Rarely have I been asked to share my story and our journey. A private, reserved person to the core, I feel both humbled and honored to share with you the impact the Early Learning Center at Shepherd has made in our lives. Devastating losses clearly close doors on the life you once knew; however, God uses tragedy to open incredible windows by bringing amazing people into your life, often when you least expect it. This is exactly how my twins were brought to the preschool at Shepherd, how my oldest son was brought to the day school at Shepherd, and how our family was blessed with a new church family at Shepherd.

Our story begins with overwhelming loss, yet ends with extraordinary blessings. April 18, 2013, began as any other morning did around our household: taking care of three kids under age 6 and all the chaos that comes with that. My husband's inability to catch his breath this morning resulted in his passing away several hours later at our local hospital. Rev. Stork and I were by his bedside. I remember sitting in this room for what seemed an eternity with Rev. Stork, as both of us were in complete shock that Pastor Ryan was here yesterday and gone today. How do I tell my children? What kind of life will we have? Where will we move? Am I imagining what just happened? What will happen to his church? Rev. Stork helped me deliver this news to my children and to the congregation. God placed this incredible person and family friend in this room with me on this day to help me tackle the immediate tasks that honestly would have left me paralyzed.

The kids and I vacated the parsonage, located a house to move into in the Denver area, and moved into the new house on June 18 of that summer, to be near grandparents. My next overwhelming task was to find a kindergarten for my oldest and a preschool for my twins for the uopcoming school year. My husband and I always dreamed of having our children receive a Christian education for preschool-12th grade. I was deeply committed to giving this gift to our children, yet I had no idea how a single mom with limited means could accomplish this. Even attending church was emotionally difficult for my children after their dad passed away, and it often resulted in meltdowns on most Sunday mornings. God led us to attend Holy Cross in Highlands Ranch one Sunday in June 2013, as my husband's good friend was a pastor there. We spoke with the pastor after services, and he connected my family with the principal and senior pastor at Shepherd of the Hillls. Pastor Skelton mentioned how amazing the people are at Shepherd within the church, preschool, and dayschool.

The kids and I toured the school several days later. My children received financial aid and scolarships to attend the preschool and day school. I will never forget what Pastor Stolenow said to me during the tour that day: "Let us help you raise your kids." This is exactly what Shepherd has done for my family. The twins thrived in the preschool! They heard about Jesus every day, learning about God's grace and forgiveness from teachers who were nothing short of amazing. The teachers at Shepherd's ELC even helped me potty train my twins that year. My oldest loved

the day school and maintains friendships with many of his peers and teachers even to this very day. My oldest son just graduated from Lutheran High School this past May.

The Early Learning Center at Shepherd blessed my twins with so much; as a parent, it is hard to paint this picture for you. The teachers welcomed my twins not in spite of their tragedy, but because of it. The teachers flooded my children with prayers, love, mentoring, and guidance, not because it was their "job," but because the Holy Spirit led them to. My twins learned kindness, how to serve, and most importantly that Jesus never ever leaves you, no matter what obstacles we face in life. The Early Learning Center and day school quickly transformed and grew into not only our school, but our church. Our church quickly became our family.

I have volunteered in one capacity or another at Shepherd now for 13 years, and I have worked at Shepherd for 8.5 years. My children have not only been event participants but have been volunteers for years at VBS, Fall Family Festival, Chili cookoffs, Easter Breakfast, and servant events. Volunteering for my children has led to each one of them working here to make a difference in one small way or another.

We are one of many families who have been impacted by the ELC at Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church. Our ELC is not just a preschool. It is a community of believers who are deeply committed to spreading the gospel and love of Christ to each and every child. This message radiates to their families, which in turn grows the body of Christ. The ELC fosters lasting friendships and cultivates family.

I encourage each one of you to visit the ELC teachers occasionally, or attend a preschool event from time to time. This mission at our doorstep could not have been more impactful to my family, and it continues to do so for countless others each and every day. Thank you, Shepherd and ELC! My family could not be more blessed!

Here's to another 25 years of making a difference and spreading the Gospel!

Lauren Ryan,

Bookkeeper at Shepherd of the Hills