

Homeschooling Special Needs Children: An Interview with Tom and Sherry Bushnell

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"[Sherry] knew that special ed. was not rocket science and that with information she could do as good a job as a teacher . . . As homeschoolers, never has there been an opportunity like this to influence the culture of death with the message of life."-Tom Bushnell, NATHHAN

When our daughter was first diagnosed with a learning disability, a friend asked me, "Do you know about NATHHAN?" I know a few kids named Nathan, but she was referring to the NATIONAL CHALLENGED HOMESCHOOLERS ASSOCIATED NETWORK-NATHHAN. I have since been incredibly informed and blessed by this gracious loving group of individuals. It's more than a group. Really it's an entire support network for families with special needs kids.

We have the great pleasure to speak with Tom and Sherry Bushnell, the current lead caretakers of NATHHAN. Join us as they share their incredible story and their vision for helping others.

TOS: Welcome, Bushnells! Tell us about your family, their names, ages and stages of life.

NATHHAN: My name is Tom and my wife is Sherry. We live in Porthill, Idaho, one mile from the Canadian border. We live in a log home that we built on 46 acres. We farm garlic, alfalfa and have Alpine dairy goats. We have 10 children at home and 1 in heaven. Our oldest is Jacob, 19 and attending Bible school in Pennsylvania. Our second oldest, Josh, is age 17. He has learning differences and learned to read at age 13. Tally, our daughter in heaven, is 15 and has Down syndrome. Jordan, our adopted son, is 14 and also has Down syndrome. Sheela is 13 and was born without eyes. We adopted her from India when she was 21 months old. Zack, our fourth son is 11. Lynny, our daughter with cerebral palsy and autism, is 10. She was adopted from India at 15 months. Zeph, our fifth son, is 9. Then we have Sheraya who is 7, Mercy Grace who is 5 and Jayben, our 6th son, who is 1 year old.

TOS: Have you always homeschooled?

NATHHAN: Yes. Sherry was independently schooled instead of attending a high school back in the 80's. She also knew that homeschooling was what she wanted for her children even before our children were born.

TOS: What gave you the inspiration to start the ministry of NATHHAN?

NATHHAN: We were homeschooling our oldest two, Jake and Josh, and then baby Jordan, our son with Down syndrome, came into our lives. Having worked in a special ed. classroom, Sherry was not about to have her son babysat all day. She knew that special ed. was not rocket science and that with information she could do as good a job as a teacher. Sherry got in touch with a group called NATHHAN in 1990. Diane Macbeth was running it along with Kathy Salars. They could not continue after the group grew into the hundreds, so they asked for help. Our family took the job on and it has grown like crazy ever since.

TOS: What does NATHHAN offer homeschoolers?

NATHHAN: NATHHAN's job is to equip parents to teach their special needs children at home. Part of what we do is match families with other families with like disabilities. We publish a magazine and operate a lending library through the mail plus a large web page. Part of our job also includes saving pre-born babies from death by abortion by giving birth moms an option of a loving home for their baby (inside) with disabilities. Many of our families in NATHHAN have adopted their challenged children. Many are willing to take another. *All homeschoolers are needed here at NATHHAN* and can work on the front lines against abortion by supporting families choosing adoption instead of abortion for pre-born, special needs children. NATHHAN offers support and the "how-to" for teaching families to care for these challenged children.

TOS: Something near and dear to your heart is a new aspect to your ministry called CHASK. Tell us about that.

NATHHAN: Our hearts go out to parents with special needs pre-born children who have no hope. Have you ever thought about how to save the pre-born special needs babies being killed daily? Many medical professionals think that most people do not want pre-born, disabled children.

Today we are aggressively working to find mothers in crisis pregnancies with babies who have special needs. There are loving families for these children within NATHHAN. We are teaming up with Human Life to locate babies both born and pre-born. You can directly help stop the abortion of pre-born special needs babies with your support of CHASK / NATHHAN. Our organization, CHASK, stands for Christian Homes Adopting Special Kids.

CHASK, through NATHHAN, offers families adoption with *no agency fees*. As we continue to build our database of families who are willing to adopt a special baby, moms are contacting us here to see if we truly do have a home for their baby. *NATHHAN's no-fee adoption services make it financially easy to take a child into your home or to support a family in the adoption process.*

TOS: As an adoptive parent myself, I am thrilled to learn about this work! How can our readers help or get involved?

NATHHAN: Here are several things you can do today to save the life of a special baby:

- 1 Share about CHASK (Christian Homes Adopting Special Kids) with your local Crisis Pregnancy Center or OBGYN.
- 2 Copy this interview and send it to your families and anyone else who would be interested in sharing financially to save special needs babies from abortion.
- 3 Fill out an adoption application form so we can share your name with a birth mom.
www.nathhan.com Click on CHASK.
- 4 Tell Christian families with special needs children where to find help through NATHHAN.

As homeschoolers, *never has there been an opportunity like this to influence the culture of death with the message of life.* With God's blessing, we will change the way many professionals in the USA think of pre-born special needs children and parenting the disabled.

TOS: What advice do you have for the parents of a special needs child who are thinking about homeschooling?

