Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Caregiving with Grit and Grace – Part 2
Guest(s): Jessica Ronne
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Dr. James Dobson: Welcome everyone to Family Talk, it's a ministry of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute supported by listeners just like you. I'm Dr. James Dobson and I'm thrilled that you've joined us.

Roger Marsh: Well, welcome back to another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh, your co-host for the program today, and our continuing conversation with Jess Ronne. She is the author of *Caregiving with Grit and Grace: 100 Days of Hope and Encouragement*. She's an author, speaker, podcast host, film producer and caregiving advocate. She's also the founder and executive director of The Lucas Project, which is a nonprofit organization that provides recognition, resources, and respite for special needs caregivers.

She and her husband, Ryan, live in Michigan. They have a blended family with eight children, four of hers, three of his, and one of theirs. And that also includes their son, Lucas, the aforementioned of the Lucas Project, who has some rather profound disabilities. And Jess, welcome back to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. It's good to continue this conversation with you today.

Jessica Ronne: Yeah, I'm excited to be here.

Roger Marsh: For those who did not hear part one of the program, of course, it's up at drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. Jess is the proud mom of four kids with her first husband, Jason, who fought a valiant battle with cancer, and then she found herself at the age of 33 as a widow with four young children, including Lucas, who was born with some pretty profound disabilities. She met Ryan online. She blogged, he blogged, he had just lost his wife to brain cancer and they had three children in that marriage. They fell in love, and he swept her off her feet and they've had a whirlwind romance that's lasted now 14 plus years and it's been nothing but lollipops and raindrops, and all sorts of things all the way through with a couple of bumps in the road I'm sure, as Jess mentioned in our previous conversation.

One of the things that I am just taken with and I want you to circle back around before we launch into the Lucas Project and this great devotional that you've written, is the fact that you and Ryan, when you did get married, found yourself blending a family of seven children that were ages seven and under. That in and of itself sounds like it should be a, "Yours, Mine and Ours, Too," movie or something like that. But you said initially it was great 'cause the kids were all little and they liked having all these additional siblings. Where were some of the fractures, the rips, the tears that you guys ran into initially? Was it kind of smooth sailing for the first year or two, or did it start to get a little bumpy early on?

Jessica Ronne: You know, in terms of the kids, we've had typical, you know, teenage drama or whatever, but we've never, thankfully, had like massive rifts in terms of like, “You're not my mom or you're not my dad” Or bio siblings going against bio siblings or anything like that. They've all just really meshed beautifully as a family. Our biggest challenge was always Lucas, as Lucas continued to age. And I think our kids even recognized how much time and energy that we had to put into him and they didn't wanna rock the boat to cause us more stress.

And I think we, we look back on that now in hindsight and they, as long as they could help out by not causing too many rifts. But we have kids that there's some grief that they need to address at some point and that's going to be their story and their path on, on how that gets addressed. But yeah, really, it's been remarkably quite smooth in terms of the kids all blending.

Roger Marsh: Yeah, you and Ryan sound like you're both candidates for sainthood in terms of dealing with the fact that you've had to go through what you've had to go through. And he being that bonus dad, I like the shirt that I saw not too long ago that said, “Stepdads are called stepdads because they stepped up” … when someone needed a father and a family. And for him to take on your four, including one with some rather profound challenges.

You write about in your book, *Caregiving with Grit and Grace*, that there's a point where every family that is providing caregiving for a family member, whether it's a parent to a child or spouses to each other or adult children to their parents, where you have to kind of come to terms with the fact that this is what you're really dealing with. And you wrote about in the book, you know, while you and had that moment with Lucas, you know, that one point where you said, “Okay, wait a minute, I have to realize this isn't going to change.” You know, this is his lot.

Share if you would, you know, what it was like for you to have that moment. Because beforehand, like you said in our first conversation, it wasn't that you were necessarily in denial, you know, like there's no problem here. It was rather you're just trying to make it through the week, make it through the month, and you're not really thinking about it until that there's that one point where you realize, “Oh my goodness, this is gonna be lifelong for him, and I've gotta make some adjustments.” Talk about that, if you would.

