

AJC article by Tom Rawlings

Foster Parents Need Support

By Tom Rawlings

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In my small hometown this Christmas, my friends Joe and Randy Thomas will open presents with their new son, Johnny. Now, having a new child for Christmas is usually a commonplace event, but in this case it's an extraordinary one.

Johnny is 12 years old. He can't see, is hearing-impaired and autistic. And he has lived in Tennille with Joe and Randy, his former foster parents, for eight years now. But this past summer, in what amounts to an "open" adoption, Joe and Randy made him their own.

The Thomas's never expected to be foster parents. When Johnny joined them, they were empty nesters, their children off at college. Randy was Johnny's special ed kindergarten teacher, and she offered to give him a "temporary" place to stay when his parents could not meet his needs and DFCS became involved. That was back in 2000, and Johnny has been with them ever since.

I've followed their relationship with Johnny over the years, as I was both their juvenile court judge and a part of their community. I know the thousands of hours Randy spent driving Johnny from Tennille to Macon and Augusta for therapy. When Johnny first came to the Thomas's, the Georgia Academy for the Blind said he was too severely disabled to enroll. Thanks to Joe and Randy's hard work, he is now a student there is learning Braille and is using some words. "He has a great sense of humor," Randy says. The Thomas's have also worked hard to maintain a relationship between Johnny and his father, stepmother and siblings.

Community support has been vital to the Thomas's' ability to take on the challenge of a child so disabled. Thanks to the work of therapists, Johnny learned to pedal a tricycle, but the sort of specially-equipped tricycle he would need cost \$4,500. Almost every civic club in rural Washington County got together and raised the funds, and now Johnny pedals the two miles to the Tennille post office and back, with Randy navigating from behind. Johnny is the only child at Tennille's small United Methodist Church, so all the adults have "adopted" him.

That community support "validates what I'm doing — to know that people are supporting us, and that people think what we're doing is the right thing," Randy says.

While many foster parents receive the kind of community support the Thomas's have experienced, others don't.

"There's a stigma," Randy admits. "Most people think foster parents are out there for the money, and that's ridiculous." While the state provides limited "per diem" payments to foster parents and reimburses some expenses for clothing and other necessities, many foster parents can't afford to take in a child without help.

Rachel Ewald knows that problem well. A foster parent herself for the past 20 years, she began almost a decade ago putting together a resource bank for foster families that has now grown into the Foster Parent Support Foundation. Each year, from a 7,000-square-foot warehouse in Roswell, Ewald and her volunteers receive, sort and give to foster families across the state almost \$2 million worth of donated clothing, toys, cribs, strollers and high chairs. Last year, the foundation served over 4,000 foster children, and Ewald is now raising funds to expand into a 25,000-square-foot facility. Foster parents receive just what they need for the particular children in their home. “People want to build trust that if they give you something it will be used well,” she says. The nonprofit venture has succeeded in part because it’s private, Ewald says. She has 35 volunteer staff who supervise an additional 50 to 150 volunteers per week. Last week, ninth-grade students from Pinecrest Academy in Cumming were helping fill foster parent requests. “When you send money to the government, you can’t get involved,” says Ewald.

Other state and local organizations are there to support foster parents. Some local faith communities hold mother’s day out programs for foster parents or help with transportation, says Sharon Carlson, executive director of the Adoptive and Foster Parent Association of Georgia. With assistance from state and private contributors, AFPAG provides support and training for Georgia’s foster parents.

The state is boosting efforts to support foster parents as well. With the backing of first lady Mary Perdue, a private-public partnership called EMBRACE has been working to improve our state’s ability to retain and support foster parents. Foster parent liaisons are helping community businesses find ways to reach out to children in need and the families that volunteer to care for them.

With the help of Embrace's foster parent liaisons, foster families and community services connect in ways that benefit children. There have been swim nights at YMCA, skating at local rinks, vouchers for clothing at the local Goodwill, picnics in the park and other celebration activities, all coordinated by the foster parent liaison and sponsored by their local communities. The project has demonstrated success in pilot areas and is likely to become a permanent part of the way our state assists foster parents.

For many years, Joe and Randy were content to foster Johnny. They knew that if they adopted him, it would be their biological children who would one day have to assist with meeting his needs. But both her sons, who now have families of their own, reminded her that Johnny was already part of their family and would always be part of their family. So they made the decision to adopt and, this holiday season, the entire Thomas family will gather around the Christmas tree. And Johnny will have an overnight visit with his biological family, too.

In the Christian tradition, Mary and Joseph were told they’d be raising a child who was intended not to be theirs alone but to be the brother of and a blessing to all people. Like good foster and adoptive parents, they willingly accepted this child into their home. And the rest of the community — in the form of shepherds from the fields and wise men from the East bearing gifts — came and supported them.

During this holiday season, do what you can to support those courageous and compassionate families who, like Joe and Randy Thomas, have answered the call to raise the children who will one day be a blessing to us all.

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