



We were home in Wisconsin for the holidays. We had moved away earlier that year to Arizona and we flew home for the holidays. We stayed at my brother's house. My wife Katie, daughter Paige who was 5 and Nicholas who was 3. There were few places at this time in his life that he felt comfortable, but my brother's house was one of them. It was because he had a basement.

Nicholas didn't really like the basement; it was dark and full of concrete. There was a small play area downstairs with carpet and a small trampoline. But he didn't like it for the play area. He liked it since it had stairs. They were hidden behind a door, but he knew where to find them. He would throw a dog toy down the stairs and my brother's golden retriever would fetch it. This made him laugh.

My brother had a big house, big enough to host Christmas for all 5 brothers and their families. Including our parents, there were approx 20 in all. Most stayed the night during one of the Christmas weekdays and we goofed around with the kids, played football outside and played ping-pong in the basement.

Nicholas never had any particular reason to like or dislike music. My wife and I didn't play a musical instrument. Paige, his sister, had taken piano lessons for a year or so, but we stopped them when her fingers stopped growing and the piano teacher indicated that for her to grow as a musician, she now needed to grow physically.

One evening, my two nieces were practicing Christmas songs on their flutes and clarinet. They were separated by a few years in age, but always played together and were friends. Paige was always devising "shows" where she could sing or dance and others could also perform. She asked my two nieces to play some songs and she would sing for us. The parents all gathered in one of the bedrooms where the "show" was to occur. We encouraged Nicholas to join us in the room, but he said he didn't want to be in the room. We gave him his personal space.

Paige would introduce the shows activities, and off we went. One of the segments was to be music accompanied by Paige singing. They started playing, and Paige started singing. It was the traditional off key singing that you would expect from a 5 year old. It was tough to synchronize melodies of singing and playing when you only had 10 minutes of rehearsal. After each song we would clap and cheer them on.

Nicholas popped his head around the corner, "what's all the noise going on in here?" This of course was a rhetorical question. He knew what was going on, we had explained it several times and encouraged his attendance, but he decided not to join us in the room. We asked him again to join us, but he declined.

Again a song would begin and singing commenced. At the end, Nicholas would pop his head around the corner, "what's all the noise going on in here?" We told him to join us singing or



playing. We confessed that he didn't have an instrument and tried to leave. Someone handed him a plastic recorder. He grabbed it and left. He didn't want to stay.

Another song, another Nicholas head popping. But this time, he walked in when the song was over and blew on the recorder, making a big noise! We all laughed because he was being silly. Nicholas understood our laughter to be "with him" and not "at him". Every time he tried to take a breath to play the recorder, we would all laugh and he would get a small breath of air in the recorder before he would break down in laughter as well.

My wife took a picture of Nicholas playing the recorder and laughing. I still have that picture. That day Nicholas taught me two things. First, he reminded me that he doesn't like to be in big crowds and doesn't like to feel crowded. Second, he proved to me that he does like group praise and does like being with groups of people that make him feel comfortable.