



CATHOLIC COURIER

CRUSADER CRUSH

Elmira Notre Dame whipped Saugerties 32-13 in Kingston last weekend, earning the Crusaders their first-ever New York State Class B intersectional football title. Page 13.

Diocese of Rochester

Thursday, November 22, 1990

50¢

20 pages



Adoption of minority children sparks debate

By Barbara Ann Homick
Staff writer

Based on the precepts of Roman law, adoption policies in the United States stress the importance of cultural continuity in the lives of children.

But for Maurice West, a two-year-old black child who was taken from a white foster home and placed with black adoptive parents, that emphasis on continuity had a tragic result.

In May of 1989, an Ohio court had ordered that Maurice be placed for permanent adoption with a black family by June 1 of 1990. Working with a Cincinnati adoption agency, Rochester's Catholic Family Center placed Maurice with a black couple — Gerald and Bernice Kittelberger — in early July, 1989. Eight weeks later, on Aug. 26, Maurice West Kittelberger was pronounced dead at St. Mary's Hospital.

According to a *Democrat and Chronicle* report from July 26, 1990, Monroe County Court Judge Donald J. Wisner attributed Maurice's death to "a broken spirit" caused by eight weeks of cumulative abuse by the Kittelbergers.

Although Bernice Kittelberger was convicted of second-degree manslaughter and Gerald was found guilty of second-degree assault, Wisner sentenced both to two-and-one-third to seven years in prison.

During sentencing of the Kittelbergers, Wisner said, "There were agencies that perhaps backed off because of claims of

prejudice who could have followed it to the end and found out what we found out too late," the *Democrat and Chronicle* reported.

The July 26 article also suggested that — in an effort to meet the Ohio court's deadline — the agencies may have failed to take certain measures that would have shown the Kittelbergers were not fit to be parents.

Mary Jo Crimi, director of the Catholic Family Center's Adoption Department, supervised the social worker assigned to handle the Kittelberger adoption. Although Crimi declined to comment on the case for the *Catholic Courier*, she noted that CFC adheres to the guidelines of the New York State Child Welfare Reform Act of 1979.

This legislation states that the cultural background of the child must be an important consideration in placement. Not only is it important for the child to share physical similarities — especially skin color — with his or her adoptive parents, Crimi explained, but it is also important that a child fit in and feel comfortable with the family.

During her 15-year tenure at CFC, Crimi said, the center has never placed a child outside of his or her racial or ethnic background.

About 36,000 children now are awaiting adoption throughout the United States, and slightly more than 50 percent of those children are minorities, according to Mari

Anne Clarke, deputy executive director of the National Adoption Center in Pennsylvania.

In Monroe County, however, only three of the 15 children now awaiting adoption are minority children. Mary Shaw, case-worker supervisor of the adoption unit at the county Department of Social Services, said Monroe County is very fortunate because its statistics do not reflect the state and national trends of large numbers of minority children awaiting adoption. The high foster-placement rate in this area helps get children into homes, Shaw said.

Peggy Soule, executive director of the CAP (Children Awaiting Parents) Book, also pointed to the foster-placement process as a key step in finding good homes for minority children.

Soule — whose group operates a nationwide photo listing of more than 400 adoptable children, mostly from minority backgrounds — suggested that cases like that of Maurice Kittelberger could be avoided if minority children were put in minority households at the time of foster placement.

"You won't have to move the child if you do it right the first time," Soule observed.

Michelle Ely, a black woman who has adopted six black children, likewise said placement in a black home is best for black children. All of her children initially were raised in black foster homes, she said,

noting that it would not have made sense to take them out of that setting.

"I think the ideal adoption is doing what is best for the children," Ely said. "It's not so the family can have a child, but so the child can have a family."

Al Stumph — who with his wife, Kathy, adopted a biracial and a Mexican daughter — noted that concern for the child's well-being is at the heart of the New York state adoption law. Although it stipulates that children should be placed within their own ethnic, religious, racial and cultural backgrounds whenever possible, Stumph noted that the law also says a child should not remain out of an adoptive situation for an inordinate amount of time.

Stumph, an Albany-based project coordinator for the New York State Welfare Training Institute (a division of the Center for Development of Human Services at the State University College at Buffalo), said that if a suitable setting cannot be found within the child's own racial group, state law allows white parents to adopt the minority child.

Noting that courts only finalize adoptions of children for whom placement decisions have already been made, Monroe County Family Court Judge Joan Kohout said the courts attempt to issue rulings tailored to each child's needs. Currently, she said, the most frequent minority adoptions involve Korean children.

Continued on page 15