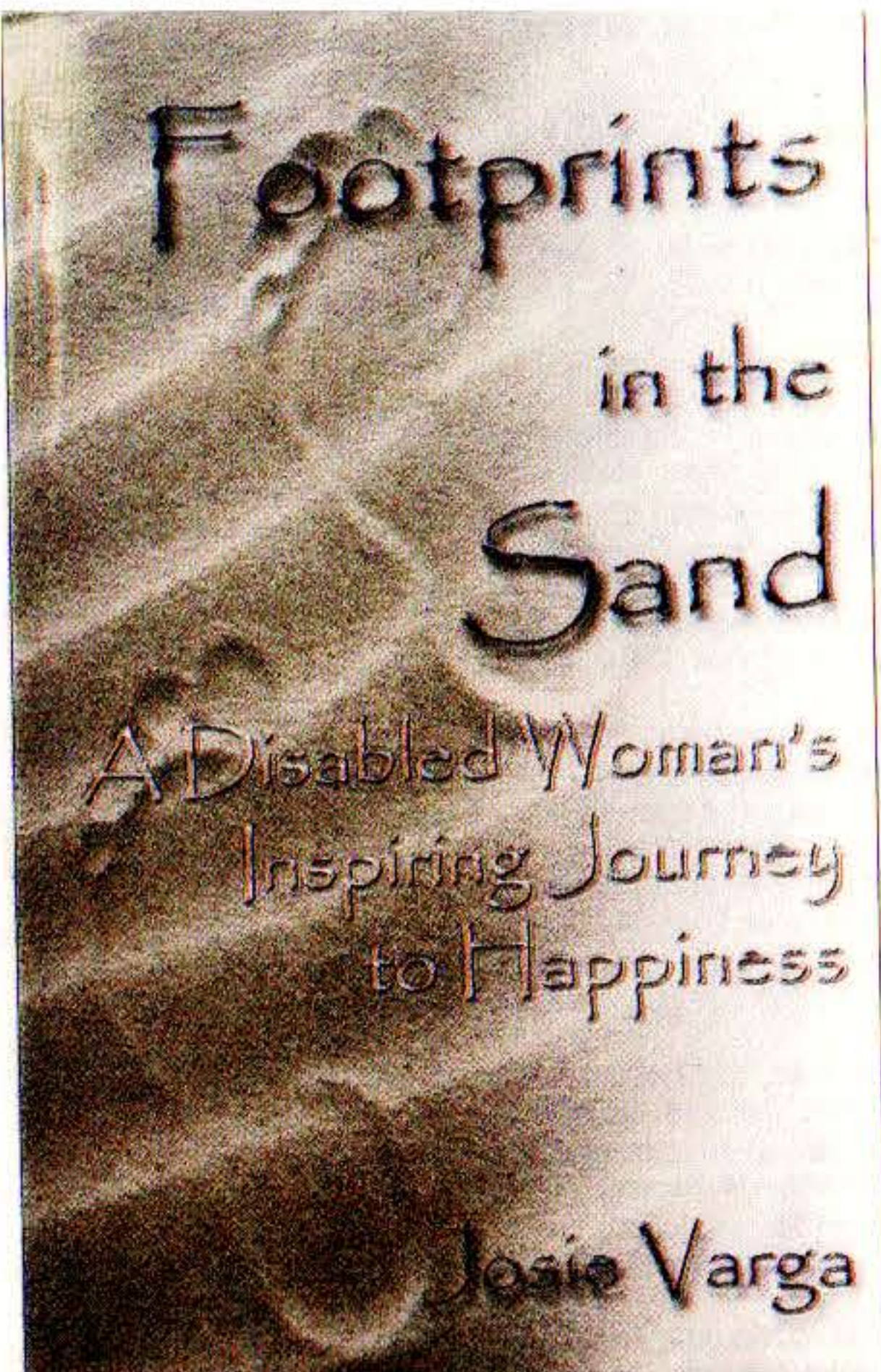


Her spirit will not be disabled



A writer shares her tale of triumph over obstacles

BY ROZ GIUDITTA
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Josie Varga cannot hear birds singing outside, nor can she ice skate with her daughters. Severe bilateral hearing loss and cerebral palsy make these everyday activities impossible.

