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Student Spotlight 2023

The Hilliard Family

Marietta, GA



Mark and Katrina Hilliard’s love story began after they met in kindergarten – quickly becoming inseparable friends that would later lead to dating and eventually getting married. Mark would go on to become a church worship pastor, while Katrina worked as a high school math teacher. When their dreams of expanding their family were halted due to infertility, they turned their focus to foster care, a decision that has led to an incredible outcome.

“Infertility was an extremely difficult road to walk, and the doctors eventually told us that IVF was our only option,” recalls Katrina. “Some friends at our church worked at a foster care agency, so we began

asking many questions. After many difficult and emotional conversations, we decided against IVF, and we were ready to begin foster parenting classes. The main goal of foster care is reunification, so we wanted to help children while their biological parents worked to get them back. We were open to adoption, but only as a last resort if a child could not return to his or her family.”

Those plans would change when the Hilliard’s got their first foster care placement in June 2016 – Joshua, a three-week old infant. By the time Joshua was a year old, Mark and Katrina were overjoyed to adopt him. Within months, the family of three became a party of four when a 3-week-old baby boy, Jak, was placed in their home through foster care. Before long, Jak officially became a part of the Hilliard family when they finalized his adoption. Then, in July 2019, the Hilliard’s welcomed another foster baby into their home – Jacob – who they would also eventually adopt. They now had three boys under three years old – but the family was not done expanding.

“When Jacob was just nine months old, we got an unexpected call from our case manager,” recalls Katrina. “Jak had a newborn biological brother who needed a family. We said ‘yes!’ to three-day-old little Judah in April 2020 – right in the middle of a global pandemic. You counted correctly – we now had four boys, four and under! It has been a wild, shocking, blessed ride and we wouldn’t change a thing! Our boys keep our home loud, our schedules full, and our hearts forever grateful.”

When it came time for Joshua and Jak to start school, the Hilliard’s knew how important it was to find the right academic setting.

“Foster care is accompanied by trauma,” says Katrina. “Poverty, drug exposure, neglect, lack of educational resources, addiction, homelessness, abuse and lack of support are all common reasons children enter the foster care system. Our boys entered our home as infants, but they still experienced some of these struggles in-utero and in their short time before entering foster care. More importantly, some of their biological family members have experienced these struggles for generations.”

While the local public schools were not the best fit for Joshua or Jak, two different area private schools appeared to provide the learning environment they needed. However, with four small children – including two still in diapers – affording the tuition was not possible. Their solution came in the form of AAA Scholarships, allowing Joshua and Jak to attend schools where they are thriving.

As a Kindergartner at Cornerstone Preparatory Academy, Joshua has gained valuable reading skills and become a master of math. He is an active, athletic and kind-hearted 6-year-old who loves to learn and is a great big brother. While he can be shy, Cornerstone Prep's small class size, attentive teachers and consistent routine have helped him improve his social confidence and come out of his shell.

Also during the 2022-23 school year, Jak began attending Midway Covenant Christian School in the K4 program, gaining all the skills in letters, numbers and writing that he will need to move onto Kindergarten. At five years old, Jak is curious, kind, charming and loves to make others laugh. He has a great love for cats and is fascinated by clocks and figuring out how things work. A perfectionist by nature, he is hesitant to try new things, but his teacher has helped him build confidence and now he is flourishing both socially and academically.

"AAA Scholarships have been a godsend for our family – enabling us to place our boys in wonderful schools with healthy environments," says Katrina. "The flexibility to choose a private school for each of them has been monumental as they enter their formative school years. Their smaller class sizes empower their teachers to better assess and meet their individual needs, while also allowing us to be closely involved with teachers and school administration to ensure our sons remain on a successful trajectory. We sincerely feel that we are in partnership with their teachers, which brings us great peace of mind. Thank you to AAA and all the donors who have made this opportunity possible for our children!"

About AAA Scholarship Foundation

AAA Scholarship Foundation promotes the advancement of education by administering educational choice programs. The typical AAA Scholarship student is an ethnic minority living with a struggling single parent/caregiver in a high crime community. More than 80 percent of these children are initially awarded AAA scholarships while living in households with annual incomes at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Many are either below grade level, failing at their previous school or both when they first receive a scholarship. Parents, who find their children in these circumstances and are concerned about their future, look for viable options. They seek an atmosphere that challenges their children and will reverse inadequate learning, social patterns and potential lifelong negative impacts. They wish to change their children's learning environment, acquaintances and the unfortunate predictable outcomes associated with school failure.

AAA Scholarships are funded in Arizona, Florida, Georgia and Nevada by companies that redirect a portion of their state tax liability to the AAA Scholarship Foundation in exchange for a dollar-for-dollar tax credit. AAA Scholarship Foundation is one of the only 501(c)(3) nonprofit scholarship organizations approved to administer these legislatively-authorized tax credit scholarship programs in multiple states. AAA Scholarship Foundation provides your company with the convenience and efficiency of a single solution for participating in multiple state tax credit scholarship programs. For more information, or to learn how your company can participate in the program, visit www.AAAScholarships.org, or contact Kerri Vaughan at kerri@aaascholarships.org or 888-707-2465 ext. 730.