

Season 5 | Episode # 12

Becky Ellis

Stepping Out in Faith to Serve

Crystal Keating:

This is the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast and I'm your host, Crystal Keating. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship and practical ways that you can include people living with disability in your church and community. As you listen, visit joniandfriends.org/podcast to access the resources we mention or to send me a message with your thoughts.

Becky Ellis is joining us on the podcast today to talk about leaving a legacy for the next generation, through the example of coming alongside families and individuals living with disability, with the love of Christ. Becky began serving with the ministry in 1999, when she and her mother volunteered at the Texas Family Retreat. That summer changed her life and she continued to serve every summer thereafter. Becky now serves as the regional Operations Director of Area Ministries for Joni and Friends where she oversees ministry development, organizational management, staff cultivation in all aspects of fundraising and so much more. So, it is a pleasure to welcome you to the podcast today, Becky. Thanks so much for joining us.

Becky Ellis:

Absolutely! Thank you, guys, for having me. I'm excited to share my story.

Crystal Keating:

Well, we are excited to hear it, and so I'd love to just hear how you became connected as a very young volunteer with Joni and Friends so many years ago. Becky, how did you initially hear about our ministry and what was your understanding of ministry that involved people with disabilities and their families? You were twelve years old, right?

Becky Ellis:

Yes, I was twelve years old many, many years ago. So, my mom's best friend, Julie, she had a son with Down syndrome, Steve. And so, Steve and I grew up together, best buddies since babyhood. And so, Julie and her family, they heard about [Family Retreat](#). And so, they're the ones that gave us the invitation to attend Family Retreat. They were attending as a family; we were going to attend as volunteers.

At twelve years old, my mother made me sign up with her. You can just imagine an enthusiastic middle schooler wanting to go serve others. That was not necessarily the picture. So, we both didn't really know what to expect, but that year, our lives were definitely changed.



Crystal Keating:

That's awesome. And so, when you came to Family Retreat in 1999, what was your role? Were you hanging out with Steve and his family, or, you know, what was your experience like serving with your mom? It sounds like you weren't all that like crazy about going.

Becky Ellis:

You know, that was in just the beginning years of Family Retreat and so, as a twelve-year-old, I was paired with my mom, and so together we were paired with a family and one of their daughters had a disability. She was partially paralyzed throughout the left side of her body, and so we were her buddy for the week. She was close to my age. She might have been nine, ten years old. And so, for me, my experience, I felt like I was just her friend. But through my mom's example, I kind of saw what was needed to be a buddy and to care for her and her family and just to love on them during that week of Family Retreat.

So as a twelve-year-old, I was paired to help out, but also getting to participate in the activities that Family Retreat holds.

Crystal Keating:

Oh yeah. Okay. So maybe talk about some of those activities that families and campers get to partake in.

Becky Ellis:

You know, each camp around the country and even the world is unique in their own area. But we had activities like crafts and Bible. We had swimming, fishing, canoeing. We even have a blob at that location, a ropes course, dance night, and of course the epic shaving cream fight at Family Retreat.

Crystal Keating:

That sounds like a blast. And everything's accessible, right?

Becky Ellis:

Absolutely! Fully accessible. So, to be able to see, you know, for the first time, someone in a wheelchair being transferred into a pool, you know, you don't really see that in your everyday life, especially as a twelve-year-old when the world revolves around me. And so, to see others helping, you know, spoon-feed someone or tube-feed someone who can't eat on their own, that was huge for me to see at that age where everyone was so accepting of each other and just filled with a genuine love.

Crystal Keating:

That's awesome. Well, while you were volunteering, was there anything particularly challenging for you? Even in the summers to come, like you were twelve, and then each year you volunteered. What were some of the things that kind of caused you to go, "Wow, I wonder what's happening," or, "I'm kind of uncomfortable with that."



Becky Ellis:

Yeah, absolutely. You know, as the years progressed and Family Retreat, you have to be sixteen years old to be a buddy on your own. And so, I continued to serve alongside my mom for those younger years.

But really it wasn't until I was in high school, when I was taken out of my comfort zone in the roles that I held at Family Retreat. And I was truly challenged to rely on God when my strength wasn't enough because I didn't know some of the situations that I just wasn't familiar with, that are included in the life of disability.

