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A Gift Of Hours



From left, Pam Dickinson with VIP Kid Jacob Rudes, 5, and Brandon Barthle, 14, with VIP kid Alex Miller, 6, enjoy time at the craft table during Nathaniel's Hope Buddy Break at St. James United Methodist Church in Tampa Palms.

Michael Spooneybarger

By **MICHELLE BEARDEN** The Tampa Tribune

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At home, he's Daddy to two little girls. But one Saturday a month, Kevin Schmook is on his knees playing rough and tumble with an energetic 7-year-old boy at St. James United Methodist Church.

"He doesn't stop, the whole three hours," says Schmook, 40, his eyes darting across the kid-filled room in search of his charge, who has autism. "One minute here, one minute there, up and down and all around. I'm having a blast."

Welcome to Buddy Break, a free program that allows harried parents to hand over their special-needs children - and any siblings - to trained volunteers like Schmook from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The parents get a chance to run errands or enjoy quiet time, and their children get one-on-one attention.

And what do the volunteers get?

"Tired," Schmook says with a laugh. "I'm mentally and physically exhausted when I leave. And I'm already looking forward to next month."

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In May, St. James became the first church in the Tampa Bay area to adopt Nathaniel's Hope Buddy Break, an Orlando-based ministry now in four Florida locations. When Schmook heard his pastor talk on Palm Sunday about starting the program, he knew he had to sign up for the first certification training.

"I was sitting in the pew and I began crying like a baby," recalls the recruiter for a dental HMO. "Here I look at my own children and see how happy and healthy they are, and it's something I sometimes just take for granted. I knew I had to do this, to help others and to grow my connection with God."

Big Need, Big Response

Some 70 people showed up for that first training session. Church member Sally DePalma, ministry coordinator, was both pleased and overwhelmed.

"It's the fastest ministry we've gotten approved, then up and running at St. James," she says. "It showed me how compassionate people are and how they are willing to sacrifice to help those who need it most."

The program is growing quickly. It serves about 25 VIPs, as the special-needs children are called, and 11 siblings. A second training session last week drew nearly 20 new volunteers.

"It's like we started pushing a little marble down a hill and it became a boulder," says DePalma.

She stumbled upon Buddy Break at an information booth in Orlando. As the mother of an 8-year-old autistic daughter, she knows firsthand the frustrations of caring for a special-needs child.

She says she has it easier than most, because her daughter has mild autism, a developmental brain disability that can affect the ability to communicate, form relationships and tolerate change. Many other parents of disabled children have it much harder, she knows. "Sometimes your clock is 24-7 for years, maybe without end, so the need for respite care is incredible."

But such help can be unaffordable or difficult to find. Many parents just give up trying to do the things most people take for granted: going to movies or out to dinner, attending church, accepting invitations to parties. Even getting away for a trip to the grocery store can be a challenge.

While these parents often feel isolated, they are certainly not alone. Some 30,000 special-needs children are served by Hillsborough County public schools - and "that doesn't include all the kids who aren't in the school system," DePalma says.

Offering a few hours of respite a month seemed like the kind of thing a church should do. So she took the idea to her pastor, the Rev. Brian James, who immediately embraced it. He made his pitch from the pulpit, and the congregants responded.

"I don't get surprised at what God does anymore," James says. "That's his hobby. What has really hit me is that we thought we'd be blessing people by offering this ministry. It's turned out that we're the ones being blessed."

Giving, Receiving

That's how volunteer Dawn Frazee feels. The mother of two teen girls, she considers it a privilege to come here once a month. She's a buddy to Alexander Lipps, 2, who has cerebral palsy, a seizure disorder and is visually impaired.

Frazee, 44, grew up with a brother who has cerebral palsy, and she has volunteered as a Special Olympics coach.

"This is something that God gave me a heart for," she says, cradling Alexander in her arms. "People with disabilities are humans, just like us, but sometimes they get shunned or picked on. That's not right, but it happens."

She also remembers what her parents went through in trying to raise a special-needs child without sacrificing the needs of the rest of the family. A ministry like this would have helped ease their burden, she says.

"You have no idea until you've walked in their shoes," she says. "I know that Alexander's mom is just hanging out by the pool today. Things the rest of us take for granted become very precious when you're raising kids with disabilities."

