New Hope for a New Year!

Look inside to learn how the Rivera family received new hope in Christ!
Last year’s battle with coronavirus opened my eyes to a war zone that ravages most of the world – especially among people with disabilities. Yes, sequestering made me feel isolated, but every day that same specter suffocates the forgotten and neglected. Yes, my grocery store wasn’t always well stocked – but overseas, many with disabilities are succumbing to starvation. Yes, I had a hard time making a doctor’s appointment – but in developing nations, broken limbs go untreated, surgeries are too expensive, and medical care is non-existent.

COVID-19 opened the eyes of all of us at Joni and Friends. I used to say, “People with disabilities are on the bottom rung of the world’s ladder.” But since coronavirus, it’s clear the disabled have been pushed off that ladder. In a world scrambling for its footing, they’ve been forgotten. Eclipse by the strong and self-absorbed, they are invisible.

At Joni and Friends, we stand up for these people. We are ratcheting up our resolve to reach and serve the lost and the hurting in the name of Jesus Christ. Personally, I am committing every ounce of effort to “be aglow and burning with the Spirit as I serve the Lord” in 2021 – the desperate needs among the world’s disabled are just too urgent. Please join me in shining the light of Christ more brightly into the kingdom of darkness to chase away fear and hopelessness.

Thankfully, COVID-19 pressed Joni and Friends to come up with innovative and creative ways to rescue wounded and weary people with disabilities and their families. Such ministry makes me boast in the Lord! I am so proud of your Joni and Friends teams for pioneering ground-breaking ministry that exalts the Gospel of Christ while adorning it with deeds of mercy. You will read about this trailblazing ministry in this newsletter… and I know you will join me in lifting praises to God for the amazing way he is reaching the world’s disabled through you and this wonderful ministry.

I am a child of the King, and one day I’ll cast my crown at the feet of Jesus who rescued me through his crown of thorns. Until that day, join me in gathering into that kingdom as many sick and wounded, lame and weary people as we possibly can. Oh friend, join me in zealously serving the Lord to the glory of Christ into 2021… Let’s get going!

Never lag in zeal and in earnest endeavor; be aglow and burning with the Spirit, serving the Lord. Rejoice and exult in hope; be steadfast and patient in suffering and tribulation; be constant in prayer.

ROMANS 12:11-12 (AMPC)
Dan and Sandra Rivera were super excited when they heard about Family Retreat. Their sons DeMetrius (19), Nathan (11) and Isaac (6) matched their parents’ excitement.

Both DeMetrius and Nathan have global developmental delays, making their day-to-day caregiving routines incredibly complicated – and making vacations impossible. Little Isaac was perhaps anticipating Family Retreat most of all. “I was looking forward to having my own assigned volunteer buddy!”

When in-person Family Retreat was canceled due to COVID-19, the Rivera family was heartbroken. But coronavirus couldn’t stop us from encouraging special-needs families, and provisions were made for Family Retreat at Home. Dan and Sandra received a personal invitation from our New England staff letting them know they were wanted and valued.

Sandra cried as she explained, “It was shocking to see Joni and Friends do something like this.” Because before being connected to Joni and Friends, Sandra’s experience was that “people don’t invest in us.”

But you invested in families impacted by disability like the Riveras! “In 10 years, I’ve never seen anything like this!” said Sandra. “Joni and Friends took time to reach out to us. They saw us. They got to know us and made us feel special.”

Dan went on to explain, “Joni and Friends made us feel loved and that we’re not alone.” And in a season when already isolated families are being pushed even further into the margins of society due to coronavirus restrictions, Family Retreat at Home came at the perfect time.

No matter what is going on in our world, we will love and serve families by creatively engaging with them so they can find hope in their hardships through Jesus. Thank you for making year-long, hands-on ministry to special-needs families possible!

Sandra said it best, “You make us feel a little bit more connected to this world and a little bit more connected to being God’s children.” And now, after Family Retreat at Home, Sandra is part of our Joni and Friends online support group, receiving the hope and encouragement she needs as a full-time caregiver to her sons – and getting that support all year long.

“I can’t believe God loves us so much to bring us into the Joni and Friends family!” declared Sandra. Thank you for showing the Rivera family – and thousands of families like theirs – that they belong to the family of God!

Watch this video for more of the Rivera’s inspiring story! jonandfriends.org/support-families
40 WEEKS BEING THE Hands and Feet of Jesus

Life in Peru is incredibly difficult for Ursula and her 14-year-old daughter Karolay, who has cerebral palsy. Karolay has been denied health care and as a result, her disability has gotten more and more severe. And Ursula has struggled day after day for 14 long years, carrying Karolay everywhere – which had become close to impossible as her body grew.

