Spread God’s Joy at Retreats & Getaways!

“At home Leo doesn’t really laugh, but at Family Retreat he laughs and has fun! Riding the horse is his favorite activity!”
There are many parts of the Gospel that captivate people with disabilities. Jesus is our Rock who strengthens us in our weaknesses. He is our Savior, constantly rescuing us from sin (when we whine, “God’s not fair... others have it easier!”). Jesus is our precious Comforter who pours hope into our hearts when suffering overwhelms us. The Gospel impacts every aspect of disability.

There’s one part, though, that really gets us excited. You hear it at Family Retreats and at Getaways. Whether whooping it up at a wheelchair square dance, or wildly applauding a brain-injured kid’s poem during Talent Night, you hear it... you sense it. All of a sudden, someone will shout, “I feel like I’m in heaven!”

The unmistakable fragrance of heaven permeates every Retreat and Getaway. It’s because our disabilities seem to disappear in the joy. We almost forget about the pain. The power of Christ in our weakness is so tangible, it transports us to that glorious Day when we “will go out and skip like calves released from the stall” (Malachi 4:2).

The kingdom of heaven is bubbling up within me and I must share it. So I borrowed a bit of “heaven” from Family Retreats and wove it into my new children’s book, The Awesome Super Fantastic Forever Party. It’s a true story about Jesus and his heavenly kingdom — no fanciful myths about heaven; only what the Bible says! I want all children to grasp God's truth about our glorious destiny... and how to prepare for it!

But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

HEBREWS 11:16

I hope you’ll order copies of The Awesome Super Fantastic Forever Party for all the young ones in your life. And remember, your purchase helps Joni and Friends expand our programs so that more special needs families can enjoy their slice of heaven at our Retreats and Getaways. Thank you for spreading heaven’s joy through your prayers, gifts, and my new children’s book!

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Reyna is a single mom raising four children alone. Her two oldest, Belen (19) and Leo (17), have a rare genetic disorder that impacts every aspect of their lives. Belen and Leo have complicated caregiving routines that start at 4am each day. “I’ve been doing this daily for 19 years,” says Reyna.

“Nineteen years.”

“I help feed Belen and Leo and change them,” explains Yahir, their 10-year-old brother. “I’ve been doing this my whole life.”

“I don’t want to take Yahir’s childhood from him, but I need his help,” says Reyna. And between all the medical appointments, therapies, feeding issues, and toileting routines, Reyna needs a lot of help. While she and Yahir tend to Belen and Leo, she must also look after Mia Victoria, her 10-month-old baby, whose father left Reyna while she was pregnant. “It’s not easy having two disabled children and still give Yahir what he needs,” confesses Reyna. “It’s exhausting.”

But ever since Reyna and her children came to Family Retreat, “I don’t feel lonely anymore. I feel great! The friendships we made through Joni and Friends are a huge gift from God!”

“Family Retreat gives me rest and refreshes me so I can go on physically, mentally, and emotionally,” says Reyna. “And the spiritual part of Family Retreat gives me strength. Here God teaches me how to be calm despite the storm that surrounds me. At Family Retreat, God shows me that I am not alone.”

“At home we have to stay inside. We don’t get visits from people, and we don’t get any help,” says Yahir. “But at Family Retreat we have friends! Belen and Leo can’t do fun stuff at home, but here they laugh and do everything! Leo and Belen are leaving Family Retreat happy.”

Family Retreat is for Yahir, too! He explains, “It’s hard when I’m at school. People always ask about my brother and sister. It’s hard for me to concentrate and sometimes I feel like there’s no hope. But here I feel like I fit in. Here we know what it feels like to have hope and happiness. At Family Retreat, I have fun and make new friends, too!”

“I see Jesus shining his light through you!” says Reyna of our Family Retreat volunteers. And Friend, Jesus can shine his light through you at our Retreats & Getaways, too! Please pray about volunteering with us today!