NATHHAN: Find another parent dealing with similar challenges that is homeschooling. We can help each other. Look for resources in the home to use instead of spending a lot of money on teaching early learning skills. Work on organizing one subject at a time, such as communication. When this is under your belt, work on physical therapy or speech. Then tackle reading or math, if possible. *Communication is essential, as is character training.*

TOS: What about the parent who has been homeschooling for a while and is facing discouragement or burnout?

NATHHAN (Sherry): In my house, burnout is a state of mind. The Lord can order a day for me that is crammed full of visitors, overtired messy children-a three ring circus of a school day, a busy office, freezing weather outside and church in the evening. But, if my priorities are aligned with God's in my heart and mind, this disastrous looking day can be handled with ease. God's way for me is always best. When He is clearing my path, I do not stumble. I ask myself this question, "What does God want me to do right now?"

I have found some secrets that make for a more peaceful day. I will confess. I do not get to enjoy a consistent blissful early morning devotion time, although this has happened occasionally. I set my mind on a meaty Bible verse and apply it to my day. I do see fruit. In regular prayer throughout the day, waiting on Him for advice gives me a trusting relationship. I would not trade a daily two hour Bible reading opportunity for the all day long, one-on-one relationship with Jesus that I have. I stress the worst when I am not trusting that He has ordered my day.

Second, planning my day, including the meals for several days ahead, helps me cook with less stress. We are not a frozen casserole once-a-month cooking type of family. We have a big meal at breakfast, lunch and dinner! All these teens call for mega cooking lest my kitchen be ransacked. We eat a lot of stews, soup and bread and BBQ venison or elk. This mother of lists has also genetically passed this down to her offspring. My children appreciate a to-do list in the morning. This eliminates my nagging them and their forgetful, sidetracked stares. If we share the chore load and work together we are ready for school by 9:00AM.

When we start teaching the first week, I start with one-maybe two-children. *That's it.* We start on 1/2 the subjects the first couple days. When this is going well and they are consistently doing well, we'll add another subject. After those two children are working well (or is it that my brain is functioning well?), I will add another child. When those three are working well and the schedule is smooth, I will add another child and so on until we are schooling all 7 at once.

Another way I can bring burnout upon myself is to set my standards for my children too high. My expectations can be all wrapped up in my pride. If my children fail, I take it personally. This is a never-fail recipe for anger and burnout for me. Readjustment of what I can expect of my children in schoolwork takes some objective input from Tom. I am usually so blind by my failing standards that I cannot see past what is going wrong. I think I struggle the most with this "too high of expectations" with my daughter Sheela, who is blind. Somehow she seems so capable.

Yet academically she struggles. Without her strong determination to hang in there, I think we would not have made nearly the progress. I have hardly had a month go by that I have not had to re-think my attitude towards schooling.

There have been times in the past that I have needed to secure outside help with housework or even schooling. An energetic teen or someone to share at least a little of the busy time of the day can make the difference of how I feel things are going. After a new baby I do not attempt school. When we have lots of visitors, I do not attempt school (unless it works out that we school together for fun). When some of us are sick, we do not have school, especially if the one who is sick is me! If there ever is a time that school cannot be done with dedicated time and attention for some reason, we are reasonable. Our goal is two hours a day of sit-down seat work.

If homeschooling becomes a tension in the home, wait on the Lord. There is a reason that things are not going well. If it is not apparent, or the solution you thought would clear up the stress isn't working, talk with your husband. If you are a single mom, get input from someone who is pro-homeschooling and you can take advice from. Perhaps they might know of something that will help.

Motivated learners are what make teaching fun. Motivated (not perfect) teachers are successful. There are no perfect homeschoolers. In fifteen years of looking, we have searched and searched and have not seen even one! This means that we cannot truly think that others always have it together.

Have you ever looked at another homeschooling mom and said to yourself, "I might as well give up, I cannot compare with her." The Lord has graciously given us children to teach and a land where teaching at home is legal. I am not so sure that God has a totally peaceful existence in mind for me. The Bible tells me that when I am weak, He is strong. If I have got it all together all the time perhaps I do not need to rely on God. From personal experience there is something sweet about a desperate heart. Leaning on Him when I am totally burned out leaves room for Him to replace my goofed up mental state with a better plan. So, boycott burnout. Replace it with sweet gratefulness.

TOS: What a testimony! Thank you for teaching us that we can rejoice in all the challenges with which the Lord blesses us! Bless your family for helping to equip so many others.

Biographical Information

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Christine M. Field practiced law for eight years before becoming a full-time mommy. She and her husband live and homeschool their four children in Wheaton, Illinois, where her husband

serves as chief of police. Three of their four children are adopted: one through private adoption and two from Korea. As special needs expert columnist of TOS Magazine's Resource Room, Christine welcomes readers' comments, personal stories, and questions. Please contact Christine at RR@TOSMag.com. As the author of books Help For the Harried Homeschooler, A Field Guide to Home Schooling, Coming Home to Raise Your Children, Should You Adopt? and Life Skills for Kids, Christine is a ready and willing help to the homeschooling community. Crosswalk.com has featured her a number of times as have other publications. For more information on Christine and her resources please visit her website: www.homefieldadvantage.org.

" . . . I am the harried homeschooler as I seek to play the many roles and meet the many demands in my life."