

Comfort The Little Ones

Bob and Joan Nast have turned a run-down ranch in South Florida into a haven for terminally ill children and their families

Wearing giant boots and standing side by side with their 10-gallon hats touching brim to brim, 4-1/2-year-old identical twin cowboys—Grant and Gavin—push their fingers through a fence, hoping to pet Rosie’s crumpled snout. Rosie is a potbelly pig—one of the favorite residents here at God’s Little Acres ranch in Coconut Creek, Florida, just outside Fort Lauderdale.

Older brother Travis, 7, scales slats on the white fence. He proudly displays his superior prowess as he teaches his younger siblings about farm animals. What could be more ordinary than the simple pleasures of picnicking and playing in the country?

But there’s nothing ordinary about this outing for Travis, the twins or their mother. Travis has spent a painful and terrifying year in and out of Joe DiMaggio Children’s Hospital in Fort Lauderdale, where he is being treated for a brain tumor.

“What you go through is very hard to put into words,” says his mother, Christian Hughes. “It [is] very devastating and life-changing. One day you have a normal family, your kids are fine. Then everything changes.

“God answered all of our prayers,” Hughes continues. “[Travis is] here today. He’s a miracle—all of these kids are miracles,” she says, her eyes spanning the crowd of youngsters and parents who are arriving at God’s Little Acres from all across South Florida.

Seriously ill and dying children and their parents come to the

ranch for a daylong retreat in the country that features professional clowns, a petting zoo, a jumping house, cotton candy, face painting, crafts, music, hayrides, special performances and lots of food.

It was after encountering story after story such as Travis' that Joan and Bob Nast's dream for God's Little Acres began to take shape. This retreat center for seriously ill youngsters and their beleaguered parents started with little more than a spiritual gift of mercy, a special calling, a knack for hospitality—and a little bit of genuine faith in a big God.

The Nasts are not called as great preachers or thundering prophets. God's Little Acres is a wonderful example of how ordinary Christians can make a dramatic difference by using their gifts of love and giving to shine the light of Jesus Christ into their communities.

"This dream began 35 years ago, when we lived in Putnam Valley, New York," Joan recalls. "We would take underprivileged children from the Fresh Air Fund [which places children from New York City in homes in the country during the summer months] out of Brooklyn into our home for the summer. Even though we had three healthy children, we had compassion for these kids."

The Nasts moved to Florida in 1972, where they continued to reach out to children through Kids in Distress, an organization that deals with abused and abandoned children, in Fort Lauderdale. They visited detention centers and eventually started going to hospitals to cheer up and pray with sick kids.

They found themselves spending increasing amounts of time with the children at Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital.

"We were going often and became acquainted with many of the parents of the sick kids," Joan says. "Our hearts would just break for the children and their parents. You could feel their

hopelessness, depression and fear when you spoke with them.”

The Nasts began to discuss ways they could help. “Bobby and I would sit and talk about having a place someday where parents and sick children could get away from hospital rooms and problems,” Joan told Charisma. “That’s when we started talking about a ranch.”

Joan says she prayed God would open a door for them to make a place where families could come to find some rest and hope.

“We felt that there was such a need for picnics and laughter—a place away from hospitals and needles and pain—where children could feel happy and normal and parents could get a break.”

The Nasts’ dream of starting a ranch retreat compelled them to take action. When the couple found a broken-down, pink ranch house on 5-1/2 acres in Coconut Creek, they sold their \$500,000 home on the Intercoastal Waterway near Fort Lauderdale and their 31-foot boat and cashed in all their savings to buy and restore it.

By God’s grace, the Nasts have realized their dream.

Through much of the year, their ranch hosts outdoor events two to three times a month, and seriously ill children along with their parents and siblings come and enjoy a day of fun, food, hope and encouragement—a day when pain, needles, questions and fear are far from their minds.

A peaceful sense of God’s presence fills the atmosphere, soft Christian music plays, and church and community volunteers deftly take over so parents can relax and enjoy the day.

“This is a place where your kid can be just a kid for a while, and nobody stares, and he doesn’t stick out ‘cause he’s sick,” says Travis’ mom. “I think it’s just amazing that these people have so much love in their hearts to give that this is their mission, because it means a lot. It means a lot to the

families, and it means a lot to the kids. They talk about it all the time.”

Jeanette Hand, one of the visitors to the ranch, has three young children with serious disabilities. She is amazed at the love she feels at God’s Little Acres.

“I’m constantly fighting [for my children],” Hand says. “It’s so nice to come here where you don’t have to fight.

“This is just something that is fun. There’s no fee, and the people are so wonderful. It’s such a blessing. I can’t say enough good things about it.”

Throughout the daylong event, the children play games, and Yvette—the Nasts’ daughter—puts cowboy hats on the kids and leads them on a pony ride. A local karate team performs, and the Coconut Creek police even bring by a large robot named Safety Sam, who delights the children.

But no one seems to be able to capture the hearts of the sick children the way Sharon Chatlos, the animal lady, does. The youngsters gather around Chatlos all day long as she introduces them to a wiry-haired hedgehog, two cockatiels, the potbelly pigs, an emu, ponies and other farm friends.

“I think there’s just a special connection,” Chatlos says. “It brings them out.”

The magic that happens between the children and the animals is just one of the miracles that the Nasts—who learned to believe God for the supernatural as volunteer workers for the Benny Hinn crusade ministry—have experienced as they have stepped out courageously to extend God’s mercy. The renovation of the property itself, run-down when they first purchased it and transformed with the help of unexpected donations and many volunteers, is perhaps the greatest.

Miracles are expected at God’s Little Acres. Everyone there

believes in them, and the volunteers pray together before the children arrive that every child will be healed. But whatever the ultimate outcome, the Nasts are committed to their purpose.

“Whether they live or whether they die, our purpose is to make them happy for one day while they’re here with us,” Joan Nast explains. “We have no control over their tomorrows, but we do have control over the day that they’re here, and that will be full of hope.”

The Nasts’ efforts are appreciated by those who benefit from their mission. “There really are good people in this world,” Jeanette Hand declares. “Joan and Bob are sent from God. They really are.” Her eyes fill with tears. “It’s a wonderful, wonderful place.”

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For more information about God’s Little Acres, write 4551 N.W. 39th Ave., Coconut Creek, FL 33073. Send tax-deductible contributions to Christian Life Missions, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.