



Allan Morse, 19



Renalgia Burgess, 14



Paul Edwards, 17

serving with **Love**

CC Melbourne, Florida's

SuperKids

Reaching Special-Needs Children and Families

Story by Christmas M. Beeler
Photos by Geraldine Wilkins

Melvin Cairns lowered his head. After a chaotic day with his autistic son, Marshall, he felt depleted. The child's tantrums and screaming were wearing on the whole family; he never seemed at ease. They asked what was wrong, but he couldn't answer. He didn't even look at them. They tried taking Marshall places, but something always set him off. People would stare and sometimes criticize them. The strain seemed to never end, and there was no hope in sight.

Melvin thought sadly about how Marshall had seemed like a normal child until he began regressing at 18 months old—losing his verbal skills, throwing convulsive fits and squealing, hardly sleeping, and showing no more recognition for his parents. By age 4, he had slipped into another world. The Cairns went to doctors and specialists to find out what was wrong with their son but had made little progress. Melvin struggled with anger toward God and feelings of guilt. *Maybe this is my fault*, he often thought. *Maybe I'm being punished for something*.

For the first time in many years, Melvin decided to pray. Melvin had grown up in

church but rejected Christ as a young man because of what he perceived as hypocrisy in others. Now, he humbled himself before God and prayed, *God, You are my only hope. You are my son's only hope, my family's only hope. Please help us. Please help my son, Marshall.* Tears streaming down his face, the burdened father poured his heart out to God.

Over the next few weeks, the family found better doctors and treatments for Marshall. Before, doctors had seemed to ignore their concerns. Now they found doctors who could diagnose their son. As they learned more about autism, Melvin realized that they may never be able to reach their son. He got on his knees again. *God, no matter how long it takes, I pray that someday my son will say "I love you" and that he will be able to enjoy a happy, healthy life.*

A few months later, Marshall started to talk. Melvin knew that God was answering his prayers. He rededicated his life to the Lord, but his wife Laura wasn't a believer. They visited several churches, but none could accommodate a special-needs

child. Finally, at Calvary Chapel Melbourne, FL, the church leaders said they would do whatever they could to help. That first year, Melvin worked with the leadership to start a special-needs Sunday school class. Melvin and Laura helped organize the classroom to accommodate their son and a handful of other special-needs children at the church.

Later, as other teachers were trained to teach the special-needs class, Melvin and Laura were able to sit together in the Sunday service, listening to verse-by-verse Bible teaching. Not only did they experience God's love in action through the believers who helped them with Marshall, but they learned about God's grace and forgiveness. Laura gave her life to Christ about six months later.

"God has done some amazing things in our family," said Melvin. "My son is 15 now, and he's an entirely different kid. We give all the credit to God. He used Marshall to change our family. I never dreamed I would be talking to other parents about special-needs kids." Parents with special-needs children encourage each other. Many of them have struggled with anger or guilt.



Carol Marengo, a retired nurse, gently guides Joshua Goulet in hand motions during praise and worship. Some of the children need assistance to be more active in worship and other activities. Joshua participates in the special-needs Sunday school class at Calvary Chapel Melbourne, FL, called SuperKids.



Mike Carmichael, with hat, teaches the adult class. Participants complete a page from their workbook and take it home to reinforce the lesson. Teachers are required to take specific training for the SuperKids program.

Melvin recalled how God helped him get past those feelings.

He cited John 9:1-3, where the disciples asked Jesus, “‘‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.’” Then Jesus healed the man. Melvin commented, “‘‘He was blind so that God could perform this miracle, and that’s what He’s trying to do—using us, using our kids for His glory. If it wasn’t for my son, this ministry wouldn’t have started. In a way, I give thanks for autism because of the blessings that have come from it for our family and many others.’’”

Ministering to Special Children
The special-needs ministry, called SuperKids, is growing. “‘‘We started with five children in

2001, and it’s nearly doubled every year. Now we have 40 special-needs children and adults,’’ said Melvin. The special-needs children and adults range in age from 2 to 68. Nearly 40 believers from CC Melbourne donate their time each week—staffing two classes for kids, one for teens, and one for adults—and two classes on Wednesday nights. Teachers use basic sign language, visual aids, games, and toys to make the Gospel accessible to students.

