

A family on the spectrum

The Breedloves' journey



The Breedlove family (from left to right: Leslie, Ethan, Jeff and Matthew) spends time together on a summer vacation at Figure Eight Island, NC. Photo provided by Jeff Breedlove.



Ethan (left) and Matthew (right) attend Camp Barnabas during the summer. The camp works with special needs campers and their siblings. Photo provided by Jeff Breedlove.

“It’s always there in the back of your mind, wherever you are,” Jeff Breedlove, history teacher, said.

Breedlove’s son, Matthew, was diagnosed with autism at the age of 2.

At first, Breedlove recalls feeling shocked, devastated and grief-stricken.

“It’s something you don’t know how to deal with right away because you never expect this to happen to you. It’s a real paradigm shift,” Breedlove said.

“There was a lot of confusion and sadness. Autism was such an abstract idea at the time,” Leslie Breedlove, Jeff’s wife and Matthew’s mother, said.

Autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning there are levels of severity that manifest differently based on the individual. Matthew is in the middle of the spectrum; medium to high functioning.

Jeff stressed that autistic kids aren’t that different from the rest of us.

“I like to use the analogy of a toaster and a hair dryer. Most people’s brains are toasters and make great toast. Autistic kids’ brains are like hair dryers. Sure, they can make toast, but it takes longer and probably won’t look the same as your toast.

However, it is still toast. Tastes the same and is just as good,” Jeff said.

This lesson is one that the Breedloves have instilled in their younger son, Ethan.

“We’ve always tried to teach Ethan that people will treat Matthew based on the example that he sets. He has a lot of responsibility,” Leslie said.

“Matthew might not talk or act like you, but he is just as special as the rest of us. He will play and talk with you. You just have to push harder,” Ethan said.

Within weeks of the diagnosis, Jeff and Leslie took Matthew to Children’s Therapeutic Learning Center, an organization that offers intensive therapy for children in the Kansas City area. Since then, he has been in multiple therapy programs.

When Matthew was 7, the Breedloves decided they needed to try something new. After hearing about Brain Balance, a program designed to help kids overcome neurological challenges, Leslie and the kids moved to Peachtree City, Georgia, for six months, while Jeff stayed in Kansas.

“Moving to Georgia was a no-brainer, but it was hard. It taught us the importance of community; the importance of being surrounded by supportive friends,” Leslie said.

With help from investors, the Breedloves raised enough money to bring the program to Kansas.

Now, Matthew is back at home, preparing to graduate from Leawood Elementary School. Although their son’s upbringing may not be traditional, the Breedloves want Matthew’s

“He might not act or talk like you, but he is just as special as the rest of us.”

childhood to be as normal as possible.

“We want him to do things that a typical fifth-grader would do. He participates in school musicals, plays Special Olympics sports and dresses normally. It’s important to play the part,” Jeff said.

Each day brings new challenges, but the Breedloves are unwilling to be defeated by them.

“You have to be constantly thinking of ways to make situations successful in which you normally wouldn’t, like at a birthday party or a restaurant, you just have to be prepared,” Jeff said.

“There are days when you want to crawl in a corner and cry, but we know we can endure a lot. We’ve learned to celebrate the small, everyday triumphs that others take for granted,” Leslie said.

A conversation that Jeff had with his grandmother has remained with him since Matthew’s diagnosis.

“She told me there was a reason why we [my wife and I] were chosen, and I think she’s right. I do believe there’s some greater purpose that we all have in life, and this is part of mine,” Jeff said.

The Breedloves feel that they can make change by advocating for autism awareness, especially during April, National Autism Awareness Month.

“I have two options. I can either accept the diagnosis and let life happen, or I can stop it from beating me down and advocate so that maybe it’s easier for the next kid, or the next kid,” Jeff said.

One way the Breedloves advocate is by participating in Light It Up Blue, an event that falls on Matthew’s birthday, April 2. For the first two nights of April, homes around the world light up blue to show support.

The opportunity to participate may have already passed, but there are still many other ways to help in the autism community.

“Kids can get involved with Special Olympics, Autism Speaks, fundraising events or peer mentoring programs,” Jeff said.

With more children being diagnosed with autism each year, Leslie reiterated the importance of having a strong, supportive community.

“Everyone has an opportunity to help out a ‘Matthew Breedlove’; trying to understand and accept [him or her] really makes a difference. The more empathetic people can be, the more it helps families like ours,” Leslie said.

In honor of Matthew, the Breedloves started their own foundation to help send kids to camp, teach school districts about autism and give scholarships to families.

“It’s called the Rockstar Foundation,” Jeff said, “because Matthew is our rock star.”