

Saving Room for Thomas

By Becky Cunningham

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For a non-verbal teen with significant autism and other medical conditions, the chances that he would spend the rest of his life in foster care or an institutional setting seemed a very real possibility. The odds of a family voluntarily taking on these challenges at his age were impossible. Or were they?

My husband, Jeff, and I love children. We have a beautiful daughter, Kiersey. We have been married for twenty years, but were never able to have another child. We have worked as volunteers for an agency that supports families in our community that have children with special needs (LifeLine, Inc.). I am a nurse and have worked with children throughout my career.

Two years and four months ago, we had the opportunity to meet Thomas. Over the few hours that we were with him, we fell in love and decided to pursue adoption. During the visitation opportunities, we came to know for sure that he belonged in our family. Each visit allowed us to see how intelligent, funny, sweet, and fun Thomas was. We were so delighted when he was finally placed in our home in November, 2011.

Since he has been in our home, we have come to know how he communicates, what he likes and does not like, and how he responds. He, in turn, has learned about us. He has met all his new Aunts and Uncles and several cousins. They all

think he is fun and accepted him instantly. Even though Thomas says very few words, he communicates his needs and desires very easily. He also has a wonderful sense of humor. When company comes to our home, he escorts someone in the room, he is ready to sit and play!

Jeff, or “Papa” as Thomas calls him, is so excited to have a son. I thought I knew all about Jeff, but he is a new man since Thomas has come! He takes Thomas fishing and on walks, even to the grocery store! He works with Thomas on his speech, and on skills such as bathing, toileting, and eating with so much patience.

Kiersey has become a strong advocate for those with disabilities and has done school presentations and projects regarding autism, and how to work with those who have disabilities. She reads with Thomas several nights a week after school. Thomas trusts her to help him and follows her directions without question. It is so precious to see.

Thomas comes to “Mama” for hugs and kisses, which I love! We sit and sing and read and play. He loves music and books and will spend a lot of time looking through books and magazines pointing out things he likes. I love to tuck him in bed at night, and then see his face first thing in the morning when he wakes up. He always has a smile.

Even though we have worked with families who have children with disabilities, it is different now that we have a child with autism of our own. Thomas has continued to teach us how to advocate for him

and others with disabilities. He is teaching us to slow down and enjoy each day, to see what is really important, and to love each other more. He makes us laugh. He makes us proud with each new accomplishment. He makes us want to give of ourselves to others. We have had some wonderful interactions with people in the community because of Thomas. He brings out the best in people and we think he brings out the best in our family. We are proud to say that Thomas is ours and has rounded out our family. We don't know why we only had our one sweet girl, Kiersey, but **I think maybe it is because we were saving room for Thomas.**



In January 2012, 15 year old Thomas found his forever family after being part of the foster care system for most of his life

Editor's Note: Becky serves as LifeLine's Board Chair and "Chef Jeff" can often be found cooking for a LifeLine event. It has been one of the biggest blessings of our ministry to walk alongside their family through the last two and a half years as we have watched God work out even the tiniest details of Thomas' adoption. We were honored to be present on the day Thomas was officially declared a "Cunningham."