

'We will be with Sami again'

Tragedy inspires mom to begin prayer ministry

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Three-year-old Samantha Ann McDonald loved swinging, Dora the Explorer, her dog Yeller, wearing her clothes backward and picking up rocks of all shapes and sizes. She even saved gravel from the Southeast parking lot in her purse. When something especially tickled Sami's fancy, she'd quote the McDonald's restaurant slogan, "I'm lovin' it." Her favorite color was pink; her favorite song was *Jesus Loves Me*.

Sami drowned in the family swimming pool on May 2, 2006. There were fences and locks, alarms and warning lights. None of it kept Sami, her tricycle and purse with a few rocks inside from falling into the pool that day.

But that's not what her parents Geoff and Debi want people to remember.

"It's been our hope and prayer that in some way Sami's death will glorify God and make people stop and think about Jesus," Geoff said.

"We're learning God's heart. Our fear is turning to trust, and we love to tell people how wonderful God's been to give us peace."

Last fall, the McDonalds talked about what happens when children die. Ten-year-old Jacob, Sami's brother, was upset when he heard about a car accident that claimed the lives of several children.

"People who loved those children will miss them, but they won," Debi explained. "They went to heaven first."

As the family left the emergency room after Sami died, the car was silent with grief until Jacob said, "Mom, I was sad, then I remembered—Sami won."

And that's how they face life every day.

Geoff and Debi studied how King David handled the death of his baby. Though he'd been fasting, ripping his clothes, so crazy with fear and grief that people were afraid to tell him the baby had died, the king took the news with faith and grace. He dressed, bathed and asked for something to eat.

"God promises that one day we will be with Sami again," Debi said. "We cling to that. Until that day, we're going to be about His business of sharing faith and hope."

Soon after Sami died, a family friend, Kim Crittenden, from Bowen Elementary School where Jacob and 7-year-old Becca go to class, asked Debi if they could pray together.

Kim said, "Debi's eyes lit up and she said, 'Would you help me start a prayer group here at school? This is something I've wanted to do for years!'"

Debi and Crittenden began inviting other moms to pray for the children and teachers, family needs, whatever they wanted to share.



The McDonalds are Southeast members seeking to glorify God in their loss. They are from left to right: Debi holds Sami, Jacob, Becca and Geoff.

"Sami wouldn't let us forget to pray before eating or going to bed," Debi said. "She even wanted to pray at naptime. A prayer group seemed like a wonderful way to comfort our grieving community. So many knew Sami."

Eight came to the first prayer meeting. As Debi prayed to know how to grow the group, she came up with the name Sam's Rock. It fit in so many ways.

Not only did Sami love rocks, but the Bible describes God as a rock and firm foundation. Debi found verse after verse in 1 and 2 Samuel that explained how God is bigger than any problem we'll ever face and how God will help us keep our emotions under control. Second Sam. 22:2, "The Lord is my rock ..." has taken on new meaning.

Debi ordered 1,500 bright pink and white T-shirts with Sam's Rock in big black letters across the front. She's given them away to people from Maine to California, Michigan to Georgia, France and England.

A typed note goes out with each shirt.

"When you wear Sam's Rock, don't remember her death and the sorrow, remember that because of her Rock, our Rock, she is alive—she won. She got to go first, and she patiently waits for you to come play with her in heaven. For now you are called to live abundantly, love and forgive each other, always remembering Jesus loves you."

Sam's Rock prayer group has grown to as many as 40 on Monday mornings to pray. They pray for children and teachers and the right person to fill a vacancy at the school. On Sept. 11, they prayed for the nation and recently, the group prayed for the Somali mother whose four children were murdered by her estranged husband.

Last week, Debi and her Bible study group wore Sam's Rock T-shirts to work in the clothes closet at The Healing Place, a drug and alcohol rehabilitation center in downtown Louisville. As they waited to begin the outreach, dozens of women stopped to ask what Sam's Rock meant. Conversation quickly became up close and personal. As Debi told her story, the women were touched by hearing of God's faithfulness to help her overcome grief in such a way that encourages others.

"God is using this to connect people," Debi said. "Sam's Rock is becoming bigger than a prayer group in a public school. It's about hope and how in the face of the unthinkable, God has given peace, a lesson in God's unfailing promise to never leave us."

Now two other schools are interested in starting Sam's Rock prayer groups. Kurt Sauder, head of Southeast's Men's Groups, said the McDonalds have used their grief as a springboard to reach out to others.

"They've had great heartache and pain, but they also see that this tragedy can be used for the glory of God," he said. "They're so aware that this world is not our home. It's temporary, and they're fixed on eternity."

Pictures of Sami are everywhere in the McDonald's home, and they often talk of something she said or did that made them laugh. In the afternoon, when Jacob and Becca get home from school, Debi asks each one what they did in school that day. Then together, they talk about what Sami may be doing in heaven. Some days they imagine that she's swinging with her great-grandmas. Other days it's ballet or singing—all the things Sami loved to do.

"When I think of Sami in heaven, I can almost hear her say, 'Mom, I'm lovin' it,'" Debi said.