

Couple adopts faith, children into home life

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ONTARIO — As she does nearly every day at 9 a.m., Connie Salamida turned on her television set one weekday morning about two years ago to entertain the handful of neighborhood children she babysits to supplement her husband's income.

Most days, the TV is tuned to "Sesame Street" on the Public Broadcasting System, but on that particular day the set had been left on Channel 13. Phil Donahue's bespectacled face and white hair graying around the house. Meanwhile, the popular TV host interviewed a Franciscan priest from New York City, who was surrounded by a gaggle of "hard-to-place" children up for adoption.

"I was folding clothes and doing things," Connie recalled. "One of the times I looked up, the boys were smiling in the camera, and I fell in love with them."

"The boys," David, 9, and Tony, 11, both black, are now her adopted sons. David and Tony are half-brothers and still bear the disfiguring scars of a fire seven years ago at their Virginia home, where they had been left alone by their birth mother.

Later placed for adoption by their mother, the boys were shuttled from foster home to foster home, including one where they stayed for four years, before being adopted by Connie and her husband, Dominic.

The Salamidas hooked up with the boys' adoption agency by calling a number that had been flashed on the "Donahue" show screen. But Connie admitted that she hesitated a bit before making the call.

"The first thing I thought was I don't want any more kids," she joked.

Indeed, one could hardly blame the Salamidas for hesitating, since David and Tony became only the most recent additions to their flock of 11 children, seven of whom were adopted.

Connie and Dominic acknowledged that they didn't set out to raise such a large family after their marriage in 1963. But the St. Mary of the Lake parishioners nonetheless always wanted to adopt a couple of kids.

"We wanted a hard-to-place child because Dominic and I decided we could love any child," Connie remembered. "We always felt a sense of compassion for the underdog."

This philosophy eventually transformed the Salamidas' first home in Idaho and their current residence in Rochester into multiracial oases in a world where many orphaned children of color grow up without ever having permanent homes.

The Salamidas' first two adopted children, Marty, 23, and Suzanne, 22, are white. Tami, 21, John Paul, 10, and David and Tony are all black. Thomas Viet, 17, was an Amerasian baby from Vietnam when the Salamidas welcomed him into their home back in 1974.

While adopting seven sons and daughters, the Salamidas also found time to raise four of their own — Tonia, the oldest at 26; Shawn, 20; Dominic Jr., 18; and Mary, 13.

One might find the task of raising such a large family daunting enough. But the Salamidas seem to have a hard time turning down people in crisis, and have through the years opened their home to more than 20 unwed mothers and several foster children.

"I never thought to myself, 'I want to have 11 kids,'" Dominic said, recalling that he grew up with only one brother and one sister.

Connie concurred. "I don't think either of us thought about having a big family until after we adopted Marty," she said, adding that she then told her husband, "This is great! Let's do it again."

Behind the Salamidas' open arms stands the figure of Jesus, whose presence is reinforced throughout the household fill-

ed with devotional and religious pictures, posters, videotapes and books.

Connie attends 6:30 Mass every morning, a habit she developed after converting to Catholicism from Methodism in 1967. She said she became interested in the Catholic faith after marrying Dominic.

"Dominic ... never missed Mass," she said. "There was just something special about going to Mass. I tried being a good Methodist, but there was something missing there."

What was missing for Connie was an emphasis on the Eucharist. "I think the power of the Eucharist converted me," she said.

Given her faith, it's not surprising that Connie empathizes with Jesus' request that the apostles "suffer the little children to come unto me."

"I just see so much love in each child and so much potential," she said. "I think when Jesus said, 'Let the little children come unto me,' I understand what he said because there's so much goodness in them."

Nurturing that goodness is almost an obsession for the Salamidas, who carefully monitor their children's television watching, disallow attendance at rock concerts (except for those presented by Christian bands), and in general discourage the children from physically and verbally abusing one another.

Tonia remembered, for example, that the boys in her family were never given toy guns for Christmas or their birthdays.

"You learned not to express your anger through violence," she said, pointing out that her parents had a practical reason as well as a spiritual one for their strictness.

"It's really the only way you can have this many people in the house," she said. "From day one, you're taught that you're not number one, your brother is."

Indeed, the Salamidas not only pray together, but also serve together, variously spending their Saturdays protesting abortion at Genesee Hospital in Rochester or working in the soup kitchen at Ss. Peter's and Paul's Parish.

Despite their family's Christian ethic, the Salamidas are quick to point out that all is not peaches and cream at their household. Family members fight and occasionally stray from the straight and narrow, Connie and Dominic both emphasized.

Still, from the perspective of young Tony, a kid couldn't be luckier than to grow up in such a loving household. He fondly recalled his and David's arrival at the Monroe County airport two years ago.

"When we came to the airport, the whole family was there, all these smiles on their faces," he said, recalling that meeting his new family "was a joy."



David Salamida bicycles in front of the family home in Ontario.



Babette G. Augustini/Staff photographer
Sean McElhinney, one of the children Connie Salamida (left) babysits, seems enthralled by the painting, "Jesus with the Children," which hangs in the entrance way of the Salamida home.



Shawn Salamida takes a moment to pray before breakfast.



David Salamida (left) and Dominic Salamida Sr. play with the family dog, Trigger.