

IN THE LOOP

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COMMUNITY



CAROLE DICKEY/Staff photos

LeighAnn Gomillion, a Buddy to Clay Band, enjoys a picture book with the child. Each VIP child is teamed up one-on-one with a Buddy.

From Disabled to VIP

CHURCH PROGRAM PROVIDES RESPITE

By CAROLE DICKEY
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Music, singing and laughter were the first sounds a person could hear walking into the education building at St. James United Methodist Church last Saturday morning a few minutes past 10.

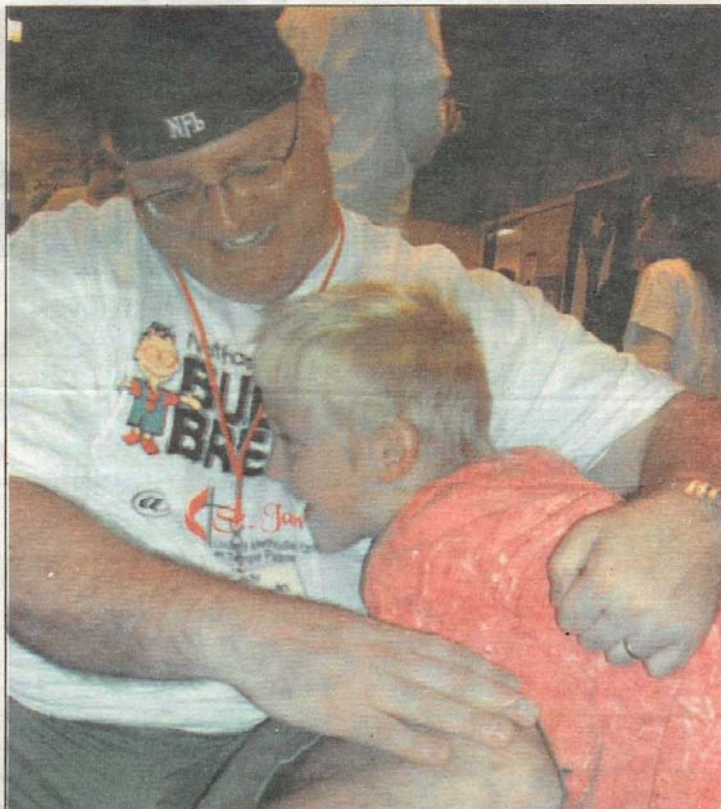
About 50 children sat in a circle delighted with the clackers, maracas and ribbon banners they used to keep time with the music. After a rousing rendition of "I like me," other upbeat songs, music games and a limbo exit, the children headed to different classrooms for crafts, movies and various activities of their choice.

Some of these children were born with autism. Others were born with Down's syndrome, chromosome disorders and other physical disabilities. But during the monthly three-hour Buddy Break program at St. James there is only one label that describes them: VIPs.

The program addresses three needs: the parents' need for time to run errands or enjoy one-on-one time with their spouse or perhaps other children; the VIPs themselves, ages 2 to 16 years, who are reminded in a fun, loving, Christian environment that they are very important people and loved by God; and the siblings, ages 4 years to 5th-grade, who are invited on outings.

It is often hard for a family to cope when their 24-hour routine revolves around a special needs child, said Sally

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Above, Patience Nelson, a Buddy to 6-year-old Jacob Rudes, right, explains how the dog, La Vie, owned by Scott Baggett of Lutz, is a trained therapy animal and won't hurt him. Maggie Schmook, a visitor, offers her encouragement during the Buddy Break open period. During the three-hour program, children enjoy music, crafts, movies, therapy dogs and other activities. At left, Lindsey Danner, 11, pulls her Buddy, Nancy Bailey, onto the floor to dance during a music session at Buddy Break.



BUDDY

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DePalma, who heads the program. Buddy Break allows parents, who pre-register, to drop off their children and enjoy a respite from their care giving responsibilities.

Although the program at St. James is just a few months old, there are currently 53 families participating, and that number is growing. At present, DePalma finds it necessary to place families on a waiting list. Her hope is that other churches will get on board with the program, so no family will have to wait. According to DePalma, the program is easy, fun, and it fills a tremendous need.

"You can start with just a few volunteers and three VIPs. It doesn't have to be huge. Ten percent of children have some type of disability," she said. "Why don't church congregations reflect that? I don't think the churches realize how great the need is."

Because the response at St. James has been so enthusiastic, with 100 volunteers on call and the number of VIP families growing so fast, it has opened an opportunity for the church to offer a special needs Sunday School, a dream come true for DePalma, she said.

For information, call DePalma, 971-4790, Ext. 234, e-mailbuddybreak@stjamestampa.org or visit www.NathanielsHope.org.