

Dear Jill, thank you so much for inviting Patrick to play at your house.

Dear friends of Jill, simple words, strongly felt: thank you.

Thank you for helping a child find joy spending the night at a friend's house for the first time in his life. Thank you for helping hundreds of parents who carry a heavy burden find a night's rest and the renewed strength to carry on. Words fail to convey the depth of emotion and gratitude we feel to all who made this miracle in our lives possible.

When a doctor says a word of power like autism or brain tumor, your course in life changes, suddenly and irrevocably. You realize you are not in control, but you have no idea what is to come.

As an American soldier, I thought I was Army strong. Yet I had no idea how much my faith, courage and endurance would be tested by autism. Frustrated by his inability to communicate, with major anxiety attacks about everything in life we take for granted, and completely mystified by social norms, we forgive Patrick ten times a day because he knows not what he does.

Caring for someone with autism is like running a moral marathon on the same treadmill every day. We cannot really go anywhere or do anything normal. We were growing exhausted, but didn't know where to turn. We just kept running.

In fact, the first night Brigid and I spent away from Patrick was the night she endured 20 hours of neurosurgery to resect a brain tumor. I am grateful the doctors saved her life, but the damage to her optic nerve was significant and permanent. My dearest friend and Patrick's best teacher was suddenly blind.

Feeling overwhelmed one night, I remembered the verse, "*Come unto me all ye who are weary and carry a heavy burden, and I will give you rest.*" The next day, someone from Patrick's school told me about Jill's House.

Realistic experience taught us to be skeptical, but desperate times called for more research. The more we learned about Jill's House, the more we began to hope this divinely inspired place might just work. The staff had expert training in autism; nothing we said about Patrick came as a shock to them. Beyond behavior management, the caregivers made a real connection. Everyone we met lives their faith, called to love all His little brothers and sisters. There is no place like Jill's House.

I can think of no higher accomplishment than this: the next day, an autistic child who is terrified of new social situations, asked to go back to Jill's House. We were blown away. Our dear son, who has never been invited to a birthday party in his life, finally had a comforting place to spend the night.

We are always asked what we do on our "date night." The first night we stayed close to the phone and fell asleep before midnight. I was able to spend two days a week with Brigid during her radiation treatments at the University of Pennsylvania, because Patrick could never make that trip successfully. We scheduled classes to learn the life skills and mobility techniques the blind need to regain their independence. We even went to a new restaurant that is not required to serve chips & salsa within seconds of sitting down. But my favorite is the peaceful moment together, walking arm-in-arm in the woods and listening to all the sounds of nature the sighted might miss.

Men, don't wait for blindness before you walk arm-in-arm with your bride.

Mathematically, I cannot explain the effect of respite care – it's just one night. But psychologically and spiritually, something amazing happens. A quiet house makes us miss the sound of rattling floorboards as he jumps up and down. When I return from work the next day and Patrick greets me with his customary "Yo Genie!" from the movie Aladdin, I smile knowing my purpose-driven life still has purpose.

If only I had a magic lamp and three wishes. . . Being a soldier instead of a genie, I recall the words of the Centurion: "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and my son shall be healed." I have come to accept that our time is not always His time, but I have no doubt that someday Patrick and all children with special needs will wear perfect wings.

Until that happy day, we will soldier on, grateful for the lesson in unconditional love, and for all the angels like you who keep watch over Jill's House. Thank you so very much. God bless you.