Jessica Ronne: Yeah, it wasn't denial. It was, I think, lack of diagnoses, really. Like, we were just sent home with “special needs.” We're not real sure how this is gonna turn out. And as Lucas's mom, I was going to press towards a goal of like the best scenario possible. And that's just kind of what I kept in my mind until we made that move to rural Tennessee, and Lucas started to go through puberty and he became very aggressive.

He does have level three autism, intellectual disability along with numerous other diagnoses. He needs assistance, maneuvering. He's incontinent, primarily nonverbal. So just needs assistance in every aspect of life, really. And as he began to go through puberty, he became very aggressive. He began to have a lot of behavioral challenges.

And, you know, when he was little, he was adorable. And we could still find people to help out or babysit. You know, a 6-year-old in diapers isn't really that big of a deal. A 16-year-old in diapers who's now screaming and lashing out and being aggressive, nobody wants to step into that situation. And so, life just became very, very isolated and especially out in rural Tennessee where there weren't any resources or programs. And that's when it really hit me, “Oh, this isn't going to get better.” And in fact, it's only, it's only going to get more challenging as he ages and as I age. And now I'm watching him even hurt his younger siblings and they're becoming frightened of going near him because he's reaching out and grabbing them or grabbing their hair.

And that's when there was no longer any semblance of denial, but total acceptance of this is a lifelong gig and it's really, really hard and what does that look like for us moving forward?

Roger Marsh: It must have been a real eye-opener for you. I was reading a blog by a Christian songwriter musician. I won't mention his name, but he and his wife adopted a daughter from China and she has, I think it's Angelman syndrome or something like that. And he, just the other day, was kind of droning on in his blog about getting some things off his chest that he never really addressed. She's 22 now and she can be emotionally unstable. She can be physically violent, you know, whatever she's a big girl, you know, that type of thing. And she's always going to be in their care. You know, one of them has to always be with her the whole time. And I think a lot of people don't, you know, understand what you were going through.

It's like, here's Lucas and he's growing through puberty and he's growing. And yet he's still processing life like maybe a toddler would. And so, he's just got more body, you know, more strength. And so, yeah, he isn't going to be able to control that. What was the conversation that you and Ryan had, you know, when you're in this moment and saying, “Oh my goodness, we've got to, we have to move into the next season here because we're realizing this is the season we're really in and it's going to progress from there.”

Jessica Ronne: It was a really slow process. When we lived in Tennessee, we started investigating what potential group homes would look like or future residential options. Nowhere near ready to take that leap, but just, you know, taking the tours, asking the questions, and we discovered that most of the options were really, really expensive. The one option that we were really wanting for him, I believe was around $180,000 dollars a year for that type of private care. And then the group homes we toured, we weren't that thrilled with. It just didn't seem like enough direct staff for the amount of residents that were in the home.

And so, I really processed for years. And then we eventually moved back to Michigan, because we decided that we really needed to be in a state that provided those resources and support for families like ours and Tennessee just was not going to be that state. And we certainly weren't going to find it in rural Tennessee. And once back here, I think Lucas was 17 or 18, I had a realtor just set up a search and just send me houses that I could look at because I was kind of curious about maybe starting our own group home. And so, every day I would just kind of look at these.

And then one day an option came up and it was a sprawling ranch in need of total renovation. And the unique thing about this property was it was a sprawling ranch and an old farmhouse, and the township wouldn't allow it to be split. And so, I went and looked at it and I was like this is it this is going to be Lucas's future home; it was 10 minutes away from our home. And I called Ryan and I said "You know we should look at this, this could really be a possibility." Completely convinced that he would be the dream killer because I'm usually the "let's jump in and do it" and he's the more logical, "well honey." And he walked through and he was like you're right; this is Luke's future home.

And so, we, we set about to purchase it and God even solidified it even more in our, our spirits because I called my realtor and I said, "I'd really like to close on Lucas's birthday, which is August 12. Could you let the seller know that?" And she called the seller and told the seller and the seller started to cry. And she said, "My birthday is August 12."

Roger Marsh: Oh, wow.

Jessica Ronne: And it was just like God's stamp of approval. "Yes, this is the way you should go." And so, we purchased this home. Ryan spent the next year renovating it. And about a year and a half ago, Lucas and three other disabled individuals moved into what we've affectionately called Hope Farm, which is now a 24/7 group home for these four kids.

