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Brittney's Story: Nature's Power to Heal
Body and Soul

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Natalie's Story: When it rains, it pours.

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Kathy's Story: Balancing Strength and
Support

Caregiver Stories

Website Content written for Hope Grows

Brittney's Story: Nature's Power to Heal Body and Soul

Almost a year ago, Brittney was at her wits' end.

Brittney noticed unusual behaviors since her son was a baby, but as a first-time mother, she wasn't sure what was normal. "When he was three weeks old, he would lay in his crib and just stare. As he grew, he didn't like to be touched or hugged, and if we were in an active environment with a lot of people he would go off on his own." There were even certain toys that caused a reaction in him like chalk or Playdough. Brittney thought it was something she was doing, or wasn't doing, that was causing her son's distress. "I got so frustrated, and there were many times all I could do was cry."

Making Sense of Things

After Brittney's son turned three, his meltdowns were constant and nothing she did could console him. It was clear his behavior was more than typical toddler tantrums, so Brittney took him to see a specialist who diagnosed a sensory processing disorder that caused extreme auditory, visual, and tactile sensitivity. "It all made sense," Brittney explains. "In the mornings when he would meltdown for an hour or more as I struggled to get him ready, it was the noise of the alarm, the harsh light, the tags or the texture of his clothing, all of these things assaulting his senses."

Growing a Routine

Understanding her son's disorder has allowed Brittney to address the problem through simple modifications. Mornings are much smoother with a gradual alarm clock that lightens his room and wakes him up naturally and a wardrobe of clothing that does not irritate his skin. He also attends occupational therapy to help retrain his senses.

The Power of Essential Oils

When Brittney began to see how critical sensory triggers were to her son's wellbeing, the *Essential Oils and the Soul* class at Hope Grows caught her attention. Having dabbled in essential oils for many years, Brittney knew that gaining in-depth knowledge from Hope Grows could help her implement oils into her son's daily life in a beneficial way. What she learned at that first class opened a door into inner peace, and peace at home, for Brittney and her family.

Essential oils are plant extracts that can be inhaled or rubbed into the skin to promote physical and emotional health. Each plant essence has unique properties that stimulate parts of the brain responsible for emotions, behaviors, breathing, blood pressure, and heart rate. Brittney now incorporates essential oils into her son's care. "We use a grounding blend if he's feeling anxious, and a focusing blend if he's distracted." Sensory processing disorder can also lower a person's immunity since they are always in a state of hyperawareness, so each night Brittney rubs a protective immunity blend on his feet and diffuses a restful blend to help him sleep. "The oils have made an unbelievable difference," Brittney says. "I'm so glad that I went to Hope Grows or I wouldn't have learned the power nature has to heal."

The Impact of Caregiver Support

Brittney also benefits from Hope Grows' weekly caregiver support emails containing tips, words of encouragement, and news on upcoming events. "I love the *Victorian Tea*, too. The speakers are incredible. They share so much useful information for caregivers. I learn so much."

Even though Brittney realizes that her son's condition means challenges at every stage of transition in his life, Hope Grows' caregiver support programs give her confidence, power, and inner peace.

Natalie's Story: When it rains, it pours.

Natalie already had her hands full raising five children, the youngest of them a daughter with autism, when her aging father began to decline. At first the support he needed was basic – cooking meals, helping with household chores – but his condition continued to deteriorate physically and cognitively. At the same time, her daughter Elineke's condition was complicated by more challenges including dyslexia, hearing problems, and bipolar disorder.

As her father and daughter struggled, Natalie's own well-being languished. "With an autistic child you are physically taxed to the max," she explains. "You can't be asleep when they're awake, and you can't hand your child over to another person." After hours of dealing with her daughter throughout the night, Natalie would break down crying by 7:30 in the morning, with a full day of caring for her father ahead of her. "When it got to be impossible, I had to keep on going. I didn't have any choice."