But there was one year in particular, it was my senior year in high school, and I was paired with a young girl named Rosie. Rosie had the biggest smile, and she loved the color purple. She had cerebral palsy and so at Family Retreat she relied on me to be her hands and feet. We had a ton of fun together that week, but I remember so vividly when it came time to eat, I really struggled.

Rosie was a messy eater because her cerebral palsy caused her tongue to thrust forward. Most of the food that I fed her landed everywhere but where it was supposed to. And so, there was one night I remember going back to my room and it had been a full day, and there were three long meals. And I remember saying to my mom, "I just can't do this anymore. I can't feed her. It's hard to get the food in her mouth. It's so gross, and I lose my appetite." And that was the honest truth there. And my mom looked at me and said, "Becky, you have to feed her for two more days. Her mom has done this for every day of her life." And so, that summer, it just gave me perspective.

A lot of the families that we serve, you know, this is their one week of respite. And so, to serve over those three days is very powerful. Family Retreat that year, it revealed my selfishness and pride and my inner brokenness. And when the world around us defines our friends with disabilities as broken because of how they appear on the outside. That summer, my brokenness was truly revealed through the innocence of Rosie, and I have many more stories over the years, but that one really stands out for me.

Crystal Keating:

Oh, definitely. I can't tell you how many volunteers have gone, thinking, "I'm going to make a difference. I'm going to make a change." And they're the ones that leave changed. And that sounds like your experience as well. And so, you know, that was a challenging time for you, but what about some aspects of being at Family Retreat that were really joyful for you, that really blessed you tremendously and just brought a lot of excitement to your heart?

Becky Ellis:

Oh yeah, I mean, countless times. The friendships that I've made at Family Retreat go back to twenty-four years and many of those friends serving back then still serve today. And so, there's something about stepping outside of yourself, serving, doing something for others, that truly impacts you. Where you go expecting to make an impact and you do, the volunteers do, but the impact that Family Retreat has on our volunteers just goes above and beyond. So many memories, gosh, I don't even know if I can pinpoint one down because the joy that Family Retreat brings, it's just a God-given joy and it's unexplainable.

Crystal Keating:



Well, and there's something so unique about being together with other families for several days. You start building these fantastic relationships and you get to know people. And I think that's what we all desire is for cultivating community that lasts beyond that particular week, and so that's really special.

Okay. So, I'm curious about you and your mom. What was it like serving with her through the years? She must have been so proud of you.

Becky Ellis:

Oh, I mean, I loved it and I remember even the shift and not rooming with her anymore, but at that point, we finally got my dad on board, and he was able to, you know, take off time from work to be there and serve. He still serves with us today, and we've gotten my sister and my nieces involved as well. So, it truly is a family affair, and we wouldn't do a summer without it. Just making that commitment, those five days out of the summer, where we commit to serving together. It's something that I'm so grateful for. And if there's one thing that I would not let go of with my family, it would be that time serving together at Family Retreat.

Crystal Keating:

That's a truly bonding experience, I'm sure. Okay, so you served many years as a volunteer at Family Retreat and now you are overseeing some of our [area ministries](#), which is our Joni and Friends locations around the country. So, what was the catalyst that led you to a career with Joni and Friends?

Becky Ellis:

It's interesting, because I remember in college, and I went to a school in Arkansas, Ouachita Baptist University, and I honestly didn't know what I wanted to study. I kind of hopped around choosing different majors here and there, knew that I had a love for people, you know, was it going to be teaching or coaching that I wanted to do? And I just remember my dad, one year, said, "Well, why don't you work for Joni and Friends?" And I said, "Dad, I don't want to move to California." I didn't even know they had an office in Texas and what that was all about. As I say, "didn't want to move to California," we've got a lot of Texas pride going on here, born and raised. So-

Crystal Keating:

It's okay. It's okay.

Becky Ellis:

So, after college I kind of had some random odds and ends jobs and still volunteered at Family Retreat, and even the weeks leading up to Family Retreat, I was able to go into the office, helping them with whatever needed to be done. And they had a job position open. And so, they called me just because they knew me through the, you know, at that point, I think it had been fourteen years of volunteering.

And turns out, interviewed, got the job, and I truly had no idea the depth and breadth of the ministry domestically and internationally. So, it was eye-opening for me because all I really knew about was Family Retreat, but getting to learn about the ways that we mobilized the church, our resources that are available, our wheelchair collection, I mean the list goes on. And



so, those first couple years, even though I felt so comfortable in my role helping out at Family Retreat on staff, I was truly learning so much about this ministry.