Roger Marsh: And this is a group home as a residential facility as opposed to, say, respite care, which would be, you know, for a day here, a day there, you know, sometime.

Talk about the differences between the two, because I know you talk about the importance of respite care and how just those who are providing care like you and Ryan are doing; you need a break every now and again. You just need someone, you need to know that your child or adult, who has the special needs, is getting the care that they need so you can get a break just to take a little time away. But that they're gonna be in good care, so you don't spend the whole time away wondering if things are gonna be all right with them.

Jessica Ronne: Yeah, and that's hard to find when you have an individual with numerous severe disabilities. Um, like I was saying, you know, people don't really want to step in and change a 16-year-old's diaper or deal with that aggression and behavioral issues.

But when we were in rural Tennessee, Ryan started having a bunch of health problems and he was having panic attacks that resembled heart attacks and ending up in ER. He lost a lot of weight. They want to do a PET scan to rule out cancer and come to find out it was all just due to the stress of our life and not ever, we never had a break. And so that's when I decided to start the Lucas Project because I thought if we're this desperate for a break, other special needs families must also need a break. And we partnered with a local school district, and they let us use their facility once a month for a five-hour chunk of time where families could drop off their children and they could just go take a break. And it was run by volunteers and staff, and very successfully run until COVID. And then it kind of all got shutdown.

And we are actually launching a similar program here in Michigan now that will begin in July. And we're hoping that we can create a model for this concept where other churches and communities throughout the nation can then take it and offer it within their community for their families.

But yeah, if you don't get that break, that stress lives in your body. And by the time Lucas ended up moving into Hope Farm, my body was wrecked in so much pain, I could hardly move. It was like that stress had just built up for years and years and years, and I lived 19 years in that survival mode, and I just kept fighting and recognizing that, you know, we either fight, flee or freeze. And I just kept fighting and it just piled up in my body and it's been at work now for, you know, the past year and a half to really release a lot of that trauma and get back to feeling good in my own skin.

Roger Marsh: Well, I love that. Jess Ronne is with us today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. She's the executive director of the Lucas Project and we've got a link for that information up at drjamesdobson.org, in addition to this *100 Days of Hope and Encouragement* book that she has written. It's *Caregiving with Grit and Grace*.

It's a devotional that's divided into four different sections: winter, spring, summer, and fall. Twenty-five for each. And I love the way you laid this out. Jess, can you give us just kind of a 35,000-foot overview of those four stages? Because I'm sure, there's someone hearing us for the first time who says, “We have a child who has special needs or maybe there's an adult that we're providing care before, and we've never heard this before.” This is, this is all new to me. And please walk us through that if you would.

Jessica Ronne: Sure. Yeah. That's just kind of how it's worked in my own caregiving journeys. It's… winter represents that cold hard truth of that diagnosis that you're just given and your whole world feels like cold and unmanageable and turned upside down. And “how are we going to navigate this?” And it's just working through and processing all of those emotions. And then walking into spring, you do kind of get into your groove of this new normal. You're doing the therapies. You're checking out the resources. You have this new language that's becoming familiar to you. And you're, you're just getting into like this new way of life. And it's okay. You're starting to see the sun again.

And then summer represents, you know, when the heat intensifies. And for us, that was as Lucas was going through puberty, it became very, very challenging or when Jason's cancer returned after he was declared cancer-free. And it feels hot and heavy and unbearable again. And then settling into fall is really an acceptance of what is and what is not and what your next steps may be. And for us, that was Jason gaining his healing in Heaven. And Lucas, creating this group home for him. It's taking those next steps into whatever that future looks like with or without your loved one.

And so, yeah, like I mentioned earlier, this is just kind of the way my brain has always processed all of these caregiving roles that I've been in and it helps me to make sense of whatever season I'm currently in to recognize that there is another season coming on the horizon.

Roger Marsh: It's so encouraging. And if you are in a situation like this or maybe you know someone in your family or extended family that has just been, this might be a fresh diagnosis for them or maybe this has been something they've been living with for a while. And as Jess mentioned, you're either in fight, freeze or flight mode, you know, when it comes to how you process this. This is an outstanding resource, and we highly recommend it here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. Jess, I mentioned in sharing your bio that you're also a filmmaker as well. Talk about that. What was that process like for you?