Connecting with Hope Grows

Natalie discovered Hope Grows when the *Take a Break in the Dirt* caregiver respite program was presented at Elineke's school. "I thought it would be good for her because she likes hands-on activities and can't focus on one thing for too long. She looked forward to it, had her own garden gloves too!" Natalie attended other caregiver support programs at Hope Grows, saying the 6-week *Powerful Tools for Caregivers* program was so impactful it inspired her to be trained so that she could conduct the program for others. "It gave me the chance to step out and do something on my own, to be Natalie again and not just a caregiver."

Significance of Caregiver Respite

Caregivers often believe they can't fit one more thing into their day, yet Natalie stresses the urgency of caregiver respite and spending time on yourself. "It's too costly to lose yourself, and it takes more than one person to get through it. When you participate in Hope Grows' caregiver support programs you find a rich resource of support. It became a force of healing for me."

When Natalie's father passed away early this year, she was surprised by the peace she felt. "I wasn't overwhelmed by grief because I had been grieving along the way," she says. "When he couldn't use his cane anymore and needed to use a walker, I grieved. When he couldn't use the walker anymore and needed to be in a wheelchair, I grieved. Every stage of his decline was another death to me."

Reflection of Life During Caregiving

Natalie reflects on the demanding years spent caring for her daughter and father and finds unexpected treasures. In his better days, her father would sit on the front porch waiting to greet Elineke as she came home from school. When he read the newspaper, he shared "the funnies" with her. "In the mornings Elineke wanted her breakfast first but I always told her, 'No, we have to think of Pop Pop first.' Putting others first is something children with autism don't usually do. She wouldn't have learned that lesson if I wasn't caring for my father at the same time I was caring for her."

It's true. When it rains, it does pour, but without the storm flowers can't bloom.

Kathy's Story: Balancing Strength and Support

We often consider a caregiver to be a person tending to the constant, complex needs of an ill or disabled spouse, parent, or child. The truth is that some caregivers are responsible for many individuals, attending to a multitude of small tasks that together can overload the person if they don't take time for themselves. Add to it the unwelcome and unexpected trials that life sometimes brings, and the everyday caregiver's resilience can shrivel. That's what happened to Kathy.

"I've been an elementary school teacher for almost 40 years, so my entire career has been about caregiving," Kathy explains. The increasing population of children with developmental and behavioral challenges has put even more stress on her job. Often her students have such difficult home lives that the classroom is their only safe place. As a morning greeter, Kathy meets students outside and walks them into school, describing it as her biggest joy of the day. "I always make it a point to know my kids and their parents, and I'm there to do what they need."

The Caregiving World Becoming Personal

As if the stresses and responsibilities of taking care of her students weren't enough, Kathy faced unexpected challenges at home when she discovered her 20-year old son had a drug addiction. "I tried to shield my younger son from what was going on. He was only eight at the time and really looked up to his big brother." Kathy redirected her youngest child through sports, enrolling him in football, basketball, and baseball and did her best to keep a normal homelife. That became nearly impossible as adversity seemed to stalk her. In the course of several months Kathy's brother-in-law passed away, her mother-in-law fell ill and died, and her father was diagnosed with cancer.

Kathy began to feel the weight of the accumulated burden and knew she had to protect herself before it was too late. She sought counseling and began to attend caregiver support programs at Hope Grows, including the annual *Victorian Tea* and *Uncorked and Skewered* where she strolled with other guests in the Hope Grows healing and restorative gardens. "I especially love the *Celebrating You!* event at the Pittsburgh Botanic Garden," Kathy says, noting the creative and unique ways the event provides support for caregivers.

A Healing Environment found in Hope Grows

"The people at Hope Grows would tell me how important it is to get away for a while, to take a break." Kathy would go to Hope Grows to talk, help with activities, or just be there. Kathy explains how the atmosphere at Hope Grows is itself a strong support for caregivers. "I love to sit and look out the windows of the sunroom. Every time I see something different, something that is beautiful in nature. It's very therapeutic and helps to ground me."

There was a particular activity at last year's *Celebrating You!* Event that made a lasting impression on Kathy. "We learned how to pot a succulent, and they taught us how that type of plant stores water in the thick leaves so they can survive in dry places," she recalls. "They only need water every now and then, but they still need water."

Succulent plants, like caregivers, are able to endure unfavorable conditions for prolonged periods, but even these well-adapted plants need periods of nourishment.