



FIRST PERSON: Special needs ministry makes difference at church

By Mary Buckner, *Special to the Religious Herald*

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RUCKERSVILLE, Va. — The special needs ministry at Spring Hill Baptist Church in Ruckersville is exciting, vibrant and growing. But it hasn't always been that way. When my family moved here nearly seven years ago so I could join the staff, there was no program at all. It was important to me to find a self-contained Sunday school class for my daughter, Becky, who had Down's Syndrome. She had been involved in such a class at our former church, and I knew how much it would mean to all of us to be able to provide that experience again.

For the first year and a half after our arrival, Becky was the special needs ministry. We were able to locate individuals within the church to work with her one-on-one during the Sunday school hour. She seemed content.

At the middle school Becky attended, we formed a close relationship with her teacher, who was looking for a church home and a place for her adult son with special needs. We invited them to Spring Hill and soon the family was deeply involved. Still, Becky and this 30-year-old man made up the extent of our ministry for several more months.



Becky Buckner

The tide began to turn when Gene and Jeannie Arnold joined Spring Hill. In addition to their teenage son with special needs, they brought a wealth of information and contacts from Special Olympics and Challenger Baseball, both of which Gene had been involved with for many years in the greater Charlottesville area. Slowly, we began to offer other opportunities for people with special needs — Vacation Bible School, a Special Needs Sunday annual emphasis, special needs workshops and involvement in the annual special education retreat at Eagle Eyrie every October.

As the news spread that Spring Hill was a place where special needs folks were not only accepted, but loved and cherished, and where there was a pastor with a heart for special needs, growth really began to take place. At this writing, there are two classes for elementary-age children, with a third one being discussed for September of 2007. A class for teens and adults is continuing to grow to the point that a new and larger room had to be found recently. In summary, we now have a total of 12 special needs students coming regularly to our Sunday school classes and six teachers working with them.



A Sunday school class at Spring Hill church.

In 2007, the special needs team has made a commitment to begin a respite care program once a quarter for children with special needs and their siblings. This program, held on a weekend evening for several hours, will not only give parents and/or caregivers a chance to have some time for themselves, but it will also utilize people across all ages in our congregation who might not otherwise have any contact with special needs individuals.

Another long-term project in the works is the commitment to work with Virginia Baptists to build the first group home for special needs adults in Greene County.

Recently, the church telephone rang. The woman calling was from Orange. She has a 5-year-old grandson with special needs and no church to attend which can accommodate him. She had been on her computer earlier that day googling “special needs” and “church.” One name appeared on her screen — Spring Hill Baptist Church. When she went on our church website, www.springhillbaptist.org, she could not believe all that was offered for families just like hers.

Later that day, she drove by to just look over our buildings. A few weeks later, they made the 40-minute drive to attend Sunday school. She said it was one of the very few times she had been able to leave her grandson in a class without his crying after them. I know just how she felt.

In December of 2002, Becky died of pneumonia. She was 16 years old. Her life was not in vain. Because of Becky, Spring Hill Baptist Church is a beacon of love and acceptance to persons with special needs and their families.

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