Jessica Ronne: That came after I started the Lucas Project and our mission statement is to provide recognition, resources, and respite for special needs families. And the respite part, we were operating out of the school, the resources we had a support group and a database and it was the recognition portion that I was really kind of stumped on. Like, how could we make society aware of what families like ours go through because oftentimes we are isolated and we're just holed up at home because the world is not accessible or accommodating for our children, especially as they age.

And I thought we just we need to create a documentary and kind of peel back that curtain and show the world what, what our lives look like. And so, I jumped on Facebook, and again this is just how I sort of navigate through the world. I threw the idea out there and just said “Hey I have this great idea. I think we should create a documentary. If there's any filmmaker out there that would want to meet with me. I'd love to discuss this further.”

And the next day a filmmaker from Nashville reached out and we had a lunch date, and they loved the idea and they followed our family around for four years. And we created “Unseen: How We're Failing Parent Caregivers & Why It Matters.” It landed on PBS last fall and was just airing on ABC this February and March, and it has really just opened up those conversations about not only these families but also about caregiving in general and how we really need to prioritize caregiving and those who need care.

Roger Marsh: You know it's amazing when you think about the number of people who go through this and I think about… my parents are both living in an assisted living facility right now. But one of the guys who is a resident there where they live, he cared for his wife, she had Parkinson's, and he cared for her for 17 years before she passed away. And as soon as she passed away, his kids sat down with him and said, "Dad, we want you to go here." He said, "Well, I'm fine. I'm healthy." And they said, "Yeah, but you need someone to take care of you because you have been taking care of mom for such a long time." He had both retired engineer and a pastor. And when I met him, he was kind of a local pastor in the nursing home.

But it was great to see him getting care because he had been pouring out so much of himself and not really thinking about it, like you were talking about with Lucas, those first 10, 12, 13 years, you were just, “we got to go, we got to do this.” And it hadn't really hit the winter part for him yet, until his wife passed away actually, that he went through all the seasons all at once. It's so important that people who are giving care get care for what they're doing and every care story is different, isn't it?

Jessica Ronne: It is. And you know, I think caregivers are really good at having sort of this “murder caregiver syndrome” where, “nobody can do the job like I can do it. I'm just fine. I don't need help.” And it's like, you do need help. You're no good to anybody if you die because you don't take care of yourself or you become ill.

And so, recognizing, you know, when somebody offers that help to take them up on it or somebody offers the meal or the yard work, to allow them to bless you in that way, because you will be better in the long haul for giving yourself those breaks because, I keep harping on it, but the body keeps a score.

And after Lucas moved, my body was in such intense pain; I could hardly roll out of bed in the morning without being just in an immense amount of pain. And as I've worked through that, my pain is almost completely diminished 14 months later, but it just lived in that survival mode for so long. And I think had I taken better care of myself, I wouldn't have been in so much pain.

Roger Marsh: But did you know to? I mean, was there anyone who could speak into your world and say, “Hey, Jess, you know what? You need the night off, you need to go to the gym, you need to go laugh with some girlfriends or do something like that. We've got this.”

Because it seems like the way you described it, and I heard you when you said, “Look when my husband had a brain tumor and was dying of cancer, the church was right there, we never missed a meal. But when I'm trying to change a 16-year-old's underwear, no one has any time for that because that's a whole different level.”

Were there people who were there and you were not paying attention to it or were there's just, there was no one there and you didn't know how to reach out?

Jessica Ronne: There was no one there in those situations. I would have gladly taken them up on it, but nobody offers in those situations. It's just too uncomfortable. I think there's a fear of “Will I have to take care of that child? I'm not familiar with the diagnosis.” And there's just a lot of what if scenarios that I don't think a lot of people are comfortable with. And I was very, very intentional to the best of my ability about taking care of myself. Really, I walked daily, I stretched, I did all the things. Acupuncture, massage, I ate healthy. I'm as intentional as I could possibly be during that season, but they're just, we're not people willing to step in and provide that care for the most part.

