

Sharing Joy and Hope

Nathaniel's Hope Makes 'm Smile

by Marie Kuck

Every life is valuable and has a purpose. There are no accidents or mistakes.

Life is woven with purpose; it's that simple. That includes every child that has a special need, including Nathaniel Timothy Kuck, a little boy that could not walk, talk, or eat with his mouth; yet today his life is impacting thousands.

Nathaniel was born in June, 1997 with multiple special needs and health challenges that kept him on a roller coaster of hospital, doctor, and therapy visits for 4 1/2 years. Nathaniel brought the Kuck family into a community and life that they were not prepared to be a part of and sent them into survival mode as they fought for their son's life. Then unexpectedly at the age of 4 1/2,

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Nathaniel had a change of address and relocated to his heavenly home where he is now whole and free to run on the streets of gold, but his short challenging journey in this life was not without purpose.

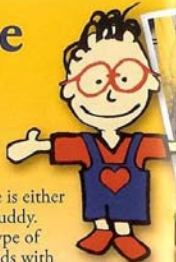
His parents, Tim and Marie Kuck, realized that his premature departure was not the end, but rather the beginning, as Nathaniel's life and purpose would continue to live on through the creation of Nathaniel's Hope.

Nathaniel's Hope is an organization dedicated to sharing hope with kids with special needs and their families. The mission is to encourage families with kids with special needs on their journey as well as educate and equip the community to assist these families in practical ways.

Within the organization of Nathaniel's Hope, one is either classified as a VIP or a Buddy. VIPs are kids with any type of special need including kids with any physical, cognitive, medical or hidden disability, chronic or life-threatening illness, or those who are medically fragile. Kids are people, not disabilities and should be recognized as such. Buddies are people who are friends with VIPs. All of the programs offered by Nathaniel's Hope have a connection with Nathaniel's life.

Understanding the overwhelming demands and stress that often face families with VIP kids, the Kucks saw the importance of helping families get a break and make it affordable! That's why Buddy Break was created. Buddy Break is a FREE respite program designed to give caregivers of kids with special needs a break from their ongoing care-giving responsibilities for three hours on a Friday night or Saturday. It also provides kids with an opportunity to have a special Buddy friend totally focused on them for a few hours. This program is held in partnership with local churches. Buddy Break currently operates in ten locations in Central Florida and Tampa, with seven more to begin by August. This program is rapidly growing with a goal to build a national network of Buddy Breaks providing community-based respite across the nation to assist VIP families.

This is not the only program that is gaining national attention. Nathaniel's Hope offers a free VIP Birthday Club which celebrates VIP kids year-round! Every VIP Birthday Club member is sent a birthday card and special surprises on their birthday along with other special recognition throughout the year. Names and photos, if provided, are posted on the Nathaniel's Hope website. Every child is



special and should be celebrated!

Once a child is a Birthday Club member, they are invited to participate in other programs offered throughout the year including Keep 'm Smiling events. Keep 'm Smiling is a partnership between Nathaniel's Hope and other organizations to have community events that are VIP-friendly year-round so that VIP families are kept smiling all year long! This program was initiated in April, 2006 when Nathaniel's Hope provided a respite tent for the two days of the Luis Palau Orlando Festival. The tent provided changing facilities, a cot, electrical outlets, water, chairs and tables, first aid supplies, etc. and volunteers to aid as needed. This allowed VIP families the ability to attend this event. Since then other events have been offered, including a Day at the Races at the Daytona International Speedway, Nutcracker Ballet performances, and football with the Orlando Guardians. Nathaniel's Hope is always looking for ways to partner with local events and organizations.

Perhaps the biggest smiles that Nathaniel's Hope brings are through their signature event of the year called Make 'm Smile! Make 'm Smile is an annual community event dedicated to celebrating VIP kids. It was established in memory of Nathaniel's birthday (June 6th) so it is always held the first Saturday in June. It is a celebration of life and a time to help

build friendships between VIP kids and the community. It features a Buddy Stroll where VIP kids and their families are "buddied up" with other individuals and families from the community (Buddies) for a friendship stroll around Lake Eola. Together VIPs and Buddies enjoy the family entertainment provided by theme park characters, musicians, clowns, magicians, bouncy houses, animals, visits from local celebrities and are provided free food, drinks, and goodies. In addition they can visit with over 150 exhibitors, including organizations that service the special needs community. These exhibitors are placed around Lake Eola and down Robinson Street, which is closed down for the event. In 2007, in spite of rescheduling the event due to the untimely visit of Tropical Storm Barry, over 5,000 were in attendance.

This year another record-breaking crowd is expected to gather at Lake Eola for the Nathaniel's Hope 6th Annual Make 'm Smile event on Saturday, June 7th from 7:30 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. All are invited to this grand celebration!

For more information on Make 'm Smile or any of the other programs offered by Nathaniel's Hope including Caroling for Kids, Hall of Hope, Online Resource Center, etc. you can visit www.NathanielsHope.org or call 407-857-8224.