But you gave Ursula heavenly joy when you sent a brand-new wheelchair to Karolay through Wheels for the World and our 40 Weeks of ministry in Peru. No longer does Ursula have to carry her daughter to school each day, and Karolay sits in a seat of dignity where she is able to interact with others and be part of her community. Plus, you gave Ursula and Karolay the eternal gift of the Gospel when they got the Joni book and a Bible in their own language! Ursula is reading the Bible to Karolay every day and said, “I know God wants us to approach him daily!”

Face masks and hospital robes can't get in the way of God's plans for the families living with disability – in Peru and all over the world. Thank you for giving Mathias and his mother the life-giving gifts of mobility, food and essential hygiene supplies, the Joni book and a Bible in their own language, and the eternal promise of heaven with Jesus!

Your generosity and steadfast prayers are sending the Good News of Jesus to the darkest corners of the planet. Thank you for sharing God’s Word with those who need it most, like 7-year-old Mathias, who has spina bifida, hydrocephalus and terminal chronic renal failure. He was overjoyed when he received his first pediatric wheelchair through Wheels for the World, and before he and his mother left our wheelchair distribution site, they were also introduced to Jesus!

Your love shouts to the world that 2021 brings with it new hope for a new year in Christ!

Everyone hears the Gospel and receives the Joni book and a Bible during our 40 Weeks of ministry in Peru, and when 12-year-old Rick, who has cerebral palsy, was custom fit into his new wheelchair, his sisters Cristine and Merly prayed to receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior! As they left with their arms full of food and essential hygiene supplies – given through your love and support – they declared, “God is love!”

We know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them.

1 JOHN 4:16
Peter and Christy Strauch are true American heroes in every sense of the word. Peter is a double Purple Heart recipient who served in the Army from 2004 – 2012. A paratrooper and combat veteran, Peter was deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan, and now lives with Post Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injuries, and stroke-like symptoms as a result of his service to his country. His wife, Christy, serves as his full-time caregiver while also caring for their three daughters, Neima (13), Neelah (7) and Olivia (6), who has autism.

The transition from war to civilian life can be excruciating, as combat zones have a way of traveling home with our servicemen and women. And while Peter and Christy have learned to navigate through their “new normal,” they’ve had to endure incredible hardships – especially over the past year.

Both Peter and little Olivia have lost access to their daily therapy sessions due to COVID-19 restraints, adding to Christy’s burden as their primary caregiver, and creating feelings of isolation and loneliness for the whole family. Christy’s own health issues have been put on the back burner while she carries the load of caring for her family. And on top of everything associated with disability and coronavirus, the Strauchs lost half their house when it caught on fire after a propane tank exploded. Peter suffered third degree burns in his effort to rescue the family’s animals during that fire, and they’ve since had to live in the remains of that home without electricity due to insurance complications.

Your love and prayers have helped this incredible family through two Joni and Friends programs: our Texas Warrior Getaways and Hearts for the Disabled.

“And Christy received new hope at the Warrior Getaway, too! At the Warrior Getaway, Christy realized she’s not alone. The Bible teaching, worship, support groups and encouragement from other Warrior families pointed her and her whole family to the Lord and gave Christy the strength she needed to continue serving her family despite the many challenges that come from disability.

“I learned how to rely on the Lord,” explained Christy. “And that our strength doesn’t come from ourselves. My strength comes from the Lord.” Thank you for giving the Strauch family – and other Warrior families like theirs – the much-needed opportunity to connect with each other and with Jesus at our Warrior Getaways!

But Warrior Getaways aren’t the only way Peter, Christy and their beautiful daughters can receive strength, joy and hope. Our Heart for the Disabled outreach sends the love of Christ to families like the Strauchs who so desperately need encouragement. And we’re inviting you to send your heartfelt Christian encouragement to Peter, Christy and their three beautiful daughters.

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Please pick up a pen and jot a Valentine's card or a note, send a poem, maybe a Bible verse or two, or just a short letter to this exceptional family and let them know that God is on their side! That’s right, pour out your love on them through your cards and letters, and please send them soon so we can deliver your notes in time for Valentine’s Day.

You can send your cards to:
Joni and Friends Heart for the Disabled Strauch Family
PO Box 3333
Agoura Hills, CA 91376

Thank you for having a “Heart for the Disabled!”

