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ADA

The Bodes: FAMILIES MAKE YOU STRONG

COVER PHOTO BY MARIE CLARK



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Photo By Marie Clark

The Bodes: FAMILIES MAKE YOU STRONG

BY KATIE LINCOLN



Many would already agree that October is a special month. Gorgeous weather, autumn leaves in their peak colors, football, Halloween, apple orchards and hayrides. The list could go on and on. For the Bode family of Ada, October takes on a special meaning for another reason as it marks National Down Syndrome Awareness month, an entire month dedicated to raising awareness and promoting advocacy for those born with the congenital condition including the family's middle son, Sammy.

Jeff and Erica Bode were college sweethearts who met their freshman year while attending Central Michigan University in Mt. Pleasant. "We sat next to each other in a required meteorology course for our majors," remembers Erica. "I think it was the worst grade we each got in college because we spent more time flirting with each other than paying attention," she laughs. The couple wed two years later and finished college living in married housing on campus. "We had no idea at the time how carefree those days actually were," Erica recalls. "I remember meeting Jeff for lunch on campus between classes and venting over our hectic schedules that now pale in comparison to today," she exclaims with a smile. Also at the time the young couple could never have imagined the



unexpected miracles in store for their future that would mold their family into what it is today which now includes their three sons, Jack (12), Sam (7) and Will (9 months).

Jeff and Erica always knew they wanted to have a family, but when the time came to have children the couple struggled with infertility. After a long and agonizing road full of heartbreak and miscarriages the Bodes

finally, with the help of fertility doctors, gave birth to a healthy baby boy, Jack, in 2007. "Giving birth to Jack was such a blessing," says Erica, "but the road to get there was hard for us. We wanted to have more children but could not bear to go through fertility treatments again and doctors only gave us a 1 percent chance of getting pregnant without medical intervention."

With little chance of conceiving on their own and a desire to expand their family, Erica began to toy with the idea of adoption. They certainly had more room in their hearts and home. The more Erica thought and prayed about it, the stronger she felt the calling to adopt a child in need of a family. Specifically, she felt a calling to adopt one of the hundreds of thousands of orphaned children around the world with Down syndrome.

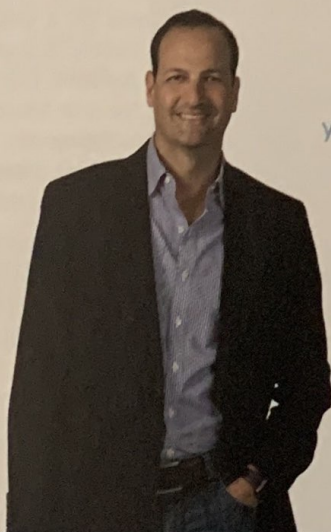
While researching adoption, Erica came across the website reecesrainbow.com. Started in 2006 by a mother whose son was born with Down syndrome, Reece's Rainbow Down Syndrome Adoption Grant Foundation promotes the international adoption of children with Down syndrome and other special needs. In comparison to many other parts of the world, the United States has a far more advanced comprehension and acceptance of those with special needs and

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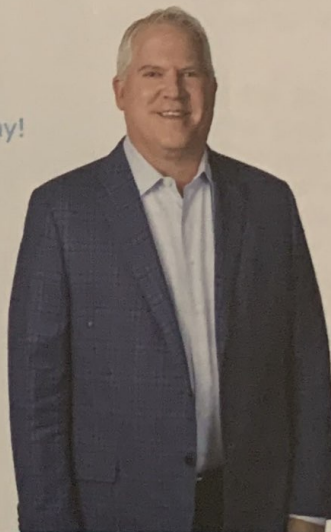
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resources that allow them to reach their fullest potential. Stigma and shame are still prevalent in many other countries and children born with Down syndrome are often relegated to a dismal life in orphanages and institutions. Reece's Rainbow features children waiting for a home and raises money to offer adoption grants that assist families with the financial cost of international adoption.

"When I approached Jeff with my desire to adopt a child with Down syndrome he definitely needed time to process," says Erica. "We were not naive to the fact that parenting a special needs child would come with a host of challenges. This child would need special care from us for the rest of our lives and would also be a big responsibility for our son, Jack. After careful consideration Jeff came to the same conclusion as me, that this was part of a master plan, that the joy this child would bring would far outweigh the difficulties." When Jeff and Erica Bode saw Sammy's picture on Reece's Rainbow, they knew he was meant to be theirs. The two-year-old boy with Down syndrome living in an orphanage in Armenia had a biography with words they would use to describe their own son Jack, including busy, active and into sports. "He even looked like he belonged to us with his dark hair and eyes," says Erica. "To this day

he is the only one in my family that I think looks like me, the other boys resemble Jeff," she laughs.