But neither of these disabilities has stopped her from recently publishing a book about her life, called "Footprints in the Sand."

Thus far, sales have been modest, but the 40-year-old Westfield resident and communications consultant is happy about the effect the book has had on readers.

"People, both handicapped and nonhandicapped, have said that I can identify with everything you wrote," said Varga, a former journalist. "It's about my experience growing up with CP, but it's not only about that."

"You don't have to have a disability to feel different, to feel I can't accomplish this — to have doubts in yourself. We all have doubts in ourselves. So I just hope that this book helps some people push a little more and go after what they want in life."

Varga has gone after what she wants despite the obstacles she has faced. Born in Elizabeth, she was diagnosed with CP at 20 months and wore braces on her legs until she was 5.

At 14, she learned she had low- and high-frequency nerve deafness in both ears and began wearing hearing aids. She no longer wears the hearing aids but has a slight speech impediment and a limp.

After graduating from high school, Varga took a full-time job with the city of Elizabeth. President Ronald Reagan visited City Hall in 1984, and she wrote a freelance article about behind-the-scenes preparations for the presidential visit.

It was published by the Elizabeth Daily Journal. Her parents were thrilled that the story was published, yet they never encouraged their daughter's childhood interest in writing or her subsequent interest in college.

But Varga's love of writing ultimately prevailed over her own uncertainties and her parents' protectiveness.



PHOTOS BY JIM PATHE/THE STAR-LEDGER

Josie Varga says, "My disability is not a weakness but a strength because it made me fight to be where I am today. It made me the person I am today."

She left her job and entered Union County College, where she wrote for the college newspaper and never took fewer than five classes a semester.

After graduating, she transferred to Glassboro State College, now Rowan University. She was voted features editor for the college newspaper and earned a bachelor's degree in communication with a specialization in journalism.

As soon as Varga began to look for a full-time job in 1988, she experienced the discrimination that might have deterred a less hardy individual.

An ad agency manager in Cranford told her to get out

of the field because she would never make it.

A newspaper in Elizabeth offered her a reporter's job, and then withdrew the offer after Varga mentioned her hearing impairment.

A dental association also refused her because, as Varga subsequently learned, "they objected to my speech impediment."

But she made a contact with a departing editor during the interviewing process, and several months later, the contact offered her a position as the assistant editor of a trade magazine. For the next six years, she wrote for a

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trade organization and worked her way up to editor and director of communications.

During that time she met Fran Tarkenton, the former Minnesota Vikings quarterback, the late Walter Payton, the former Chicago Bears running back, and Bobby Unser, the former race car driver. She interviewed Lee Greenwood, the country music star and Grammy Award-winner best known for his rendition of "God Bless the U.S.A."

Despite her promotions and success, Varga reveals problems in her book with the executive director of the organization.

"He did give me the job of my dreams and he did acknowledge my talents," she writes. "(But) he just couldn't get past my disability."

Varga began writing "Footprints in the Sand" during this pe-

riod in order to inspire others to overcome their obstacles.

"I attribute my strength to my disability," she said. "My disability is not a weakness but a strength because it made me fight to be where I am today. It made me the person I am today."

"And, if given a choice, I would never change a thing. I wouldn't change my cerebral palsy or my hearing loss because it's who I am. I am proud of who I am. The circumstances of my birth do not define me, only I define me. And I choose to concentrate on my strengths rather than my weaknesses."

After working for the trade organization, Varga married and became a communications consultant. She is currently at work on a second book, "101 Ways to Mend Your Spirit."

To learn more about Varga's life or to order her book, visit her Web site at www.josievarga.com. Her book may be purchased at any major bookstore.