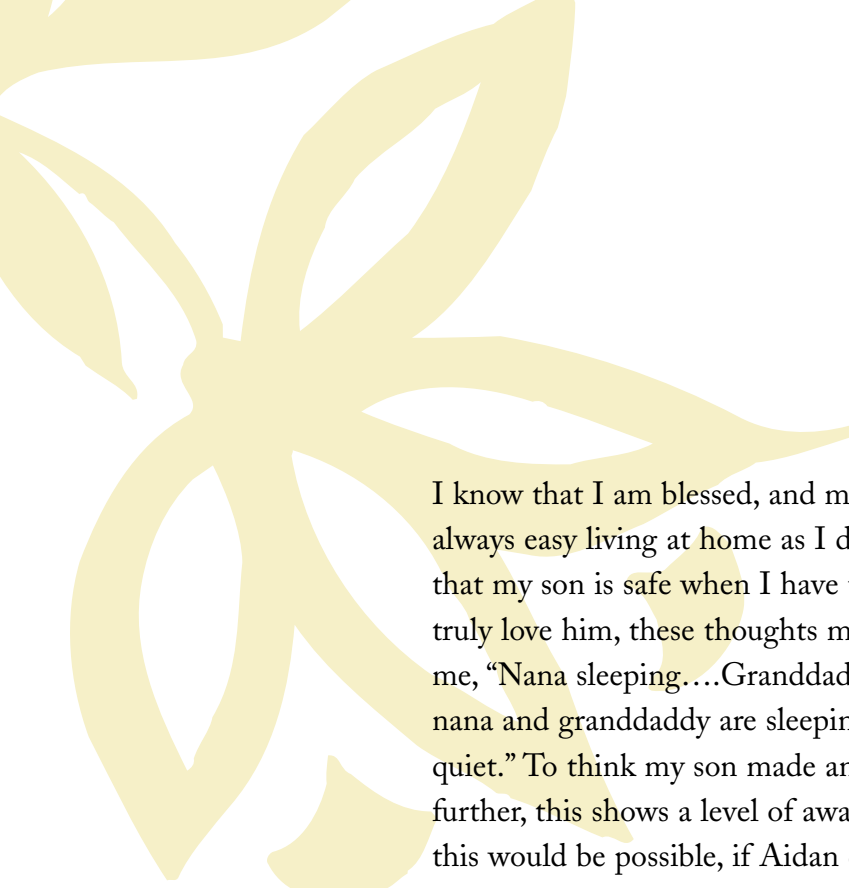


Aidan's Village

NO ONE SAID RAISING A CHILD WOULD BE EASY, BUT NOTHING can prepare you for how difficult raising a child with a disability can be. In many cases, parents take on different roles to ensure that their child receives appropriate services and strive to maintain their child's quality of life. As a single mother of a seven year old son, Aidan, who is living with autism, I know firsthand about wearing different hats. I am a mother, an advocate, a president and founder of an autism organization, a parent faculty member, a committee and task force member, a speaker, and a student. But I am also a daughter, a granddaughter, a sister, and a friend. The list goes on.

Many people ask me, "How do you do it?" My answer is always, "because I have to and because I have a lot of help." That help is my family, described by my 87 year old grandmother as "the family," which consists of grandma, mommy, daddy, and my brother, Matthew. They have provided a great deal of support to Aidan and me over the years. I do not know what I would do without them.

Aidan and I have lived with my parents since he was six months old, and my grandmother, Aidan's great-grandmother, has been his "childcare provider" since he was six weeks old. Until she recently became ill, she would put Aidan on the bus in the morning so that I could arrive at work by 6am. My brother, Matthew jokes, "there is nothing like free and affordable childcare." (Of course it is affordable, it is free.) Then there is my mother, who called me ten times within one hour to discuss Aidan's Halloween costume, and always attends "Boo at the Zoo" with us. Or my brother who walks the "walk of shame" with Aidan and me at Sesame Place as we walk up the stairs, pass the other people in line, who are staring at us, of course, as we go to the front of the line to ride the Rubber Duckie ride Aidan loves. And my father who says, "I know I am not always around (he works all the time) but I will always be there for Aidan, he is a good boy."



I know that I am blessed, and more than lucky to live with my parents, but it is not always easy living at home as I do not have my own space per se. However, to know that my son is safe when I have to work crazy hours and that he is with people who truly love him, these thoughts melt away. Early one morning recently, Aidan said to me, “Nana sleeping....Granddaddy sleeping.” I am elated! My reply to him is, “Yes, nana and granddaddy are sleeping. You are so smart. That means we have to be quiet.” To think my son made an observation and shared it with me. To take it further, this shows a level of awareness and caring for people who love him. None of this would be possible, if Aidan did not see examples of this on a daily basis.

I understand that there are many people who do not have support from their families. However, I sometimes ask myself, “why me?” My father said to me, just the other day, “why not us?” No one is above having a disability or being affected by a disability in some way. My father on more than one occasion has said “maybe Aidan is the way he is, so that you could help other people, because I know that you will fight!” This statement humbles me, and provides me with a sense of purpose. For it is through my family’s support that I am allowed to assist other families. From their love, I feel a sense of duty, a call to action.

So when you feel lost or alone, remember, you are not alone. There are parent support organizations, like the organization I founded, DC Autism Parents (DCAP) that is there to provide you with information, to empower you to wear different hats to help you help your child. Be thankful for what you have, because it could always be worst.

Aidan described as “our baby,” by the family is the most loving person, I have ever known. It is through him that I have learned what true love is. It is because of him that I fight. Thank you grandma, daddy, mommy, and Matthew, for all that you do. Without you, Aidan would not be the wonderful little boy he is today. Without you, Aidan would not know what true love is. For this I am truly thankful.

It takes a village, and Aidan most certainly has one.