Roger Marsh: Interesting. Well, I appreciate the tough love that you are giving our listeners with not only your ministry, the Lucas Project, with the good news about the Hope Farm, excuse me, I wanted to say, for the Lucas Project.

And then the Unseen film and then this brand-new devotional, *Caregiving with Grit and Grace: 100 Days of Hope and Encouragement* by Jessica Ronne, and we've got the link for all of that information up at drjamesdobson.org.

What's the best website where we can find you, that one stop shop, if you will. Let's give a little shout out to that if we will.

Jessica Ronne: jessronne.com.

Roger Marsh: Okay. jessronne.com, R -O -N -N -E.

Jess, thank you so much for the work that you have done. I’m in awe of the work that you and Jason did, and then out of the work that you and Ryan are doing. And I pray God's richest blessings on your family. And one of these days, if I'm in Ludington visiting a granddaughter, we're gonna swing on by the farm in Holland, and find out more about what you guys are doing. 'Cause it sounds like just an outstanding ministry and I know a lot of our listeners have been blessed by this conversation today. Jess Ronne, thank you so much for being with us today here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Jessica Ronne: Yeah, thank you.

Roger Marsh: Sometimes the greatest act of faith aren't the big, dramatic moments. They're actually the small daily choices we make to keep going when life feels impossibly hard. You've been listening to a special edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, and my conversation with today's special guest, Jessica Ronne. If Jess' story touched your heart like it did mine, remember you can catch both parts of this conversation at drajmesdobson.org/familytalk. And of course, I encourage you to check out her devotional book *Caregiving with Grit and Grace,* along with information about The Lucas Project. We'll have all that information and more up at drjamesdobson.org.

Well, families like the Ronnes remind us why the work we do here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute matters so deeply. Each day, we are privileged to bring you conversations that strengthen marriages, that equip parents and offer hope to families facing extraordinary challenges and your support allows us to be that steady voice of biblical wisdom and practical help when families need it most. Right now, through the month of June, we have an extraordinary opportunity before us. Several generous ministry partners have come together to offer a special matching grant which matches every dollar you donate and doubles it. Whether you are able to donate $50, $100, $500, or even $1000, please know that you gift will have twice the impact in helping families find strength for their journey. Now you can make a secure donation online at drjamesdobson.org. You can also give a gift over the phone when you call 877-732-6825. And as our way of thanking you for your support and your donation of any amount, we'd love to send you a copy of Dr. Dobson's book, *Your Legacy*, along with the companion DVD. In a culture that is constantly pulling at our children and pulling them away from faith and morals, this timeless resource will help you build a spiritual foundation that will last for generations. It's filled with practical strategies, real-life testimonies and the wisdom Dr. Dobson has gathered from decades of ministry to families just like yours. Now you can request your copy online at drjamesdobson.org. You can also call us at 877-732-6825. And if you'd prefer, you can send your request through the U.S. Postal Service. Send your donation and your request for Dr. Dobson's book *Your Legacy*, when you write to The Dr. James Dobson Family Institute or Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. P.O. Box 39000 Colorado Springs, Colorado, the zip code, 80949.

Well, Independence Day is just around the corner and to help celebrate, I'd love to invite you and I will, to sign up for our special email series called "Faith of Our Founders." By reading this series, you'll discover the remarkable faith stories of the men and women who shaped our nation, and you'll be reminded that the freedom we celebrate on July 4th is rooted in a deep dependance on God. It's a perfect way to prepare your heart before this patriotic season and to receive your copy, you can sign-up for the "Faith of Our Founders" email series when you visit drjamesdobson.org and sign up today.

Well I'm Roger Marsh and on behalf of Dr. James Dobson and all of us here at the JDFI, we are so grateful that you have chosen to spend time with us today.

Be sure to join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk, the voice you trust, for the family you love.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: Hi, everyone, Roger Marsh here for Family Talk. Do you like Dr. Dobson's Family Talk? Well go to our Facebook page and tell us. You can sign up at drjamesdobson.org and every day, you'll see threads on issues that matter most to your family. See what's playing on a broadcast, dialogue on topics of faith and family, and find encouragement for daily life. That and much more at the Family Talk Facebook page. So join to conversation at facebook.com/Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.