

Nathaniel's Hope Buddy Break

story and photos by JOHN GARROD

Nathaniel Kuck's legacy is a ministry that brings support and love to families that desperately need it. It is a legacy especially awe-inspiring, because in the four and a half years that his life lasted, Nathaniel never spoke a word.

Each month, the Orlando-based Nathaniel's Hope Ministry, working through St. James United Methodist Church in Tampa, as well as four Orlando churches, offers Buddy Break. Buddy Break provides families of special-needs children (dubbed V.I.P.'s) with a chance to recharge their batteries. For about three hours, well-trained volunteers (Buddies) take care of children with physical, mental, medical and emotional challenges. Simultaneously, their siblings, who face obstacles most children can't imagine, engage in games, sports and activities that most children take for granted. All of which gives their parents a chance to shop, run errands or simply unwind.

The vision for Nathaniel's Hope, which offers several ministries to these beleaguered families, came to Tim and Marie Kuck after Nathaniel's death in 2001. It had been a long and exhausting journey for the family from day one. Nathaniel was born with multiple birth anomalies, and an undiagnosed syndrome. The family spent the next four and a half years in and out of hospitals, enduring therapies and surgeries, while battling multiple illnesses. "We were always exhausted," says Marie. "But Nathaniel taught us that every life has value and purpose."

It was during this time that Tim and Marie found many churches simply couldn't minister to families of V.I.P.'s. "Some of them don't recognize the need, but many simply don't know how to reach out to these families. The challenge we face is to get churches to understand that they can do something," says Marie.

Nathaniel's Hope comes into churches and conducts training for volunteers. "The idea is for this to be the church's ministry. We provide the training and help them

get started, but then the members of the church are the ones who make it happen."

At St. James UMC, the program is headed up by Sally DePalma. The mother of a V.I.P. herself, Sally is a fountain of energy. She and her husband met the Kuck's at an Autism Walk at Disney in Orlando. The church, led by Pastor Brian James, has trained over 100 "Buddies." At the November Buddy Break, about 25 V.I.P. kids attended.

During an orientation, Sally and Marie listen compassionately as mothers of V.I.P.'s talk of the hardships they face, ranging from transportation issues to finding schools that will take both the V.I.P. child and the siblings. Through it all, the ladies convey hope and the love of Christ. For many of these families, this three hour break is the only respite they get each month from the rigors of their lives.

For parents, St. James has coordinated with local businesses to offer deep discounts on everything from food to lodging. The local Y.M.C.A. has been helpful, opening its doors to the parents and the siblings to enjoy their facilities. One month, Buddies take some of the siblings on a canoe trip.

The other ministries of Nathaniel's Hope include caroling on Christmas Day in children's wards of hospitals, a Birthday Club that keeps in contact with V.I.P.'s all year and an online resource center. Each June, "Make 'Em Smile," draws thousands to Orlando's Lake Eola Park to love on and provide support for V.I.P. families. Next year, they hope to bring the event to Tampa.

For information on Buddy Break at St. James, contact the church at (813) 971-4790, extension 234. To learn more about Nathaniel's Hope, check them out on the web at www.nathanielshope.org.



V.I.P. Justin, seated, with representatives from Project Pup of Pinellas County and his Buddy, Sherry Nelson, behind him



Buddies are carefully trained to match activities with the wants and abilities of their assigned V.I.P.