For the Smith family, giving people their space, including Doug (who today is served by LADD), was a deeply held value. This is not a family that hovers. Thank goodness. Or that night, the restaurant patrons would have never known what it was to be serenaded by none other than nine year old Doug Smith to, “Rain Drops Keep Falling on my Head.” Susan recalls, “He just went and talked to the piano player and then got on stage and started singing.”

And so it is for the Smith family, who frankly, struggle to describe any difference between their brother Doug and themselves. “Doug could do things we couldn’t do,” says Dave, the oldest of the four. “He could water ski on a single ski. He is one of us.” Brian, Doug’s younger brother thinks back, “we really didn’t notice a difference.

When we were 16, we all got our driver’s license. When Doug was 16, he couldn’t get a driver’s license, but he was allowed to go on his moped eight or ten miles. I don’t think I would let my kids do that today. But, like we say, there was no real difference.” The siblings did note that “kids can be cruel,” and there was a sense of feeling protective of Doug growing up, but not to any great extent. “When we were around, “Brian said, “nobody messed with him so we really did not worry much about it.”

Fast forward three decades, the Smith Family remains very close. Dave is the oldest, followed by Doug, Brian and Susan. The Smith parents live in South Carolina, Brian lives in Florida and Susan, Dave and Doug are in Cincinnati. What is unique about their story is not simply the bond they all share, but the way they all support each other. Dave and Susan came together to provide joint guardianship for their brother Doug and brought him to Cincinnati from Columbus.

For many siblings growing up with a special needs brother or sister, there is a fear that once their parents age, they will be saddled with an “obligation” to care for their sibling. “What ifs” run through their head. Resentment can build, if one child is perceived as getting more attention growing up. What is remarkable about the Smith family is that their entire approach to their relationship with each other completely rejects this narrative. “We are a team,” says Susan. And by team, she includes Doug. It would not occur to her not to. Empathy pervades this family. Dave, the oldest remarks, “What I really think about is how Doug feels. Doug doesn’t like being reliant on other people. He is fiercely independent. It has got to be hard to live in a more structured environment. I often wonder what he is feeling.” Doug struggles with communication, but his personality is pervasive.

“Doug is deeply caring and sensitive,” echoes all the siblings. He is a foundation for a family that remains close, despite hundreds of miles separating them. “Doug cares a lot about holidays and birthdays. He makes sure we are all connected on these days.” Recently, Brian and Doug skyped. At the end of the call Doug teared up. “He is just cares so much for all of us.” The other point of note for this family is their personal sense of family.
of empowerment. This is reflected in two ways. “People in our circumstance, need to know they are not alone. There are people that want to help and it is important to use them,” advises Susan. Susan also feels like her life is her own. “I was recently invited to an OSU game (for those who are not Buckeye fans, this is a BIG deal). I had already made plans with Doug so I said I couldn’t go. The response to me was that I was building up ‘brownie points.’ This bothered me a bit. Doug is family. He is not an obligation. I get more from my relationship with Doug than he probably gets.” This family doesn’t spend time on “what ifs” or imagining things were different.

One can only surmise that the Smith parents has something to do with this. When asked what they did right, the Smith children thought and Dave commented, “it is hard to answer that, we don’t know anything different. Our parents treated us all the same.” Looking back, Susan does see that her parents were strong advocates.” Doug had every service available. “I didn’t realize how much advocating they did.” And certainly, their move to South Carolina was a powerful act of faith in Doug—which they have clearly shown from the beginning.

The missing voice in all of this is Doug’s. Doug does yearn for greater independence, but feels very happy at LADD. His communication style is concise and very positive. “Yes,” “I don’t remember,” and “Yeah that’s right,” are frequently his answers. For Doug, his communication is in his action and quite frankly his enormous smile that greets just about everyone any time of day. For Doug’s part, he responds very positively when his family, all generations are discussed. When asked about the funny stories his siblings shared he says with a big smile, “That was a long time ago.” Doug has a lot of reason, it seems from observation, to live in the present. He maintains very meaningful relationships in his life. What does Susan mean to you? He lights up. Then responds, “She’s pretty good.” And what does Dave mean to you? “He’s alright,” before laughing. Spoken like a true brother. Humor aside, Doug, from his actions thinks often of his siblings and according to staff and family relishes putting them first. He has ample opportunity as the Smith siblings all make a point of getting together, sometimes multiple times a week. “Doug is always thinking about us,” says Susan. “If it is raining and I don’t have an umbrella, he worries.” Sometimes his caring presents challenges. Jokes Susan, “Doug made all our beds growing up. Every morning. He is very orderly. Now as an adult, I don’t know how to make my bed.” (If only we could all have such an excuse).

And for Brian’s part, living in Florida does present its challenges. But, he says, “For me, I really trust that Dave and Susan have Doug’s best interests at heart.” When something is needed an email goes out to the family to rally support. But, that does not happen too often. Instead, most of the time is spent enjoying each other’s company. They credit Doug for passing on important values to their children. “My children know that we are all different in our own way,” says Brian. Dave agrees. “I am a better person because of Doug,” and he says his children have been impacted as a result.

Doug, as a nine year old, got a standing ovation for a rendition of “Rain Drops Keep Falling on My Head.” And, it appears the celebration continues, for siblings who support and accept each other for who they are.