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Nathaniel's Hope Buddy Break Will Benefit From 'Night Of 5000!'

New Tampa Junior Woman's Club
To Hold Its Annual 'Night of
5000' Fund Raiser At Saddlebrook

By Melissa O'Brien

For parents with special needs children, having time to sit down and relax, do some errands or just sleep can be almost impossible. Finding childcare can be difficult enough, but these parents have to be sure the needs of their disabled child can be met by a person trained to assist special needs kids.

Nathaniel's Hope Buddy Break is a not-for-profit ministry that offers a once-a-month afternoon out while children play with trained volunteers. To help ensure the organization can meet the need, the New Tampa Junior Woman's Club (NTJWC) has chosen Nathaniel's Hope Buddy Break as the local primary benefactor of its 11th Annual signature Night of 5000 gala.

The event will be held at the newly renovated Saddlebrook Resort & Spa Tampa in Wesley Chapel, on Saturday, April 19. The theme for the black-tie event is "An Evening in Monte Carlo" and includes a seated dinner, dancing, and silent and live auctions.

"A donation by the New Tampa Junior Woman's Club enables us to reach more families," says Nathaniel's Hope co-founder Marie Kuck. "It is a blessing to have the resources to run the program and to reach even farther out into the community."

Kuck, along with her husband Timothy, started Nathaniel's Hope Buddy Break after the death of their son.

"We began Nathaniel's Hope to honor our son, Nathaniel Timothy Kuck," says Marie. "He was born with birth anomalies and for four-and-a-half years, he fought for his life. He brought us into the disabled community. It has been more than six years since he died and it is our mission to bring hope to kids with special needs and to assist their families with free respite care."

Kuck says that Nathaniel's care was very involved - 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

"We had many sleepless nights, feeding tubes, medications, doctor's visits, therapies, and needless to say, a great deal of stress," says Kuck. "Though a tremendous blessing, the life of raising a VIP kid (a term Kuck prefers for these children, rather than "disabled" or "special needs") can be all-consuming, with very little support available, even from friends



New Tampa Junior Woman's Club members (l. to r.): Lisa Mastrorio, Dawn Saunders, Melissa McCormick, Jerilyn Rush, and Susie Nelson-Crowley, at last year's "Night of 5000."

and family, forcing many VIP families to travel this journey overwhelmed and alone."

Buddy Break was created to provide respite care for families who had little or no support system to give them a break when they need it the most.

"Buddy Break gives VIP parents that

break, while allowing people to get involved by being a Buddy to a child and their family," says Kuck. "The program partners with local churches, since we believe the local church has the greatest opportunity, desire, and responsibility to provide these families with

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this practical assistance within their own communities."

Buddy Break was first introduced at Calvary Assembly in Winter Park, Florida in 2004. Since then, the program has extended to the Tampa area - including the New Tampa Buddy Break, which is held once a month at St. James United Methodist Church at 16202 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., in Tampa Palms. Kuck says Nathaniel's Hope currently has ten respite programs across the country with eventual plans to expand nationwide.

During the break, Kuck says the VIP kids play interactive games with their assigned volunteer "Buddies" and other kids in the program. "The kids come to socialize, play games, make arts and crafts and listen to music," says Kuck. "We have guest speakers and sometimes therapy dogs visiting the kids. There is one volunteer (who has undergone a two-hour training course and is background-checked) per kid so the kids get special time with a mentor. Siblings are invited to come to the program because it is important to show special interest in their lives, as well."

Sally De Palma, the St. James Buddy Break coordinator, says that the program is open to anyone in the community who has a VIP child and the program is always looking for volunteers. The program is held once a month, usually the second or third Saturday, but times can vary. It is non-denominational for both volunteers and participants.

"The program began here in 2006," says DePalma. "We had Tim and Marie come and talk to our congregation and by the end of the program, we already had 70 people signed up to help. Some people come all the way from Spring Hill and Sarasota to our pro-

gram. They will drive an hour to get a three-hour break."

One of the NTJWC members, Elizabeth Band, has used the services of the Buddy Break at St. James with her son, Clay.

"It was always difficult to get sitters who you are comfortable with and know how to take care of Clay's needs," says Band. "Having a special needs child, it can be hard to find one-on-one time with your spouse and or have special time with our daughter. Clay loves going to Buddy Break and has enjoyed the time he spends with the people he's been paired up with. It is a very valuable program and it shows how good people really are."

"We are proud to have selected Nathaniel's Hope Buddy Break as our charity this year," says Dawn Sanders, the NTJWC event chairperson. "The monies that we raise will allow the local Tampa Chapter to enhance a much needed service to New Tampa and the surrounding areas."

NTJWC president Lori Carroll-Bowman says the organization likes to, "choose a charity in our own backyard. Night of 5000 is our major fund raiser for the year and all the money raised will go right back into our community. We also want to thank all of our sponsors, including Gentle Care Dentistry-Dr. Tom Frankfurth and Public Charities." Last year, NTJWC donated more than 18,000 volunteer hours and \$134,000 in cash and in-kind donations.

Carroll-Bowman says guests at the Night of 5000 will have a special treat this year, with the addition of impressionists Billy and Carol Finch at the event. The couple will be the co-Masters of Ceremony for the evening and the band, Synchronicity, will provide the dance music for the evening.

As in years past, each ticket purchased includes the opportunity to win \$5,000. The winner will be drawn during the event. Some

of the special auction items include lunch for four with Tampa Mayor Pam Iorio, a golf trip to Pinehurst, North Carolina, a signed football helmet by the 2007 Heisman Winner and Florida Gator, Tim Tebow, a team-signed Boston Red Sox 2007 World Series baseball, a team-signed New York Giants 2007 football and a cabin for two on a luxury catamaran for a seven-day, all-inclusive trip.

For more information about the Night of 5000, contact event chair Dawn Saunders at dawnsaunders@yahoo.com or 907-7721. For ticket information, please contact Heather Keen at NO5000tickets@hotmail.com or 907-7108 or view the club's website at www.ntjwc.org.

For additional information about Nathaniel's Hope Buddy Break at St. James United Methodist Church in Tampa Palms, call 971-4790, ext. 234, or visit www.nathanielshope.org.