive teen in a wheelchair looked the captain right in the eye and said, "Look, I've been flying alone for years, I'm ready to go home, here's my ticket, I want to get on the plane." She boarded. Still encountering boarding difficulties at 17, she threatened a lawsuit against the airline. It was one of many acts that Jan calls "individualized advocacy."

"Sometimes you have to blaze a trail, and sometimes you get burned by the fire," she says with a smile, "but that's OK."

Articulate and analytical, Jan seemed destined for a legal career at an early age. She spoke in complete sentences shortly after her first birthday and was reading before she entered kindergarten. She excelled in Montessori school and could do quadratic equations in her head by the fifth grade. Her father, who holds a master's degree in engineering from OU, says he was amazed by his daughter's abilities.

"I am, in a sense, a math major, and I could not do what she can do," Jack says. "She reads the required information and processes it in her head. She remembers it because she has to. You and I can get the book again in the next room or even the next building. It is not as easy for Jan, so she compensates. She has an incredible mind."

At Heritage Hall, a private school in Oklahoma City, Jan devoured Latin, French, higher math and English. During her senior year, she set her sights on attending a small prestigious cluster of colleges in Claremont, California. Jan had long since fed herself, brushed her teeth and even put on her own makeup, but navigating a strange campus 1,300 miles from home was a true test of independence. Knowing better than to argue, her parents agreed, contingent on finding a suitable aide to help with daily chores and getting to class.

"As usual, she set the pace, and we just held on," Jack says. In the fall of 1980, Jan was the first person in a wheelchair to attend Scripps, a private liberal arts women's college in Claremont.

After some initial distancing by classmates, Jan's magnetic personality and intelligence drew fellow students to her as though she had enormously long arms. Girls in her dorm were soon lining up at her door with homework for a quick review of their grammar, sentence structure and content before class.

During her junior year, Jan decided to take advantage of Scripps' study abroad program and attend L'Institut Nationale de Sciences Politiques in Paris. The program was designed for students to live with French families, but available homes were not remotely accessible by wheelchair. Ann flew to Paris ahead of time to find lodging for Jan and rented an artist's flat in the Montparnasse, the former bohemian district where the likes of Hemingway, Picasso and Sartre had inhabited the cafes and bistros half a century before.

Jan's close friend, Beth Thompson Leister, who had just graduated from the OU College of Nursing, agreed to go along as aide de camp. In France, the young women did so much sightseeing, Beth wore out several pairs of shoes, and Jan had to have the tires on her wheelchair retread. One thing they quickly discovered, along with the monuments and cathedrals, was that Paris has stairs—lots of them.

Three times a week Jan would climb four flights of stairs to attend a seminar with other Claremont students. "It was great exercise," says Jan. "And I could eat all the croissants I wanted."

Because disabled people were seldom seen inside Paris at that time—most of them lived in suburbs—Jan became something of a celebrity. She was interviewed on French television and radio and was often stopped by people on the streets. She used the opportunity to let them know, diplomatically of course, about services for the disabled in the United States.

"Jan always felt that she came packaged that way for a reason," says Ann. "And that reason was to educate those who were not disabled and help those who were. When she was young, I tried to protect her, but people were going to ask her things. Children would come up and say, 'Where are your hands?' It never



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Ann and Jack Taylor pose in their Oklahoma City home. After Jan's birth, Ann became an advocate not only for her daughter, but also for all Oklahoma children with physical and mental disabilities. In honor of her public service, the Ann Taylor Chair in Pediatric and Developmental Disabilities in Physical Therapy was established at the OU Health Sciences Center in 2001.



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Jan goes over the CIL operating budget with staff. When Jan took over as CIL director in 1999, she had never served as an administrator, but in typical fashion she admits that she "learned a lot fairly quickly."

seemed to bother her. I think she felt like she came here with a job to do, and that was part of it.”

The summer after she graduated from Scripps, Jan worked as a special assistant to OU President Bill Banowksy. One morning he gave her two political tomes to read and asked her to brief him on content when she had finished. When he came back from lunch, she told him she was ready with the report. “Do you mean you have already finished both books?” he asked. She replied that she had and proceeded to deliver a comparative analysis on the readings.