“‘‘Every child is different,’’ Melvin said, “‘‘but most of them can learn to some degree. ... We do teach the children; it’s not a baby-sitting service. Our volunteers work with each child to reach them whatever way they can—whether it’s sitting on the floor singing songs to them or reading a Bible story together.’’”



Times of prayer are an integral part of each class.

A Growing Mission Field in the U.S.

The growing rate of autism has been making national headlines in the past few years. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported in February 2008 that there are 10.2 million children in the U.S. with special health care needs. Nearly 1.5 million adults and children in the U.S. have autism, according to the Autism Society of America. Other common special needs include Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and cognitive or physical disabilities.



Melvin Cairns, right, signs up new volunteers. He was instrumental in starting the program.



Volunteers Chris Neives, left, and Kristen Cabrera, discuss new lesson plans.

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.

Proverbs 31:8-9, NIV

“‘‘These are the weak and helpless that God charged all of us to be concerned with,’’ said parent Sandy Stuteville, whose son Michael has cerebral palsy. “‘‘There is a blessing in learning to work with them. ... If our family



Robert and Zulma Charest teach a lesson using visual aids.

had to move somewhere else, we would seek to start a similar ministry.’’

When Michael was too big to go to the nursery, Sandy and her husband Ken had to stay at home on Sunday and watch church services via the Internet. If they hadn’t found a church that could minister to Michael, Sandy said, “‘‘We could have become like that lonely hot coal that falls off the fire to the side, gradually turning lukewarm and maybe even cold to the things of God. ... I’m sure there are thousands of other parents out there who are desperate for a ministry like this.’’”

Melvin added, “‘‘It’s a huge mission field. In Brevard County alone, there are 12,000 kids in the school system affected by special needs, but not too many other churches in the county reach out to these families—especially on this scale. The body of Christ

needs to recognize this mission field that is right here in our backyards.”

Helping Other Churches Get Started

The awareness of this mission field is why CC Melbourne leaders are offering to help other Calvary Chapels start special-needs programs in their fellowships. They offer churches a free “starter packet”—including an informative DVD about teaching special-needs people and an instructional pamphlet about the best structure/environment for the program.

“SuperKids is designed specifically to help introduce each child to Christ in a loving environment and at an appropriate level for that child to learn and understand,” said T. J. Buckingham, the church staff member who helps oversee SuperKids and directs the children’s ministry.

He continued, “We learned a lot when we started our program, and we want to inform other people about how to start the right way.” CC Melbourne also offers a teacher seminar to train those who would like to volunteer in the program or would like to start a program in their church. So far, nearly 20 other fellowships have requested and received the starter packets, and several people have come for the training, said T. J.

Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Matthew 18:14

Ministering to the Community

The church also reaches out to special-needs families in the community by providing a “Parents Day Out”—a four-hour festival for special-needs children that also offers a respite for families.

“We’ve had quite a few people who started coming to the church because we have a needs program here,” T. J. said. “We have four festivals throughout the year in the community, and we have a table to let people know about the program. We put flyers in doctors’ offices. ... It’s a great vehicle for showing Christ’s love to these families. The festivals’ activities include food, face painting, balloons, clowns, and a puppet show. A nurse is also on site and available for any emergencies,” T. J. added.



Volunteer Ramona LeSage receives a hug from Brian Mora.



Stephen Deal, 13, loves puppets and plays with volunteer Jeff Barrows.



Rick Joyner, right, is aided by a volunteer with a class project.

Volunteers Show God’s Love

A vital part of the SuperKids ministry is having a large group of specially trained teachers and helpers. “We have to make sure that we have enough volunteers. That’s always true of children’s ministry, but it’s really crucial for this particular group so the parents feel comfortable leaving their child there,” T.J. explained.

Parents appreciate the genuine love shown by the volunteers to their children. “These wonderful people love our son and make him very happy,” Sandy added. “They take the extra time to prepare a lesson that the children can participate in and learn about Jesus at many different levels.”



Melbourne, FL



Richard Laszalo helps Rayna Stites catch and throw the ball. The two have become friends.



Another parent, Patricia Hartfield, said of her 14-year-old mentally handicapped daughter, Renalgia: “Now she has real friends who like her and enjoy seeing her every time she comes to church. She is always asking if we are going to church. It’s

a safe haven for her.” Patricia added, “This special-needs ministry has impacted her life in such a positive way; now she is opening up to me about what she is learning and asking questions about God.”

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