

Joe and April Niamtu

Speaking Up, Giving Thanks

By Kimberli Russ Vida



What image comes to mind when you think of Thanksgiving?

Although the people seated around the table may be different, the scene is usually the same, with a turkey at center stage accompanied by the usual trimmings.

No matter who the people are or what the menu is, there is one constant...family around a table sharing each other's company. We surround ourselves with those we love most. We are thankful for their presence in our lives regardless of their shortcomings. We love them as they are.

One Richmond family has more differences than most but probably more love and thankfulness than most as well. You may have heard the name: Dr. Joseph Niamtu. He is a cosmetic facial surgeon who can be seen on television as the spokesman for the Greater Richmond Association for Retarded Citizens, or ARC. What you don't see is what takes place off-camera.

Joe and his wife and co-spokesperson, April, are busy campaigning for the Greater Richmond ARC through fundraising, support and awareness. They know firsthand how invaluable the organization is, having received education on the

rights and needs of their sons Joey and Evan, as well as practical solutions and advocacy strategies.

Advocacy, Appreciation

Despite the fact that they have not one but two children who will never walk, talk or outgrow diapers, the Niamtus choose to focus on translating their situation into advocacy for others and appreciating what they as a family do have.

April reflects on sharing the traditions of Thanksgiving with her children. "Even though they don't eat, they sit at the table with us and we share each other's company."

Joey, 6, and Evan, 4, are fed entirely through feeding tubes, but this loving family doesn't let that slow them down or miss the tradition of gathering around the table to share in Thanksgiving. Says April, "I'm thankful for my family whether they're whole or broken and for each of them touching my life."

Problem-Solving

Dr. Niamtu has volunteered his skills, time and connections to orchestrate miracles for children around the world for years prior to his sons' births and since. He provides free surgical care and reconstruction, and arranges a continuum of care with local hospitals and physicians with his partners, Operation Smile, Noah's Kids and others.

As a highly skilled surgeon, Dr. Niamtu is accustomed to solving problems. As parents, he and April were forced initially into the position of relying on others for answers and solutions. That's when their thankfulness

for ARC began.

"ARC truly facilitated my kids going to school," says April. "I truly would never have thought my kids could go to school. They guided me through choosing the school, to the equipment necessary for your child like ankle foot orthotics so they don't become more deformed. They told me where to go to get him fitted and sized."

Extending the Knowledge

Through their on-going journey as parents of extremely developmentally delayed children, the Niamtus want to extend their knowledge to others in similar situations. Joe summarized their goal as being "a voice for people who need help."

Next spring, the Niamtus will appear in a Greater Richmond ARC television commercial designed to raise awareness of ARC and its four core service areas: Infant & Child Development Services, After School & Day Support, Civitan Vocational Services and Camp Baker in Chesterfield County.

The Boys' Role

When interviewed by the Richmond Times-Dispatch's Bob Rayner, Joe reflected, "There are so many things that my sons cannot and will not ever be able to do on their own [But they do] have the ability to influence and help other families by increasing the community awareness of ARC."

Education continues at the grassroots level through Joey and Evan. In school, "I've always welcomed teachers to allow the children [in the boys' classes] to ask questions," says April.

April, Evan, Joey and Joseph Niamtu appreciate some time together outside their Richmond home. (Photo Frost)

"That's the only way they are going to learn. It's so wonderful that they'll ask. That's what's so great about a four-year-old...that they will ask and get an honest answer."

In his own way, Joey is a great educator. His classmates "can't wait to be Joey's helper," relates April. "He loves the interaction he gets with them. They have a switch-activated bubble machine that makes bubbles when he triggers it. They try to make Joey a part of what they are doing. Joey just eats it up."

A Thankful Family

This brings a smile through the tears when it's "extremely overwhelming," says April. "Some days you feel it more than others. I just dive in and take care of what needs to be done. I have days where I wonder how can I do this, but you do. There's just something within a mom and a mom's nurturing heart that just gets you through it."

The nurturing that April provides for Joey and Evan makes Joe "thankful for my wife who can tackle the overwhelming burden of caring for our children. Many people would put them in an institution. She's able to pull it off and raise them at home like normal children." **RPM**

Richmonder Kimberli Russ Vida graduated from Randolph-Macon College with a degree in English. Her three children challenge her almost daily to research parenting topics including Asperger's Syndrome, ADHD and Sensory Integration Disorder while finding her sanity through writing.