

Back to front and inside out, Silly Eric always seems to be getting things wrong. But his mum loves him just the way he is.

This touching message forms the foundation for two children's books published by Gracie Wright, a vibrant and dynamic young woman whose own pursuit of acceptance was recently acknowledged by The Princes Trust.

"I had a happy childhood, growing up by the sea with a loving and supportive family," she says. "But all of that was turned upside down after a near-fatal car accident left me with a severe brain injury at the age of 11."

Gracie was crossing a busy road near her home and was hit by a car. She was left in a coma and subsequently suffered with brain damage. While she appeared to make a full recovery, memory problems and difficulty with emotional issues were an ongoing battle.

"I found my teenage years very difficult," she says. "I was struggling to find out who I was before the crash. I lost most of my memories of my childhood and sometimes I wouldn't remember my family.

"They didn't know if my behaviour was due to the car crash or just being a normal teenager! They would ask me to do things and I'd forget. But I found it hard to build friendships too. Someone could be rude to me and I'd forget how horrid they had been. I'd end up taking a lot of rubbish in my life because I didn't have a filter to know what wasn't acceptable."

A coping strategy was to write down key words on her hands, or to list the things which made her happy in a book she carried.

"I was full of confusion and I experienced severe depression. Although outwardly bubbly, I was full of hopelessness and attempted to take my own life more than once."

Determination and perseverance, and a strong and supportive family, saw Gracie achieve qualifications at school despite being told she would fail all her exams. She stayed up all night revising, passed the tests "but then I forgot everything," she laughs.

She started work as a nanny and delighted in encouraging and supporting young children. "I was convinced that I had a role in highlighting the importance of positive thinking in children's lives."

So, to reach out to more 2-5-year-olds, she created the character of Silly Eric and, after contacting The Prince's Trust, Gracie was given a business mentor in the Enterprise programme to develop Silly Eric into a brand.

She worked with an illustrator and self-published two stories, and now presents the book in local schools, leads creative writing classes and summer camps, and gives motivational talks to children and adults.

Gracie was shortlisted for the NatWest Enterprise award and, as a runner up, was invited to the ceremony in London where she met Prince Charles.

"I think if God wants to use this, it will fly," she says, and adds gleefully that she hopes to sell millions of copies.

Some of the proceeds of the books go to various children's charities and this summer Gracie travelled to India to see how the money was being used to help street children and to fund a summer camp led by Burn 24-7 India.

“Burn 24-7 is a grass roots worship movement formed by a community of believers across Christian denominations and ethnic boundaries, with the same desire to worship God,” she explains. “You worship the Lord round the clock. It’s based on Amos 9:11 and the Tabernacle of David where David built a resting place for the Lord to dwell and to see breakthrough, revival and healing.”

The movement has been instrumental in Gracie’s own renewed passion for Christ, and she has experienced a healing for her back and emotional wounds she has carried for the past 20 years.

“I’ve always believed that God exists but I thought that all that had happened to me was his fault.”

Her life-threatening accident wasn’t the only trauma Gracie experienced, after her crash she came under attack from the enemy from lots of different directions. However this season came to end when she became closer to the Lord and realised her authority as a daughter of the King, “After that I started getting closer and closer to Jesus and then I understood my authority: ‘No! My father is in charge of the universe and that’s not going to happen to me any more!’

“So I walked out of despair, self-pity, suicide, to elevation, affirmation, enlightenment, all with Jesus.”

The process has taken time, though, to overcome bad habits and behaviours. “It’s not like waving a magic wand with God,” she says. “He just wants your heart to be pure, to be right, to be in tune with his and understand that He only wants the best for you. Like giving up smoking – I really want to encourage people who are struggling with that. It’s really hard. But I realized that until I stopped smoking, I couldn’t live in my full blessing, my full destiny. It would always keep a door open to another way of life that I no longer wanted to live.

“When I stopped smoking for a whole day, I phoned a friend and said ‘we’re going for a walk today, and we’re going to walk a new path that we’ve never walked before so that I’ll remember this day for the rest of my life’.”

Gracie acknowledges that self-help systems also promote self-affirmation and self-worth, but without Christ, she says, you cannot truly move on. “The world says you’re great, but doesn’t give you the depth of love and forgiveness that God gives you. You are great, but with God He helps deal with the roots of why you are struggling, there may be heart issues, like jealousy, that you have to deal with because it steals fruit from your life.”

Gracie goes to two churches currently, in the Kingdom Life and Catch the Fire communities, reflecting her life being divided with work in London and back with family in East Anglia.

While Gracie is delighting in the response she has received with the Silly Eric books, she is continuing to explore her first love of music. She writes her own songs and performs, and has travelled to the USA to meet with record producers.

“I believe you can become anything you want to be,” she says. “Dream big and treat others with kindness and you shall go far. Whatever barriers you face, there will always be a path for you. Never give up!”

Her sparkling eyes, constant smile and guileless charm and energy can win over the fiercest critic, it’s clear. But she is also resilient and steadfast in pursuing her goals.

“I decided I wanted to be a singer and I’ve been very encouraged by my family. It’s been really difficult but fun, and challenging - it’s very character building! When you put yourself ‘out there’ for any creative idea, you have to be professional and not take offence. You need to understand why you are being told things. Maybe there’s truth in it. How do I apply it in my life?”

She says that when she is performing, very often she can hear what people are saying about her as she is singing.

“Fortunately I’ve been very blessed and have had really nice audiences! But I always prepare myself before, with an attitude of thanksgiving regardless of what happens. If only one person turns up, for example, my dad would say ‘you’ve done a live rehearsal’. And that’s how we are going to get through it.”

Still singing, and still promoting Silly Eric, Gracie is also now in the process of creating a programme to assist families in dealing with the effects of brain injury and the strategies to overcome them.

“It’s similar to having a stroke. People aren’t suddenly stupid but the communication between the brain and the voice is disconnected. The brain has to rewire itself.

“At the age of 15, I wanted to help children with brain injury, but I wasn’t ready. I am now.”

Catherine Larner