Stolen moments alone are precious indeed.

Having three children kept Matt and Shanon Kalmenson busy enough. Then along came Jake three years ago, and their lives became even more complicated.

Their youngest child's behavior changed drastically before his second birthday. He stopped playing and became fearful and withdrawn. Forget taking him to a mall; that usually led to a screaming fit. The doctors finally diagnosed autism.

"It hit us like a ton of bricks," says Shanon Kalmenson, 38. "All the rules were different now. The whole family was affected by it. Seventy-five percent of all our attention now had to be diverted to Jake."

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When she heard about Buddy Break, she was leery. Surely they're going to expect something of us, she thought. There must be some kind of catch.

"Why would strangers want to help us out, giving up some of their own time and asking for nothing in return?" she says. "We aren't even members of the church."

The Kalmensons brought Jake to the first Buddy Break in May. Like all participants, they had to register and attend an orientation meeting with their son's assigned buddy, Matt Harrell, 43, an architect and father of two girls.

Harrell says their first session wasn't so successful. Jake, who doesn't like new situations, cried fretfully when his parents dropped him off. Harrell looked around the room at the other children, who seemed content and docile, and wondered what he had gotten himself into.

"You can't go into this with your own set of expectations," he admits. "You give, and can't expect anything in return."

But patience and time together has paid off. Now the two are buddies, just as the program intends. "I call him Perpetual Jake. He's always in motion," Harrell says. The little victories mean the most. Like the time they were holding hands and clapping to the beat of the music. Then the tune stopped, Harrell let go, and Jake hung on.

Three hours may not seem like a long time, but for the Kalmensons, it's more than they've had in years. Because Buddy Break is also open to siblings, who get a separate recreation program in the church's youth facility, the couple drop off all their kids.

It doesn't really matter how the two spend their time, whether it's sharing a cup of coffee, taking a nap, or taking advantage of the VIP Parent Concierge service, an extension of Buddy Break that provides treats such as a day pass to the local YMCA, on-site facials and massages, and a discounted rate at a nearby hotel.

All those perks are welcomed, but Kalmenson says the biggest luxury these days is "having a conversation without interruption."

"It's good for Jake, and it's good for all of us," she says. "As far as I'm concerned, they're angels."

Child Inspired Ministry

Nathaniel Timothy Kuck died in 1997 at age 4, his life cut short by devastating birth defects.

Doctors said he had an "undiagnosed syndrome." He never walked, talked or progressed past the milestones of about nine months old. His life was spent undergoing surgeries and therapies, and suffering illnesses.

His mother, Marie, calls him her miracle child.

"He showed us that to each life there is value and purpose," she says. "Sometimes that's hard to see. But for us, it's become abundantly clear over time."

Nathaniel's brief time on Earth inspired his parents to set up a nonprofit organization in 2002 in his name. Nathaniel's Hope, based in Orlando, helps families meet the challenges of having special-needs children.

It develops programs that reduce stress, share hope and encouragement and provide education, with its main ministry being Buddy Break, a free respite service available at four Florida churches.

The Kucks are completing a curriculum called Buddy Training 101, in anticipation of building a network of Buddy Break churches around the country. They're also finishing a book called "Hope Lives," which tells the story of Nathaniel's journey from "womb to heaven."

Marie Kuck says the rapid growth of their organization is a reflection of how many people are desperately seeking resources and support.

She and her husband, Tim, felt that void when Nathaniel was alive; they don't want other parents to experience the frustration and isolation.

Kuck says she'll always miss her son's "little man's smile" and his presence in their home. But he left his parents wiser; he taught them unconditional love, perseverance and faithfulness to God.

Most important, she says, he taught them how to encourage others.

"Nathaniel changed his address and moved to 777 Heavenly Lane," Kuck says. "His purpose has been fulfilled. Now we've been able to see through our pain and carry on in his memory."

To find out more about the Buddy Break program at St. James, call (813) 977-4240. Reporter Michelle Bearden can be reached at (813) 259-7613 or at mbearden@tampatrib.com.

Keyword: Buddy, to learn how to become a Buddy Break partner and to see a video report.

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