

Rock-a-bye baby: Quad-City couple fosters infants

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Andrew Link/Quad-City Times Carmen Fish talks with her husband, Mark, as they wait for dinner to be done cooking. The Bettendorf couple recently received the Foster Family of the Year award from Bethany for Children and Families for their work with the agency's infant foster care program in the Iowa Quad-Cities.

QUAD-CITY TIMES

The baby was asleep, the picture of bliss, with his hands raised up over his head in the bassinet.

And his new parents were at the door.

They had never met their son.

Carmen Fish remembers beginning to shake and cry as she saw them arrive at her Bettendorf home.

She also remembers leading the couple — who, she says, had desperately wanted a child for years — to the living room. All eyes turned toward the sleeping baby.

“The father started weeping and shaking,” she said, tears filling her eyes as she told the story.

Fish remembers seeing the father stand there, unsure what to do. With some encouragement, he picked up the baby, cradling his new son in his arms.

“It was such a blessing seeing them touch their son for the first time,” she said.

That moment, which happened two months ago, underscores for Fish and her husband, Mark, why they do what they do: stand ready, as foster parents, to take in infants until their private adoptions are made official in the courts.

Family a ‘vital chain’ in process

The Bettendorf couple recently received the Foster Family of the Year award from Bethany for Children and Families for their work with the agency’s infant foster care program in the Iowa Quad-Cities.

The couple is Bethany’s sole “go-to family” for this type of foster care, a niche the agency was desperate to fill, Bethany adoption specialist Amy Herrig said.

“To me, they are just a vital chain in the whole thing,” she said. “They’ve taken babies over the holidays, they’ve taken babies on short notice. So many unexpected things can come up, and they’ve just been fantastic.”

Carmen — who provides the primary care for the infants — spends hours, days, sometimes weeks, walking around in a sleep-deprived fog. When you have a baby in the house, that’s how life goes, the 45-year-old mother said.

“She pours her heart into it,” Mark said of his wife, who also is a stay-at-home mother to their three children, ages 9, 5 and 4.

The family has taken in a total of five babies in the more than a year they have been doing the foster work. And it can be emotional, they said.

Each baby has a different personality, with different needs and quirks. Carmen said she puts a lot of focus and effort into finding ways to soothe and bond with the babies.

All of these babies have been given up voluntarily by their birth parents, who are getting counseling and possibly some other services through Bethany.

As part of that service, Bethany offers interim foster care for infants between their birth and the time when adoption can become permanent. That is meant to ease the transition for both the birth and adoptive families, as well as the baby, said Deanna Solis, the division director of Bethany’s Iowa family services.

“Some people use private attorneys and the baby goes right from the hospital to the adoptive family,” she added.

But Bethany adoption experts say that practice can cause a lot of hurt feelings if the birth parents change their mind before the adoption is final.

In Iowa, the earliest birth parents can terminate their parental rights is three days after the baby is born. And once they sign the papers, there is an additional four-day waiting period until the deal is sealed, Herrig said.

“Sometimes they’ll be adamant in the hospital that they want the baby to go home with the adoptive couple, but then they can change their minds,” she said. “When that happens, it’s heartbreaking for everybody involved because the baby has to be removed from the home.”

That does not seem to come up as an issue very often, though, because it seems fewer and fewer parents are opting to give up their babies in private domestic adoptions, Solis added.

Bethany sees maybe a handful of adoption cases in a year, and at other times, more birth parents come forward wanting to find new homes for their babies, she said.

Through Bethany, birth parents get to browse through scrapbook applications from potential adoptive parents, choosing which family they want to take home their infant.

Maybe if people knew there was a “stopgap” between the birth and the adoption — that a loving family such as the Fishes will take care of the infant until the adoption is finalized — more people would consider giving up their babies, Mark Fish said.

Role was unexpected

The Fishes grew up in small southeastern Iowa towns about a 20-minute drive apart. But they didn't meet until both were out of college.

They dated for about five years and withstood Mark's move to Chicago — Carmen moved there, too, for about a year — before getting married in 1996.

She was 33. He was 29, Mark says, laughing about being the “younger man.”

They had two daughters after getting married: Halle, now 9, and Havyn, 5. Carmen says she was 40 when her youngest daughter was born.

The couple wished for a son, but because of Carmen's “advanced maternal age,” they thought about adoption, she said. Yet they also thought about and foster care because of their life experiences.

Carmen used to work in Des Moines for an agency that represented abused children in the court system, and after “seeing all that stuff,” she said it sort of sunk in that helping children in bad situations should become a part of her life.

