

Adoption

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definitely encourage adoptive parents to tell the child. We encourage them to do it as early as possible."

The Nations have already begun tackling this issue. They have a "box" in which they have begun to collect materials sent by Ryan's natural mother, and a letter to Ryan from his natural father — in file at his attorney's office — is to be given to Ryan at a later date.

"We've agreed to send pictures on a regular basis, and letters to let her know what Ryan is up to," Alice added.

Foster parents like the Marchners run into a different set of problems.

The children in foster care are generally referred through the court system — either because of behavioral problems on their part, or because of reoccurring family problems, noted John Treahy, vice president for juvenile justice services at Hillside Children's Center in Rochester, which provides foster care, group home and adoption services.

In their home environments, these children have often lacked stability, Treahy explained, noting: "In our foster homes we try to provide them with consistency, structure, supervision. The most common effect is that sometimes we give the young people an opportunity to be involved with a 'normal' family. There is someone to tell them to get up for school in the morning, to make sure they have breakfast, to help them with homework."

Still, foster care children often bring with them emotional problems.

"We've had runners, kids who come in the afternoon who run away by night," Marchner recalled. The couple also had to deal with foster children who skipped school, and who refused to obey any rules they established.

On the whole, however, many of the children the Marchners cared for have responded well. So well, in fact, that as foster parents the Marchners have become quite attached to many of the children who have come through their Webster home.

"The longer you are with a child, the harder it is to see them go," Marchner noted. He and his wife have even been tempted to try to adopt some of the children, he acknowledged, but they have held back.

"If we stopped along the line and adopted kids we fell in love with, then we wouldn't be there down the line for the next kid we would fall in love with," Marchner said.

Although adoptions do sometimes take place through the foster care system, in many cases the children are in foster care only until their home situations stabilize in some way, Treahy acknowledged.

"One of our goals is to help the court



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Alice's working arrangement with Rochester's Holy Family Church — where she serves as director of Christian formation — allows her to bring Ryan to the office with her while she works.



This sign hangs outside Alice's office for her fellow employees as an indicator of Ryan's mood.

develop the most effective long-term care plan for the children," Treahy observed.

Although adoption and foster care situations differ, some of the requirements are similar — at least when agencies are involved.

Home visits are conducted, the potential adoptive or foster care parents are interviewed repeatedly, and the couple go through a child-abuse screening process. In some cases, parents are fingerprinted and must receive FBI clearance. If they are approved through this process, they are added to a waiting list.

The Catholic Family Center's adoption program includes post-placement supervision over several months, and referral to counseling service as needed. The agency also provides these services for parents who are adopting a child privately.

Hillside's foster-parenting program has a similar screening process, and offers a training program to help ready foster parents for the issues with which

they might have to contend. "We're always taking the position that it's important to prepare these individuals for almost anything that can happen in the home," Treahy explained.

Despite the training and preparation, however, the potential adoptive and foster care families still face situations that require patience and endurance.

The Nations decided to sidestep using an agency because they did not want to have to wait the four to six years needed to adopt a healthy, white child. This lengthy waiting period, CFC's Brown acknowledged, is due in part to abortion and because more unmarried women are opting to keep their children because there is less social stigma attached to being a single parent in today's society.

The Nations also decided they did to want to adopt a child with special needs. "Alice and I, for our first child, we didn't know if that was a responsibility we wanted," observed Paul, a psychologist at Syracuse's North Medical Facility.

Alice read several books concerning adoption, and, using advice obtained from those books, sent out 500 resumes and 350 letters to a network of friends, acquaintances and former co-workers, pregnancy centers, churches and other alternative-to-abortion programs.

The couple began their search in January, 1994. A few months later, a Sister of St. Joseph in Erie, Pa., who had been one of Alice's supervisors in college, put the couple in contact with the pregnant daughter of a co-worker at the college where the woman religious serves as a campus minister.

The Nations met with the woman and other members of her family, and began working out the details of the adoption.

In October, Alice traveled to Erie to be present for the delivery and to serve as one of the woman's delivery-room coaches. The time from the beginning of

their search and Ryan's birth was a relatively short 10 months.

"We were very lucky and very surprised," Paul acknowledged.

Due to legal red tape — in part because the adoption involved residents of two different states, and because the Nations wanted to make sure that there were no possible glitches in the adoption process — Alice had to remain in Erie with Ryan for seven weeks. Fortunately for her, she had a cousin living there with whom she could stay, and a number of other acquaintances in town from having attended college there.

Meanwhile, Holy Family Church allowed her to work by telephone and computer via modem, and Paul served as a courier during his weekly trips from Rochester to Erie.

The couple recognizes that even after all their efforts, the birth mother could still change her mind. The Nations had already discussed this possibility when they began searching for a child, Alice said, noting, "We made a decision early on that we would not question a birth mother's decision."

And even though they know that the possibility still exists for the birth mother to change her mind during the state-mandated, six-month waiting period before the adoption is official this June, "Our lives are better because of it," Alice said. "We're better people because we've had three months with Ryan."

The Marchners, on the other hand, have had to live with the regular "loss" of children they have come to care about. Indeed, they even quit serving as foster parents between 1983-92.

"We really felt burned out," Marchner acknowledged. "There's a lot of work involved in it."

There were also some initial fears when they became involved with foster care in 1972 because they already had three daughters. But being foster parents actually helped to make them better parents, Marchner said.

"It really set us up to look for problems that could arise when dealing with teenagers," he said. His daughters also learned some lessons. "They could see the behavior of these children, and the consequences of their behavior," he said.

The Marchners also had to contend with friends who did not understand what they were doing. But that did not stop the couple from opening up their home to dozens of foster children.

"We were successful, our kids were growing up normally," Marchner said. "We thought chasing the buck all your life is not what it's all about."

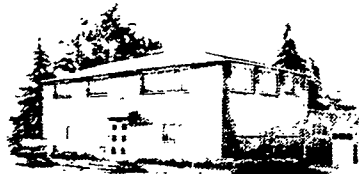
Although they have received training as foster parents, Marchner continued, "We are not professionals. What we are is parents. Most of the time, we just sit down and talk to them, bring them into our house and try to show them what family life can be like."

And like any family, the Marchners have remained in contact with a number of the girls they have helped through the years. And they regularly get phone calls or notes from them as well.

On a recent morning, one young woman who overcame her problems and earned a graduate degree and who now works in the Rochester area popped by at breakfast time for a cup of coffee and to say "hello."

"It's intangibles like that that make it great," Marchner concluded.

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