

Hope for Yordi

Joliet family raising money to adopt girl from Ethiopia

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By Denise Baran-Unland Special to the Herald News

With seven biological children of their own and room in their hearts for one more, the Twietmeyer family of Joliet decided to adopt their next child -- a special needs girl from India.

But the Oak Park adoption agency they contacted suggested that they adopt an HIV-positive orphan from Ethiopia and the child's two siblings, which the Twietmeyers did in July 2007.

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The frustrations they encountered during the adoption process led them to found Project H.O.P.E.F.U.L (Helping Orphans and Parents Eliminate Further Unnecessary Loss...of time, dignity and Life) to assist families in adopting HIV-positive children. The family also worked with a Washington, D.C., lawyer to expedite the entry of adopted HIV positive children into the United States.

The Twietmeyers will soon finalize the adoption of another HIV-positive child, Yordi, who they say weighs only 39 pounds at age 10.

Quest to get Yordi

To raise the \$8,000 they still need for travel expenses to and from Ethiopia to get her, Carolyn Twietmeyer said the family will host a garage sale and raffle of a hand-dyed batik quilt at their home May 29-31.

A family friend and her internationally adopted children created the quilt for the Twietmeyers' raffle. Any money raised above and beyond their travel expenses will be given to another Project H.O.P.E.F.U.L. family.

Yordi herself will draw the winning name once she is safely home.

"We're praying, God willing, to get her the end of June or the first part of July," Carolyn said. "But it's very expensive to do."

The family recently received a \$4,000 grant from Shaohannah's Hope, an organization founded by contemporary Christian music artist Steven Curtis Chapman and his wife, Mary Beth, in 2003 to financially assist those who adopt orphans. The Twietmeyers were also interviewed onstage about their family and their ministry on May 16 when Chapman performed at Parkview Church in Orland Park, Carolyn said.

"Our situation is very uncharted territory," Carolyn said. "The first time we adopted, we got a second mortgage on our house and a few small grants. We kept telling each other that God would provide the money." They family needed \$20,000 total, she added.

"While we were in Ethiopia, one week into our trip I received a call from my mother. An anonymous donor had funded the entire cost of the adoption. That was a huge confirmation to us that we were doing the right thing."

Adoption effects

Adoption has been as much a blessing to the Twietmeyers as it has been to the children. Carolyn's husband, Kiel, a commercial painter, now dreams about building orphanages for HIV-infected youth. Two of the children want to become social workers to ensure every orphan has a home.

Carolyn can hardly believe that they once wanted no part of it.

"We were like, 'No way.' All the initial panic of the 1980s about HIV crossed my mind and I couldn't even imagine it," Carolyn said. "But when I got off the phone I thought, 'I really think I need to research this before I squelch it.' I learned that HIV has never been passed in a family setting, that it is a chronic and manageable disease and that many of these kids grow up, marry and have families and never pass on the disease."

Facing the uncertainties of life was something the family already experienced long before Carolyn and Kiel decided to adopt.

"Because of what we had already endured with our boys, it didn't seem like something we couldn't handle as a family. We had been told the boys were born brain damaged, but as time went on, neither child exhibited any outstanding issues.

"Because our birth children were spared a grim future, we felt we needed to do something a little less conventional."

Immigration law troubles

Through the adoption agency, Carolyn saw a photograph of three siblings, then ages 8 months through 8 years, and immediately fell in love them. She knew that if her family didn't give them a home, the odds of them being adopted together were slim because one of the kids was infected with HIV.

Deciding to adopt them was the easy part. Doing it, the Twietmeyers soon learned, was a bit harder. Not only was it very expensive, immigration laws would not allow foreign nationals into the United States if they had a communicable disease, although there were certain exceptions. One of those exceptions was for adopted children, but the wait to receive that waiver was a lengthy one.

"We learned that an immigration law would require that our HIV positive child stay in Ethiopia for several months after he was adopted," Carolyn said. "Then we found an incredible attorney in Washington, D.C., and she lobbied to bring this issue to the forefront."

J. McLane Layton, former legislative counsel to U.S. Sen. Don Nickles of Oklahoma, adoptive parent and founder and president of Equality for Adopted Children (www.equalityforadoptedchildren.org) already had written and developed the Child Citizenship Act of 2000. This act granted automatic U.S. citizenship to foreign adopted children.

This was not previously the case in 1995, when Layton and her husband were adopting three siblings from an overseas orphanage. Since then, Layton has labored intensively for all internationally adopted children to have the same rights as children born to U.S. citizens.

So when the Twietmeyers contacted her and asked if she could help expedite the process of bringing their HIV positive adopted child home, Layton agreed to try.

Not only did Layton not know of any waiver for an adopted child ever being denied, she thought it ludicrous for a child with a compromised immune system to sit waiting in an orphanage when obtaining the right signature was a several minute process. She worked with Citizens and Immigration Services to prioritize these waivers, which was accomplished. The processing time for these waivers is now reduced from three months to a week.

"One of the reasons that it took three months is that it would sit in a mail room

before being delivered to the right person's desk," Layton said. "But that person would have a lot of other duties and responsibilities, too, so that waiver could sit in a 'to do' stack for weeks. Then if she went on vacation for one to two weeks--as she had the right to do--the requests coming in weren't being processed."

Yordi's story

It was while the Twietmeyers were in Ethiopia adopting their three children that Carolyn first met Yordi at an orphanage there. Yordi's parents had died of AIDS and her 15-year-old brother cared for the siblings. Carolyn fell in love with Yordi's sweet nature and knew right away that she wanted to give Yordi a home, too.

"The children were basically just trying to survive," Carolyn said. "They were eating out of trash containers until the police had brought them into the orphanage, and she tested positive for HIV. Being separated from her siblings and living in an HIV positive orphanage was more than she could take at that point."

An uncle, Carolyn added, has already adopted Yordi's siblings.

Another HIV child at the same orphanage recently died from measles complications, which makes Carolyn yearn all the more for Yordi to be home.

"It is frightening to have Yordi there and not know if she too is sick or if she already had the measles, to understand that her body can't handle catching anything else and to relinquish all control to the Lord," Carolyn said. "It is so humbling and heartbreaking all at once."