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My name is Heather Olivier and I am from Medford, Oregon. At the age of four my son was diagnosed with autism. As a family, we found ourselves becoming increasingly isolated from our family and our friends. Some of the isolation was a result of me withdrawing from my community and some was as a result of family and friends not knowing how to support our family. I found myself feeling depressed, sad and scared. Fortunately a service coordinator that we worked with suggested that we attend a parent meeting where she hoped to connect me with two moms that she thought that I would get along with. That meeting was the start of a change in our life. That moment where a parent is able to share their story without judgement is life changing. Those parents that were a few steps ahead of me, were the beginning of my feeling part of community. The connection with other parents that "got it" made all the difference in the world for our family.

Next, I had an opportunity to learn about dreaming big dreams for my child through my local family network. After my son's diagnosis, we found ourselves believing in all of the limitations that went along with his diagnosis. Through the connections made with family network, my family began to dream big dreams. We started to have a vision for my son's future. That vision became the compass that informed our decisions on how we would navigate supports for our family and son. We started becoming active members of our community. The more

that we met other families, the more we felt connected with our community. I no longer felt depressed, sad and scared. Instead I felt empowered and hopeful. My son is included with his peers in school where he participates in deciding what supports he needs in the classroom. He has begun to talk about what he wants to do in the future. Our family had to dream big dreams first, for my son to dream big dreams for himself. Family Networks have helped our family change the vision and trajectory of our family and our son's future.

Over the years, I have been fortunate to receive support and encouragement from parents through the family network. I now, as the Director of the Family Network in Jackson and Josephine County, have the opportunity to provide support and encouragement to families in my community. What I have had the privilege to see firsthand is that greater connection and empowerment creates stronger families and stronger communities.

I ask you to fund the regional Family to Family Networks to strengthen families and communities as they work together to build a sustainable support system.