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Children with special needs become VIPs through Nathaniel's Hope

By Arlene Colcombe
The Good News

It's a great job, but it is 24/7, with no holidays, vacations or personal time off. Raising a special needs child has its disadvantages as well as its joys.

After one of these special children, Nathaniel Kuck, died at just 4 1/2 years old, his mother decided to do something to help these children and their families. This was the birth of Nathaniel's Hope, an organization which offers respite care for parents and caretakers of these special children. Partnering with local churches, Nathaniel's Hope establishes groups of trained volunteers that provide a free Saturday of relief for the families of these children.

These "Buddy Breaks" are fun-filled days, when each special needs child is partnered with a volunteer "buddy" who gives them undivided attention



BUDDY BREAKS: One Saturday a month, Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral partners with Nathaniel's Hope to offer parents of special needs children a much needed break. The children are given a day of fun and activities with trained volunteers while their parents rest or catch up on errands.

during the child-driven program, in which they can choose from a variety of activities offered.

Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral has partnered with Nathaniel's Hope to provide a

Buddy Break for parents one Saturday a month. Church member Carol Murolo has two special needs grandchildren and is particularly interested in the program. Her daughter, Denise Jensen, is the senior coordinator of the program at Grace Baptist.

"My husband and I have three children - two of whom have special needs - and I know how difficult and often frightening it can be to entrust others with the task of caring for these precious children. That is why I was so very cautious in the undertaking of this program by our church, as every aspect and consideration was given to the program's merit and its benefits to the children and their parents [and] caregivers," explained Jensen.

Nathaniel's Hope, headquartered in Orlando, offers training and screening for the adult volunteers who serve in the program, and then introduces them to other Buddy Break programs. The

children, called VIPs by volunteers, get to choose the special activities that they want to explore that day.

"It's hard to find programs where they all feel safe and accepted," said Murolo.

But when visiting a local Buddy Break program, she got to witness her shy 14-year-old grandson open up and have a great time playing with his assigned buddy.

"It warmed my heart; it was all about them," she recalls.

Jensen also saw the affect of the buddy program on her boy.

"My son fit in. He was cared for and loved in a way that made him feel comfortable enough to participate," she says. "This is the goal of Buddy Break."

When the idea was brought before the church, it was welcomed with open arms, with more than 60 people volunteering to assist with the program.

Senior Pastor Tom Ascol was not surprised by the response.

"Our members are filled with love for God and, consequently, love for people. We are glad to be able to provide this service to special needs families in our community," he says.

On Buddy Break Saturday, different activities are set up in the church. There is a music station, in which the children receive a little instruction and get to make music with keyboards, drums and bongos. In the arts and crafts section, the kids got to make a clown face on paper plate bases and paint a giant poster. There is a time for games, and sometimes even a bounce house or ponies show up.

Nathaniel's Hope also sponsors Caroling for Kids and VIP Birthday Club, among other special needs programs.

Grace Baptist hopes to encourage other churches in the area to participate, eventually being able to offer a free Buddy Break every Saturday. Nathaniel's Hope presently has branches in California, Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Indiana and Virginia.

"When Jesus was on earth, He went around doing good, often serving people that had great needs," Ascol said. "Through our Nathaniel's Hope ministry we get to do some of that too."

For more information, visit www.NathanielsHope.org or call 239-772-1400. For more information on Grace Baptist, visit www.TrueGraceofGod.org.