Crystal Keating:

And we really do so much more than I think we even realize. And it's quite amazing what God is doing all over the world. In fact, my first connection with you was actually in Cuba. You and I met in Cuba in 2014 at a [Wheels for the World](#) Outreach, and that was really an impactful time for me just to see how God was moving through the gift of a wheelchair. And, you know, so many people would say, I have been praying for this for so long and I'm experiencing God's love through this wheelchair. It's wonderful to be a part of this ministry, for sure.

Becky Ellis:

Absolutely.

Crystal Keating:

So, Becky, leading by example is such a powerful and an influential way to introduce the next generation to living out the heart of Jesus. Your mother did this for you. So how can families and even youth groups begin serving people with disabilities with Joni and Friends or their local church?

Becky Ellis:

It's a great question. You know, obviously, they can come to a Family Retreat near them and if I'm talking to any parents out there, I would say that is the number one thing that you can instill in your kiddos is showing them empathy, showing them how to use their hands and feet to serve others for the glory of the kingdom. And Family Retreat is just a great place to do it. Even if you have no disability experience, we do twenty-four hours of in-depth training and team building before the families arrive. And so, you can go with no experience, and you'll be ready to serve for the entire week.

But then, you know, locally, throughout the year, connecting to a local church. So, if you're a part of a church, think about: does your church have a disability ministry? If so, get involved there. Find the leader in charge. Let them know you want to serve, whether that be every Sunday, whether it be once a month, maybe at one of the respite events, but I know that they need you.

Now, let's say your church doesn't have a special needs ministry. Well, great, because that's where we come in. Connecting with your local Joni and Friend's office. We have a person on staff dedicated to helping churches start or excel in their disability ministry. So, connect us to your leadership. Let us step in and provide the endless amount of resources we have to start special needs ministries because it does truly start in your church and your community. I know that there's a huge need out there for volunteers. So, whether that be within your church or any other disability providers in your community, I can guarantee you they have a need for volunteers, which is where you can get involved.



Crystal Keating:

Yes. That's so good. And so, if you go to our website, joniandfriends.org and you look at our various locations, you can find a Joni and Friends Area Ministry located nearby and contact them.

It's so great, Becky, because we do have lots of resources. We have videos, we have training modules, we have PDFs, we have books, and we have people. And I think that is so helpful to come alongside pastors and lay leaders and families. Not only that, but we have networks and so, it's possible that there are other churches in your area who have already started a disability ministry or they're connecting with families in their local communities. And so, we'd want to get you also partnered with them. It's just really helpful for churches to come alongside one another in our efforts to make the Gospel accessible to all people.

So Becky, what would you say to a parent, like your wonderful mom, or youth leader who is feeling unprepared, or even afraid of ministry that includes serving with people with disabilities and why should they serve at a Family Retreat or a disability ministry event at their church or another local church?

Becky Ellis:

Great question. My answer would be, do it. Don't hesitate. Sign up today. You know, I'm thinking of the verse, I believe it's in 2 Corinthians where he says, "My power is made perfect in weakness." So, you aren't ready, you aren't equipped yet, but we will help you get there, and he will help you get there. I remember countless examples of just being terrified that I couldn't do it. So out of my comfort zone. But through that, Christ was able to work and through the incredible training that we have at Family Retreat, I was well equipped to serve. So, whether it be Family Retreat or a disability ministry at your church, it will be the most rewarding thing that you do for yourself, and then to teach your family what it truly means to serve others.

As our biblical commission states in Luke 14, to bring them in so that my house will be full. So many families that live under the weight of disability, it's heavy, and so that week at Family Retreat for them, or that Sunday morning at Church provides a little bit of respite. It's a little slice of heaven and it's all because of those that are passionate about serving others and giving of their time. So, if there's anything that I could say to parents, it's do it. Go for it. Sign up. Take the leap of faith, and I can guarantee you, you'll be blessed in doing so.

Crystal Keating:

I love that. And just think, your mom invited you to come for one summer, and many years later, it's just become who you are, Becky, and you're impacting even the next generation.

So wonderful to have you on the podcast today, Becky. Thanks for sharing your story and many blessings to you in the Texas office and all that you're doing with Joni and Friends.

Becky Ellis:

Thanks, Crystal to God be the glory, and I look forward to see how many volunteers come and serve with us.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, me too!

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