

Mom's book shares joy of special-needs son

By Julie Brown • OBSERVER STAFF WRITER • February 28, 2010

Joan Broggi's heart is full of love for her 19-year-old son, Alex.

"He's so humble," the Plymouth Township woman said of Alex, who has epilepsy which led to mental impairment when he was younger. "He has the kindest, purest heart."

She and husband Nick, also parents to three other children, have found their lives enriched by Alex, prompting her to write *Bursting with Joy: Discovering Universal Truths Through Our Special Son* (Ferne Press/Nelson Publishing & Marketing).

"My goal is just to give hope and inspiration to others," said Broggi, a substitute teacher in Livonia Public Schools whose work includes special education classrooms. She hopes not just parents of special needs children but all who read her book will embrace gifts given.

"This can be a good thing if I look at it with the right eyes," the author said.

"This is kind of their journey," said Plymouth Township resident MaryAnn McAuliffe, Broggi's sister. Alex had his first seizure at 6 months, and became cognitively impaired.

"When he was younger, he had a lot of seizures," McAuliffe said. "Now he has maybe one a month." Alex, a Livonia Franklin High School graduate, attends the Western Wayne Skills Center of the Livonia school district, learning life skills aimed at giving greater independence.

"There's just a real simpleness to him. He just sees the good in everyone," she said of her nephew. Alex tells women and girls, including those with Down syndrome, that they're beautiful.

The sisters grew up in a family with eight kids, and are close-knit. Alex's youngest sister is a high school sophomore and he has two older siblings, a brother at Michigan State University and a sister

doing graduate work in occupational therapy at Eastern Michigan University.

Broggi's writing is based in part on Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' *On Death and Dying*, which details the steps associated with death.

Bursting with Joy is available through amazon.com and at Border's and Barnes & Noble. For more on the author, visit www.joanbroggibooks.com. Joan Broggi's busy right now with the book launch, including at the family church, Our Lady of Good Counsel Catholic, as well as NorthRidge Church, also in Plymouth Township.

She's doing speaking engagements, including one to her EMU daughter's program. Alex attended and was front and center with a big grin.

"It was so endearing," she said of Alex, who signed books that day. His mental age is around 8.

"I've been wanting to do it for 19 years," Broggi said of her book. The family lived for a time in Princeton, N.J., when Alex was younger. When they returned to Michigan, she began subbing in the Livonia district, where a colleague encouraged her to share her experiences in writing.

It took her three months of putting pen to paper, followed by editing by the Northville-based Ferne Press. "It's a very positive take," she said of the book and her family's life. Broggi adds a sixth stage, joy, to Kubler-Ross' five stages.

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Friends have read the book, and one with a special-needs child became tearful. "She said 'I'm at the joy stage with my son.'" That reaction makes the work worthwhile for Broggi.

She got an added impetus at Alex's high school graduation: "There was just so much love bestowed on him as a result of who he is," she said.

A portion of proceeds will go to the Epilepsy Foundation of Michigan, Special Olympics and Arc of Western Wayne County, in keeping with the family's beliefs in giving back. "When you start changing that focus, your life changes," Broggi said of having a special-needs child.

Girls in regular education classes at his school have enjoyed working with Alex. "They come out of it changed," she said. "He doesn't see physical beauty. He just sees the person."

She's read to Alex from book chapters, and he's been surprised there's a book about him. Some experiences were a little hard to relive, his mother said.

"It was very therapeutic for me, too." Her husband and the rest of her family have also been extremely supportive, and Alex has brought compassion and optimism into their lives.

Broggi, who earned a bachelor's degree in general studies from the University of Michigan in 1982, continues to substitute teach in the Livonia district. She has less time now for that with book marketing.

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