



SHARING HOPE

Victoria Oldham cuddles with Reagan the dog at Buddy Break, a respite program for disabled children and their families. Page F1

Program gives families time for renewal

Buddy Break focuses on helping disabled children have fun and feel special while freeing their parents to run errands or simply relax.

By MARK I. PINSKY
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As the families arrive at Calvary Assembly of God on a sunny Saturday morning, there is anticipation on the faces of both parents and children — but for vastly different reasons. The kids, from tots to teens, have a range of disabilities — including cerebral palsy, Down syndrome and autism. Some can walk, and others are in wheelchairs. During the week, they are in special programs, mainstreamed in the public-school system or cared for at home.

But despite their disabilities, these young people know that they will soon be among friends, for a good, safe time. Their companions will be other disabled kids they have come to know, as well as hand-holding volunteers called “buddies.”

And for the next three hours, they’ll be called VIPs as they go from room to room in this Winter Park megachurch, singing, doing crafts, listening to stories, playing games, eating lunch and going outside to visit a mobile petting zoo.

Meanwhile, their worn and stressed parents will dash off to visit Home Depot, ride bikes, clean their homes, spend quiet time together or just sleep.

Both parents and children are benefiting from a three-year-old program, born out of one family’s grief, that provides free “respite care” for the disabled at Central Florida churches. With “Buddy Break,” parents can bring their disabled children — and the kids’ nondisabled siblings — for a few hours on a Friday night or a Saturday morning. Trained volunteers care for the children, with the support of medical personnel who are also volunteers, while the parents take a break.

Karen Jones, 37, a radiographer and single mother from Apopka, says these hours are “priceless,” enabling her to do errands and clean her house while her 11-year-old son, David, a quadriplegic, is being cared for.

“When I take the time to relax and re-energize myself, I feel like I’m a better mom,” Jones says. “I’m able to be more patient, more attentive, more playful and less stressed out, and to appreciate David for the blessing he is.”

Providing hope

Buddy Break was founded and developed by Tim and Marie Kuck, who know firsthand how physically exhausting and emotionally draining it can be to care for a severely disabled child. Their son, Nathaniel, was born prematurely with multiple birth defects and died in 2001,



Cindy Clemens (from left), lets Keaton Williams, 15, pet a rabbit during a Buddy Break at Calvary Assembly, while Victoria Oldham, 9, holds one for ‘buddy’ Deanna Carlson to touch.

PHOTOS BY JULIE FLETCHER/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Take a break

The Orlando-area churches participating in Buddy Breaks are Calvary Assembly of God, Winter Park; Faith Assembly of God, Orlando; First Baptist Church Sweetwater, Longwood; South Orlando Baptist Church, Orlando; and Wekiva Assembly of God, Longwood. The next Buddy Break is May 26 at South Orlando Baptist.

For more information go to nathanielshope.org or call 407-857-8224.



Buddy Break gives ‘VIP’ Jenna Bess (right) something to smile about as she walks hand in hand with program volunteer Meghan Hayes.

before his fifth birthday, without ever speaking or eating on his own.

In 2002, the Kucks established Nathaniel’s Hope as a living memorial to their son, to help families like theirs. Their programs, designed to make disabled children feel special, include Christmas visits to hospitals and a “VIP Birthday Club,” which remembers each child with a card, a “Bearing Hope” beanie bear plush toy and other surprises.

With Buddy Break, the

Kucks cite studies that say a high number of couples with a disabled child divorce. So their goal was to help the families, whose children they would dub “VIPs,” and to train volunteers, called “buddies.”

One of those buddies is Brenda Whidden, a respiratory therapist who helped take care of Nathaniel at the hospital.

“Every once in a while you bond with a child,” she recalls. “I fell in love with Nathaniel.”

So Whidden, 42, decided to volunteer.

“I’m here if anyone needs me [in a medical capacity],” she says, “but I just like playing with the kids. By doing this, I feel like Nathaniel’s still alive, that his life has purpose.”

The program currently is at five Orlando area churches and one in Tampa. But the Kucks want to take the program nationwide, providing training materials for churches around the country to do what they are doing here. And there is more.

“It’s our dream to have a permanent respite facility in

Central Florida to provide care when families need it,” says Marie Kuck. “We’d like to provide overnight care, or extended care, when they have the need. There’s such a greater need to help families when they need the help.”

Calvary’s pastor, the Rev. George Cope, has known Marie for decades.

“I was always impressed with her passion and compassion,” he says. “It’s not a surprise that her tragedy became other people’s triumph.”

Experts in the field laud the program.

“Parents rarely are able to get an actual break,” says Robert A. Naseef, a Philadelphia psychologist and author of *Special Children, Challenged Parents: The Struggles and Rewards of Raising a Child With a Disability*.

“What’s great about [Buddy Break] is that there are professional people there,” says Naseef, who co-authored a recent article on respite care.

Honoring VIPs

Nathaniel’s Hope will be holding its annual support festival, “Make ‘m Smile,” at Orlando’s Lake Eola Park on June 2. Rather than a fundraiser, it is

an event to honor and celebrate the VIPs — such as the three disabled daughters of Matt and Diane Hayes.

The couple, both 41, moved from St. Louis to Orlando so their children, ages 10, 12 and 15, could attend Princeton House Charter School, a public program that focuses on children with disabilities. For the Hayeses, the respite program has been a godsend. They attend programs at three other area churches each month.

“We’ll go anywhere,” Diane says, knowing that her girls are “safe and loved and cared for.”

Plus, her daughters, like many other children, look forward to the breaks, where they meet other kids who often become their friends.

The break works both ways, says Matt: “It’s a respite from their parents.”

Chip Tolman, 52, of Orange County, says his two young children feel the same way.

“They enjoy it too — probably more than us,” he says. “When they get to the door, they let us know they’re glad to be here.”

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