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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A Different Kind of Summer Camp: Joni and Friends hosts Family Retreats for 20th year, providing inspiration and inclusion for families affected by disability

AGOURA HILLS, Calif., June 30, 2011 – [Joni and Friends International Disability Center](#) for the past 20 years has hosted Family Retreats across the U.S. and around the world, providing a summer camp-type experience for families who might otherwise never enjoy such an opportunity to simply have fun and feel like they belong.

Statistics indicate that families with a disabled member have extraordinarily high rates of estranged relationships, stress, financial burdens and despair. Families affected by disability often face social isolation, which compounds their practical, emotional and spiritual needs. Through Family Retreats, Joni and Friends addresses the particular needs of families who live with these daily struggles.



“I remember so fondly my summers at youth camp as a teenager, both as a time of great fun and personal spiritual growth,” said Joni and Friends founder Joni Eareckson Tada. “I believe everyone should get to have that kind of experience, and with the wonderful volunteers that we have, we are able to make that a reality for families and young people who may have thought summer camp just wasn’t for them.”

Held at accessible camp and conference centers across the United States, the program is flexible and designed to provide the entire family with time together in a camp atmosphere. Although each camp or conference center has its own unique facilities, several sites have amenities such as climbing walls and ropes courses, boating, hiking trails, mud pits, and a host of other activities for everyone. Volunteers who are trained and screened carefully are assigned to each camper with a disability, so that they have the physical assistance they need to participate with everyone else.

One parent tells the story of what Family Retreats have meant to them: “My youngest child, Alton, was born with brain damage which over the years led to various mental and developmental problems including Autism. My two daughters, Alisha and Alaina, are incredible big sisters to Alton, but having a family member with a disability has many challenges.”

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"I will never forget the moment that I realized we were exactly where God wanted us," Alton's mother continued. "The kids were getting ready to go to their program with their STM (short term missionary), and I was about to join the parents for a time of worship. Before parting, my 9-year-old Alaina looked at me and asked, 'Mom, does everyone have a disability here?' I replied, 'Someone in the family does.' She said, 'So we're not the only ones?' 'No', I reassured her, 'We're not the only ones.'"



"We would be lost without Family Retreat," she concludes. "We know that when our challenges get tough we can say, 'Just wait, in a few weeks/months we will be able to get away and enjoy praising God with other people like us.' At times it is Family Retreat that keeps us moving forward, knowing that there is a place for families like ours to experience support, love and a place to praise God."

Each day at Family Retreats the youth and children enjoy age-appropriate camp activities, crafts and recreational activities and, most importantly, the freedom to be themselves in a welcoming group of peers. Parents participate in their own events, including Christ-centered worship, teaching and practical seminars that address family life and issues related to life with a disability. The afternoons provide time to relax or participate in a variety of optional activities. Evenings are full of family oriented events such as talent shows, camp fires, concerts, carnivals and more, all in a warm, accepting environment.

"Our Family Retreats provide an encouraging and supportive environment where families affected by disability feel welcomed, understood and accepted," Tada explained. "It is also a great opportunity for networking and building relationships with others who know both the joys and relentless demands of life with a disability. This becomes a valuable resource and long-lasting, life-impacting result for these families whom we are so blessed to serve."

Joni and Friends has been hosting Family Retreats since 1991, and in 2010, provided 21 retreats in the U.S., running April through August. Joni and Friends is now also hosting International Family Retreats, with 12 being held last year in locations such as Ghana, Ukraine, El Salvador, Romania, Serbia, China and Guatemala. For 2011, International Family Retreats will be held in Canada and nine other countries.

For more than 30 years, [Joni and Friends](#) has worked to accelerate ministry to the disability community, offering a wide array of life-affirming ministries to people with disabilities around the world. Joni and Friends does this through the [Christian Institute on Disability](#); the International Disability Center; international radio and television programs filled with inspirational stories; [Wheels for the World](#), which every year sees thousands of individuals receive wheelchairs and the life-giving message of the Gospel.