Before starting the adoption process, the Bodes called over their extended family and sat them down in the living room where the picture of Sammy was displayed on the



television screen. "This is Samuel Travis," they explained (Travis after Erica's brother). "We don't know yet how we will do it but we are going to adopt him and bring him home."

The family was immediately on board. "My mom led the charge," says Erica. "She worked tirelessly, helping us set up home studies, keeping us on task in completing our dossier and setting up fundraisers." It took two long years before all the adoption criteria were met and enough funds were raised. During that time, Jeff and Erica were able to travel to Armenia for a week to spend time with Sammy. Finally, in 2016, the Bodes went once more to Armenia, this time with Jack in tow to meet his little brother. After a three week stay completing the necessary steps for international adoption, they returned home as a family of four with Samuel Travis Bode.

Jeff and Erica finally had the family they yearned for. Their plates were full parenting two young boys, especially with the extra care that Sammy required. The couple felt like their family was complete with no more room to spare. "Then we got the shock of our lives," says Erica still getting wide-eyed at the thought. The thing doctors had told them was nearly impossible had happened. Erica was pregnant. In December of 2018, the third Bode boy, Will, was born.

"Busy, exhausting, amazing," is how Erica, a teacher at Mayflower Preschool describes their family life. "My husband is incredible, I could not do it without him," she says about



Jeff, a residential real estate agent for Bellabay Realty. "We work together," she says. "Except for the morning shift, that's all Jeff. Sammy wakes at the crack of dawn and Jeff gets up with him every morning to make him his favorite breakfast of scrambled eggs and ketchup," she laughs. Although the circumstances of their birth vary greatly, it is clear that the Bode boys were meant to be brothers and have an undeniable bond. "The older two adore Will. No one can make Will laugh like Sam can and Jack has taken on the role as third parent to him," Erica explains of her boys. "Jack is Sammy's hero and in turn Jack is fiercely protective of Sam. Recently Jack did a presentation to his class on Down syndrome educating students on the disorder and promoting inclusion."

Spreading the message to others that people with Down syndrome are more like everyone else than different and providing opportunities for them to flourish is important to the Bode family. Erica sits on the board of the Down Syndrome Association of West Michigan whose mission is to create communities that embrace Down syndrome, empower individuals and promote opportunities for meaningful lives. "The association does amazing things for our community," says Erica. Through DSAWM individuals with Down syndrome of all ages can participate in a variety

of classes including baby sign language, sports, cooking and music. "Sammy loves to dance and sing and was thrilled with the opportunity to rock the stage at a recent DSAWM talent show," says proud mom Erica. DSAWM works tirelessly to provide financial



assistance to its members so that cost is not a barrier in accessing these beneficial programs. "We have met such amazing people through DSAWM," she explains. "The incredible staff and other families involved with the association are invaluable resources in learning how to navigate parenting a child with Down syndrome."

"Sammy is such a joy but parenting him is hard," admits Erica. "My oldest Jack was a pretty easy kid so when Sammy came along I had to set my pride

aside and ask for help." The Special Education teachers at Meadow Brook Elementary in the Forest Hills school district where Sammy attends have been an instrumental part of that help. "Sammy's teachers are like family to us," explains Erica. "The incredible work they do with him at school doesn't stop there. They go above and beyond with phone calls, texts, even attending his after school events." Inclusion programs at Meadow Brook that pair students from general education classrooms with a peer from the cognitively impaired classroom has built a community of respect and has widened Sammy's circle of friends. "He definitely feels love there," she says of Sammy's time spent at school.

"Our community is very open to people with disabilities," Erica says of her experience living in Ada. In an environment of support and tolerance those

with Down syndrome become an integral part of the community and there are no bounds to their growth and achievements. This is evident in the joy and laughter that Sammy brings to all that support him. To them he is much more than a diagnosis. He is a singer, dancer, student, friend, brother, son.



"When I think back to when we first met Sammy while he was living in the orphanage I cannot believe the growth he has made here in both body and spirit," says Erica. "Everyone has worth and everyone deserves a family. Families make you strong."

For more information on how to support the Down Syndrome Association of West Michigan please visit www.dsawm.org.



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