It was no surprise to family and friends that when Jan entered law school, she regularly made the dean’s honor roll and was often ranked in the top three in her classes. Upon graduation in 1988, she applied for a clerkship with Federal District Judge and former OU law dean Wayne E. Alley.

“Whenever I had an opening, I would have between 80 and 100 applicants from all over the country, and every one worthy of consideration,” says Alley. “All were in the top ten, mostly in the top five of their law classes. This is a difficult and demanding job and one where you have to be immediately effective. The litigants and lawyers are entitled to full service right from the outset, as am I.”

Alley says he called Jan’s law professors, all of whom spoke of this remarkable student with a towering intellect. But it was Jan herself who won him over. “If I had experienced something as potentially devastating as Jan [did], I would be pretty grouchy,” says Alley, “and she was not. I thought that was one of the most remarkable things about her. She was full of smiles, liked to joke. She was very personable and extremely professional.”

During the course of their working relationship, judge and clerk handled a certain amount of personal injury litigation. “We had plenty of plaintiffs who were seriously injured in highway collisions, industrial accidents and so forth,” Alley recalls, “but there was a sprinkling of people who were there hoping to profit from injuries that were far less significant.”

Alley says it was amusing to look over at the attorney representing a marginally injured party when Jan would pull up in her wheelchair for final arguments in front of the jury and start writing away with the stylus between her teeth or tucked under her chin. The whole courthouse became conscious of people with disabilities during her term.

During the time she worked for Alley, Jan attended a conference in Chicago for women amputees. Not long afterwards, her mother says, a photo of a handsome young man appeared in Jan’s apartment. His name was Dan Garrett.

“Dan was visiting friends in Chicago and staying at the same hotel,” says Jan. “We struck up a conversation, and things took off from there.” A long-distance romance ensued. Dan was

living in Los Angeles, working for Hughes Aircraft. When Jan finished her two-year clerkship, Judge Alley presided over her wedding. Jan moved to L.A. and got a job as an attorney for the immigration service.

The Garretts settled in the Bay Area in 1993. Shortly after, Jan heard of a job opening at the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF). She left immigration and worked as

an attorney for DREDF for three years, before accepting a position with an organization that helps make drug and alcohol rehab facilities more accessible to people with disabilities.

In addition to her career, Jan also served as vice chairman of a California Bar Association committee, frequently appearing on television and in newspapers as the voice for the disabled. Her father once asked her how she was able to inspire trust in such a broad range of people with disabilities; Jan replied, “Because they know I know.” In 1999, her personal experience, coupled with her education and legal background made her an ideal choice as director of the Center for Independent Living in Berkeley, an international leader in providing services and support for the physically challenged.

There Jan and her staff handle situations from transportation accessibility to

problems of disabled teens at their high schools. She also meets with community groups and families. “One thing I always tell parents is that it’s important for kids to be aware of both sides,” says Jan. “It’s great for their kids to interact and have friendships with and go to school with kids without disabilities, but it’s also important for them to be with kids like them, to know there are a lot of kids like that out there.”

In 2003, OU recognized Jan’s accomplishments with an honorary doctor in humane letters degree. At a pre-ceremony gathering, Jan was chatting with friends when fellow honoree George Tenet entered the room. “This would be a good time to get your autograph,” Jan said to the CIA director. “I’m the one who should be asking for yours,” replied Tenet.

Today Jan is busy fundraising and helping to plan the first facility designed from the ground up to offer comprehensive services to the disabled, including advocacy, education, training and policy-making. The \$47 million facility will be named in honor of the late Edward V. Roberts, a pioneer and international leader in the independent living and disability rights movement. A photo of Roberts, who himself was once director at CIL, hangs in Jan’s office. He believed in community collaborative efforts, which he called “working toward our preferred future.”

A future that Jan Taylor Garrett is bringing a little closer to the present.

Lynette Lobban is assistant editor of Sooner Magazine.



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Daniel and Jacqueline Ann Taylor Garrett on their wedding day in 1990.