As for Mark, he grew up watching his parents take in children and helping whenever they could. They had a foreign exchange student from Africa come to stay with them, and after that boy graduated, they sort of “adopted” the boy's younger brother, too. He came to live with them for the bulk of his school years, he said.

“I think I kind of had a heart for it,” he added.

Financially, the best fit for the Fishes was to go the route of the Iowa Department of Human Services, becoming foster parents in their quest for a domestic adoption.

They got their foster care license in April 2006. By July, a 2-year-old boy named Richard was living in their home.

“They try to match a child to a family, hoping it will be permanent,” Carmen said.

No way were they going to give up the child, describing him as “all-boy.” He was a perfect fit for their family, they said, and he did so officially when they adopted him in December 2006.

“We have a strong faith in God, and we felt like it was God-led,” Mark said.

The boy still has a relationship with his paternal aunt, visiting her once a month. They want him to stay connected to his past but look forward to a future with their family.

“We didn’t certainly think that we’d adopt,” Carmen said. “So, it’s been a good growing journey just in our marriage. You always grow through adversity.”

The couple has lived in the Quad-Cities for 6 1/2 years. Mark works as a strategic account executive for UnitedHealth in Moline.

Infants rock their world

A month after they adopted Richard, the Fishes got a telephone call from their social worker. She wanted to know whether they would consider taking in an infant as a foster child, and she didn’t know for how long.

“He thought I’d gone off the deep end,” Carmen said of Mark’s reaction to the proposal.

She admits that the first baby they fostered, a little girl, was “hard to let go.”

“I tried to guard my heart. I was a bit weepy when she left.”

Soon enough, the Fishes had another infant in their home. Then another arrived.

Carmen keeps a bassinet and a supply of baby clothes for both boys and girls in the house. When the infants arrive, she buys formula and diapers that fit their needs.

The couple receives a small daily stipend from the state for their foster care work, but it does not cover the costs associated with caring for a baby. They don’t do this for the money, the couple said.

“We fill a gap,” Mark added. “We know we can provide a comfortable, loving home for them. So we do whatever it takes.”

Their son doesn’t pay too much attention to the infants, but their daughters always take a big interest in them. They usually pick out names for the babies, who typically arrive at their home without a real name.

They always tell the children the babies are moving on and that it’s OK. They emphasize how happy the new parents are going to be, to finally get the children they’ve always wanted.

“I think anytime you find an opportunity to give, you always get back more than you give,” Mark said. “I hope our children someday understand that it was the right thing to do, and a good thing to do.”

Kay Luna can be contacted at (563) 383-2323 or kluna@qctimes.com. Comment on this story at qctimes.com.

GET HELP

Here are a few Quad-City resources for people considering adoption:

* Bethany for Children and Families, Moline and Davenport: Call (309) 797-7700 or go online to www.bethany-qc.org.

* Lutheran Social Services of Illinois, Rock Island: Call (309) 786-6400 or go online to lssi.org or adoptionillinois.org.

* Family Resources Inc., Davenport and Muscatine, Iowa: Call (563) 326-6431 or go online to www.famres.org or www.iakids.org.

Bethany: Need for infant foster care is low

Is there a great need for volunteers to become foster parents in the Quad-Cities? Yes.

But not in terms of foster parents looking to care for infants who are going through the adoption process with help from Bethany for Children and Families, said Deanna Solis, division director of Bethany's Iowa family services.

She said fewer birth families are opting for private domestic adoptions than in the past — most likely because there are more options available to prevent unplanned pregnancies and because of a cultural shift that has made single parenting more accepted.

This is happening nationally, too, according to the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, a national not-for-profit organization in New York. Statistics on the organization's Web site, adoptioninstitute.org, show that, in particular, the number of Caucasian infants placed for adoption in the United States has dropped dramatically over the years.

Between 1989 and 1995, 1.7 percent of children born to never-married white women were placed for adoption, compared with 19.3 percent before 1973. Among never-married black women, relinquishment rates have ranged from 0.2 percent to 1.5 percent, according to the organization.

Yet many people still yearn to adopt infants domestically rather than going the international route.

At Bethany alone, 15 couples — the maximum number that can be approved to adopt through the agency at any given time — are waiting for birth families to choose them, and 17 others are on a waiting list, Bethany adoption specialist Amy Herrig said.

The agency offers support for potential birth parents, including counseling before and after the adoption, and tries to comfort potential adoptive parents who could wait indefinitely for an infant.

“From my end, sometimes I feel extremely helpless,” Herrig said. “We have so many deserving families that are literally just waiting.”

— Kay Luna