



hi, we are
JONATHAN & ERIN LIPPE

We wanted to share our story about how Mark 9 has helped our entire family. Jonathan and I met in 1999 and married in 2002. While eager to start a family, fertility issues gave us a few years to enjoy married life. Jonathan got a transfer to Kerrville in 2005. We left our beloved New Braunfels a family of 2 ½; as I was pregnant at the time. Our time in Kerrville was full of changes. We welcomed our first son, Andrew. Nineteen months later we welcomed Noah. At two and a half, Noah was diagnosed with autism. A few days later we found out we were pregnant (surprise) with baby number three! We did our best to navigate our new life with autism and find treatment options, only to come up short-handed in our small town. In 2011 Jonathan was able to transfer back to New Braunfels so we could be closer to our support network and have greater access to treatment options.

We were excited to be back home; now as a family of 5, but there were struggles. Jonathan worked 70 or more hours a week, varying hours and most every weekend. We saw each other in passing, Noah's constant insurance battles to get Noah therapy he desperately needed, and other struggles meant a shift in our priorities. God, and our marriage, were at the bottom of the list. Attending a church felt like a daunting task. What about Noah? Who will take care of him and understand what he needs/wants

without words? How can I take the kids to church on my own when my husband is at work?

It took close to a year before I worked up the courage to try coming to church. Stepping into a church that I had grown up in, but had not attended in years, was

*“We did our best
to navigate our
new life with
autism and find
treatment options...”*

very intimidating! The church had grown so much (and this was before the current Children's Building). I was almost in tears, feeling lost and scared to leave Noah in a classroom. Noah's teacher, greeted me with a smile and said, “I know you, we went to high school together.” I told her of my son, and she assured me he would be okay as she had a family member with autism. On the way out, I was told Debbie Gray would be in contact with me.

The next week, I got a phone call from Debbie. She wanted to discuss Noah, his likes and dislikes, and said next Sunday she would have a Buddy specifically for Noah. Wow, she meant what she said! She had his favorite puzzles and someone by his side from there on out. I can't tell you the relief it gave me. I couldn't wait for Jonathan to have a Sunday off to see what this Mark 9 program was all about (and hear Pastor Ray's sermons). I mentioned earlier about priorities being skewed, and while attending church was a start, our marriage was still sitting on the back burner.

One Sunday, Pastor Ray mentioned a new Wednesday night bible study for married couples, The Sacred Marriage, that we both felt would be beneficial to us. I asked Debbie to please find a Wednesday night Buddy. Little did I know that same week someone had told Debbie that they would like to be a Buddy but would only be available on Wednesday evenings. God had it worked out! We were able to dedicate 6 Wednesday evenings to build our marriage! Our bible study may have come to an end but the relationship with that Buddy didn't. She is still Noah's Buddy, more than four years later. She is more than "Noah's Buddy." She is a friend, whose presence has blessed us more than we can express. Noah has had several Buddies over the years. They all see beyond his disability and see the love that God has placed in his heart.

If it weren't for Debbie Gray and the Mark 9 Ministry, we would not be able to come to church as a family. It brings me to tears to think of the 'what-ifs'. Had we not been actively involved in church, would Jonathan, I or our children be where we are now spiritually? Would our marriage be strong?

Would our relationship with God be a close and secure one? Because of Mark 9, our entire family is growing with God. I volunteer

*"She is more than
'Noah's Buddy.'
She...has blessed
us more than
we can express."*

for Debbie as much as I can because I know it is so important to give other families the opportunities to come to church like we had many years ago when it was small. Now the program is big and growing rapidly. There are many families like ours in this community. Oakwood is the only church in New Braunfels with this kind of ministry. Mark 9 needs more Buddies! Yes, even you can be a Buddy! You can help make a difference in the life of not only a child, but the whole family. A family like ours.

-JONATHAN AND ERIN LIPPE

