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'A tremendous change in his behavior'

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Easter Sunday will be especially meaningful for 8-year-old Nathan Mattison-McGee when he is baptized as a full member of the Second Baptist Church of La Grange.

The full-immersion ceremony and opportunity to speak before the congregation could be intimidating for anyone, but Nathan's mom has prepared him well. And as one of the church's ministers, Shawana McGee will officiate at her son's baptism.

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Maurice McGee sings some of his choir songs as his son Nathan plays along on the drums.

(Steve Johnston/Staff Photographer)

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The day also likely will be a happy celebration and poignant reminder of how far Nathan has come in his struggles with autism, a developmental disorder, and the strides he's made.

"From day one, I've always said Nathan was a prayer answered, that he was actually sent from God," McGee said. "When we started noticing things were different, we prayed over him every day and anointed him. We believed he would be OK."

Two days after Nathan was born, his birthparents left him with Shawana and her husband, Maurice, at their home near the church. The infant

was hospitalized five times in the first five weeks for digestive issues.

"The doctors told us he would never walk, talk or run. He'd never do the normal things, and that I needed to accept that," Shawana McGee said. "But he's running and climbing now. He said his first words when he was 3."

Nathan today is constantly on the go, outside with a squirt gun, looking for the family's cat in the front yard and the back, and then into the kitchen for a quick snack. Every few minutes, his rounds through the house are punctuated by an enthusiastic solo on his drum set in his bedroom upstairs.

"For kids with auditory processing difficulties, this helps them pay attention to what is relevant and tune out extraneous information," Bakula said. "They can be so distracted by sounds in the environment. They often want to unplug appliances because the noise is irritating."

Aspire also helped facilitate Nathan's acceptance in February to Giant Steps, a school in Lisle with specialized programs for autistic children. The therapy at Aspire and the new school have made a tremendous difference in Nathan's progress, his mother said.

"I've seen a tremendous change in his behavior," said Shamika McGee, 26, Nathan's sister, who visited for the afternoon and lived with her parents and Nathan until two years ago.

His mother agreed.

"His communication skills are like night and day. He's like a new kid," she said.

Nathan's family acknowledges many challenges lie ahead, but they're grateful for support from Aspire, Giant Steps and their faith community at Second Baptist Church.

"He plays the drums on one song every Sunday," McGee said and smiled broadly.

"Nathan loves playing his drums," his mother said. "He earns drum time through a point system with smiley face stickers at school and Aspire, where he goes for therapy."

The McGees said they thought they were up for the challenge of raising Nathan, after caring for 14 foster children, many of whom had special needs. The couple had numerous contacts with human services agencies and health professionals.

"It was like you couldn't get to him; there was this great kid in there, but I couldn't break through," Shawana McGee said. "It's taken a lot of love and a lot of sheltering him."

McGee said she's learned to limit the places Nathan goes so that he can be successful. The family avoids visiting restaurants and certain relatives because many people don't understand how best to respond to her son when he constantly taps or drums and repeats what is said to him.

"With an autistic child, you have to adapt to them," she explained. "He has just learned to wash himself, for example, and any attempt is good. It doesn't have to be perfect."

Nathan received some speech and occupational therapy at Congress Park School in Brookfield, but his mother thought he needed more therapy as well as a different approach in the classroom so he could succeed.

"In school, he was having total meltdowns and was out of control," she recalled. "I was getting calls every day. Nathan is not a bad kid or mischievous or malicious. It was something in the environment that triggered him."

At her low point two years ago in dealing with a heart condition and Nathan's situation, McGee said she was driving along Wolf Road in Westchester and spotted the office of Aspire, an agency helping special needs children and adults. She called for help.

New types of therapy, a family-centered approach, a listening ear and additional resources such as respite care were answers to prayer, McGee said.

"Nathan responds to deep pressure points and joint compression, which helps him to calm down so he can attend to a structured task," said Theresa Bakula, an occupational therapist.

"He gets overstimulated easily, and he has a difficult time sitting at a table and finishing anything, attending for any period of time," Bakula said. A swing in one of the therapy rooms also helps him calm down and serves as a reward for staying on task.

Nathan is responding well to therapeutic listening on special headphones to a CD of alternating high and low frequency sounds, his therapist said. Two 30-minute sessions a day are recommended.