

Good morning. I am the parent of three children. I have a 19 year old son and 20 year old daughter who have recently left home for college. Today, however, I want to tell you about my son, Graham. Graham is 20 years old and is diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. He is nonverbal and often self-injurious, and has needed full time care his whole life. Graham was recently placed out of our home, but my family and I continue to experience the challenges of caregiving.

When Graham was growing up, my husband and I relied heavily on respite, especially when he grew bigger and taller than us. We saw provider after provider enter our home to give us a break, and unfortunately, many did not last long. Between Graham's long list of personal care needs and behavioral challenges, not to mention his size as a teenager, few providers could truly handle his care needs including toileting, inappropriate behaviors and aggressive outbursts. Graham certainly has difficulties when it comes to his care, but he's our son, and we always have and always will strive for the best quality of life for him.

Our family was fortunate to receive funding for respite services and supports, but it was never fully enough. Caring for Graham is a never-ending process. Between appointments, therapy, school, and everything else, on top of the typical needs of my other two children, home and marriage, I was always exhausted. Even now, while Graham does not live in our home, we spend endless hours each week talking with professionals, coordinating appointments and communicating with his providers.

My family has felt the toll of caregiving physically, emotionally and socially. Being Graham's mom is an incredibly valuable experience, but it's not a typical parenting experience. My husband and I did not have the luxury of calling a neighborhood babysitter when we needed a break. Even when I had less than 1% left in the tank I had to find a way to make it last until we could find a bit of respite care.

It's hard to imagine our lives without our regular respite. I truly don't know if we would have survived. We operated day to day - rarely able to think about month to month or the next year. Many caregivers live in survival mode, and their sole focus is getting their family member through another day – I know this to be true for our family. Though our respite was only a few hours at a time, it was a

Godsend. It allowed each member of our family to be refreshed, kept us healthy and made our family unit stronger.

Inspired by the blessing of respite and my life with Graham, I co-founded the Colorado Respite Coalition in 2007. Because of my personal and professional experience, I know there are many families across Colorado in similar situations who cannot access respite due to financial barriers or lack of providers in their community. The creation of the Family Caregiver Support Fund is crucial to supporting families like mine. Respite care is necessary for all family caregivers, from parents of children with special needs to adult children supporting their aging parents. We all need a break from time to time, and the break allows of us to continue to be the primary care provider for our family member. Respite care helps me be the best possible mom for Graham, Emma and Colin.

I ask you to please support the Family Caregiver Support Fund and increase services and supports for my family, and my fellow Coloradans. Thank you.