Scan here to see the joy Reyna’s family experienced at Family Retreat!
Everybody experiences combat differently,” explains Matt, who sacrificially served our country in the Army for five years. Two deployments in Iraq as a nuclear biological chemical specialist left him with muscular myopathy and Post-Traumatic Stress. “I went on patrol with soldiers looking for bombs. Every day I’d wonder, ‘Am I going to get blown up tonight?’ My eyes were opened to what war really is. When the first person gets killed… I just didn’t know how that would feel. You can’t be prepared for that kind of hurt.”

“Matt wears braces on both legs to help with his progressive muscle atrophy,” says his wife, Kristi. Though undiagnosed, the Army acknowledges that Matt’s muscular disease is a direct result of toxic exposure in Iraq. “I’m getting weaker,” Matt says. “But we can’t really treat this disease because we don’t know the actual cause.”

Matt’s physical disability is challenging enough, yet it doesn’t seem to compare to the invisible disability known as PTSD. “Since coming back in 2008, I have a hard time finding joy in anything. War changed me. I’m not the same person,” confesses Matt. “He became cold, withdrawn, and closed off,” explains Kristi. “He had no compassion. He was not the man I knew. Matt went to war and came back broken.”

“But when we came to Warrior Getaway, we started on our path to healing. Warrior Getaway is a full family immersion of healing. The staff and volunteers love us the way Jesus does, and now I have the ability to be more joyful and worry less. Now I can have fun with my kids,” shares Matt. “There was a point in my life when I no longer wanted to be alive, but because of Warrior Getaway, I want to be here to be my wife’s husband and my kids’ father. I don’t want to think about where we’d be without Warrior Getaway.”

Kristi agrees wholeheartedly, “There’s no place on earth that feels closer to heaven. Nobody else understands us the way the people here do. At Warrior Getaway you can process and connect on a level that doesn’t exist anywhere else.”

“We feel alone a lot of times,” continues Kristi with tears in her eyes. “But here we know we’re cared for, and we see God working in every avenue of Warrior Getaway. Walls come down quickly, and there’s no explanation for it other than it’s God moving. It stuns me to be loved in such an incredible way. Four or five days at Warrior Getaway does more than years and years in therapy.”

Matt and Kristi have a special message for those who volunteer at Warrior Getaway and provide scholarships for the military families who sacrifice so much for our freedoms. “Thank you – from our family and on behalf of the other Warrior families. This has allowed us all to heal.”

Matt (with his service dog, Julien), Kristi, and their children, Kyla, Cael, and Welles, experienced God’s healing power at Warrior Getaway like never before. Scan here to see their transformation.
Finding Jesus at Family Retreat

From the Bay Area

Ever since coming to Family Retreat, Alan, Laurie, and their daughters have been an integral part of our Joni and Friends family. Brianna has trisomy 9p, Marissa has cerebral palsy and polymicrogyria, and Kayla has Down syndrome. All three of these beautiful sisters thrive at Family Retreat, where they love learning about the plans Jesus has for each of their lives.

“Because of Joni and Friends, the girls have made new friends,” explains Alan. While their whole family felt isolated before, they now flourish in the welcoming community of Joni and Friends Bay Area, where they can share their prayers, burdens, and hopes for the future.

From Arizona

William is 21 years old and has Down syndrome. He’s been attending church his whole life, but had never verbalized a commitment to Christ. Yet during Family Retreat, William took a bold step of faith and declared, “I want to follow Jesus!”

The loving, supportive environment of Family Retreat – and our focus on God’s Word – created the perfect opportunity for William to make his first public confession of faith. “Jesus died to take my place,” says William. God used Family Retreat in wonderful ways in William’s life!

Thank you for your support of Family Retreat, where families impacted by disability get closer to each other and closer still to Jesus!

From Houston

Sylas has an extremely rare metabolic disorder called GABA-T, which is considered a terminal diagnosis. His mother, Cassi, says, “There is nothing that will define your faith more precisely and profoundly than facing the death of your child.” Cassi and her husband, Randy, share that their family motto is, “God is bigger than any diagnosis.” And at Family Retreat, that’s especially true.