See what happens at our Warrior Getaways in this video: joniandfriends.org/warrior-getaway
Hand-On Ministry
From the Field!

From the San Francisco Bay Area

And on the other side of the country in the Bay Area, Junior, who has cerebral palsy, chronic lung disease, and severe seizures, had the time of his life at Family Retreat at Home! When asked about the best part, young Eliana reported, “I loved the stories about Moses! I learned that Aaron and Moses were just like Donovan and me. I help my brother with his words so others understand what he’s trying to say.” Thank you for helping the next generation know and love God’s Word!

From New England

11-year-old Donovan, who has autism, and his 8-year-old sister Elliana, who has Caudal Regression Syndrome, also flourished during the New England Family Retreat at Home! When asked about the best part, young Eliana reported, “I loved the stories about Moses! I learned that Aaron and Moses were just like Donovan and me. I help my brother with his words so others understand what he’s trying to say.” Thank you for helping the next generation know and love God’s Word!

From Arizona

And thanks to your incredible generosity, we were able to put on in-person Family Retreats too, like the one in Arizona that served Dwight, Linny and their 14 children! Dwight and Linny have three biological children and 11 adopted children, many with special needs. The scholarships you sent allowed this amazing family to attend Family Retreat where they were renewed and refreshed in the Lord. “We learned that we are not alone in our struggles,” explained Dwight.

All of Dwight and Linny’s children experienced God’s love at Family Retreat, and 10-year-old Ruby’s smile represents the renewal felt by each family member. Ruby, who has hydrocephalus, cerebral palsy and epilepsy, was starving and left to die in an Ugandan orphanage before Dwight and Linny adopted her. Now, Ruby is a valued member of her family and knows she is precious to Jesus. During worship times at Family Retreat, Ruby’s singing touched everyone’s heart. Thank you for giving Ruby and other special needs children like her a reason to sing!

Your love is spurring single mothers like Heidi – and children with severe disabilities like Junior – on in the Lord!
From North Carolina

Penny, a single mom in North Carolina, knows that the emotional impact of caring for a child with disabilities is enormous. Her son, Christian, had a stroke at the age of 13 and now has a traumatic brain injury, paralysis in his right arm, and speech difficulties. Caring for Christian alongside her other son, Braxton, and doing it alone only intensified Penny’s emotional and financial burdens. And the impact of COVID-19 has greatly increased the loneliness and isolation Penny and her sons feel on a daily basis.

But at Family Retreat and the Single Parent Getaway put on by Joni and Friends North Carolina, Penny was thoroughly refreshed physically, spiritually and relationally. “The times of refreshing were life-giving and restorative” for Penny and her two sons. The love and people at Family Retreat bring families like Penny’s closer to each other and closer to the heart of God. Thank you for making the miracle of Family Retreat possible all across the country!

From Louisiana

Family Retreats aren’t the only ways your prayers are meeting the needs of families impacted by disability. Joni and Friends Louisiana hosted an accessible outdoor adventure hike for special needs families using all-terrain wheelchairs! Families that had been cooped up for too long due to COVID-19 regulations were able to hit the trails to enjoy God’s creation and the fellowship of other families who truly understand the challenges of disability.

And for Bobby, Amy and their son Dustin, it was a time of great thanksgiving after both parents had recovered from coronavirus. While Amy and Bobby were sick, Joni and Friends Louisiana supplied them with groceries, essential hygiene supplies and other household items – and connected them to a local church for ongoing spiritual care.

“Joni and Friends has been a blessing to our family!” shared Amy. “We feel accepted and loved by everyone!” Thank you for sharing the love of Christ in beautiful ways!

There are lots of exciting events happening in your area, too!

In addition to Family Retreats and Wheels for the World outreaches, our Field teams are offering Respite Events, Support Groups, Church Trainings and all sorts of Family Fun gatherings.

Visit joniandfriends.org/events today and find out how you can get involved!
Honora Loved One, Transform a Life

We gratefully acknowledge contributions given in memory or honor of loved ones to further ministry in the disability community. To give a gift in memory of a loved one or in honor of a special occasion, visit joniandfriends.org/donate or contact Joni and Friends at 818.707.5664.

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In The One Year® Pray for Life Bible, you’ll not only learn the truth about the value of people with disabilities, but you’ll also find God’s heart on topics such as mental illness, euthanasia, global pandemics and more. Pray for the urgent need to protect life as you read through the whole Bible in just one year.

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FROM THE FOREWORD BY JONI EARECKSON TADA

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