“For families like ours, Family Retreat is the closest place to heaven on earth,” says Cassi. Sylas blossomed at Family Retreat as our Joni and Friends staff and volunteers instantly loved him and his brother, Ezra, deeply.

“To know that Sylas was taken care of and loved on so intensely allowed Randy and me time to reconnect with each other and with the Lord,” explains Cassi. When you volunteer at our Retreats & Getaways, Jesus loves families impacted by disability through you!

From New Mexico

Tyler is 18 years old and has metachromatic leukodystrophy. His grandmother, Julie, has been his full-time guardian and caregiver for the past 12 years. “I fight for him to get what he needs. He is my purpose in life,” Julie says.

But at Family Retreat, Julie doesn’t have to fight to get what Tyler needs. “Everyone is so loving and helpful at Retreat. They love on Tyler and don’t just leave it up to the Joni and Friends staff to serve the families,” says Julie. She sees a big difference in Tyler after Retreat. He loves being around people and being included in everything – especially activities like riding horses, zip-lining, and the waterslide.

“Knowing Tyler is taken care of and happy gives me peace, refreshment, respite, and time to spend with Lord one on one and be grateful,” says Julie. Thank you for sharing the love of Jesus with entire families through Family Retreat!

For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

JEREMIAH 29:11
From Mississippi

As the single mom of five children, Chelsee carries a heavy load. Working full-time and meeting her children’s needs is daunting enough, but learning that her son, Luke, has autism was an unexpected challenge, for sure. And on top of everything else, Chelsee’s church seemed to be failing at including special needs families in their community.

But when Chelsee and her children received a scholarship to our Single Parent Family Retreat, everything changed. Chelsee was given the gifts of respite and support, and her children experienced true joy through fun activities and interactive Bible lessons about Jesus. “I learned that I am not alone,” says Chelsee. Indeed, Chelsee and her children learned that they are necessary members of the body of Christ.

And that truth followed them home after Family Retreat. When Chelsee’s church recognized the need to better serve families impacted by disability, church leaders met with our Joni and Friends Mississippi team to learn how to welcome Chelsee, Luke, and his siblings with open arms and excited hearts. Through your prayers and partnership, Chelsee’s family is part of a loving, Christ-centered community all year long!

From New England

Aaron and Amy have six children. Their youngest, ten-year-old Noah, has Down syndrome. Noah is challenged by inconsistencies in his routine, and his behavioral response to stress creates tension with his siblings. This became especially clear when Aaron and Amy had to move their family from Maine to New Hampshire and then back to Maine within a short period of time – all within the season of pandemic-induced lockdown. The isolation caused by losing their home church through the move and coronavirus restrictions was overwhelming.

But God ministered to this special needs family first through our New England virtual care group for moms, then through Family Retreat at Home, and once in-person events were safe again, through Marriage Getaway. “We would be divorced five times over without the Lord,” confesses Amy. Marriage Getaway gave Aaron and Amy biblically solid couples’ coaching, and they are daily building upon what they learned in that retreat setting. Your prayers and support strengthen families impacted by disability. Thank you for your steadfast partnership!
The Awesome Super Fantastic Forever Party Storybook
A True Story about Heaven, Jesus, and the Best Invitation of All!

What will heaven be like? Answering this question for children can be challenging, but Joni Eareckson Tada shares the truth about heaven in this beautifully illustrated, biblically faithful storybook reminding us all that when Jesus comes back to this world, he will bring heaven with him!

There will be a new creation where we’ll have new hearts and new bodies. We’ll live in a new city. And best of all, we’ll be with Jesus, forever! It will be better than we can ever imagine.

In The Awesome Super Fantastic Forever Party Storybook, children are encouraged to respond to Jesus’s invitation personally. Share this joyful, eternal invitation with a child in your life today!

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