

Miracle in Possum Trot

In a tiny Texas town, Bishop W.C. and Donna Martin adopted four children. Their sacrifice triggered an avalanche of love that touched more than 70 orphans.

Several months after she buried her mother, Donna Martin had an idea to change a life. Soon after, her idea changed a community. And now, she and her husband hope the idea changes a nation.

On Feb. 12, 1996, Donna Martin's mother passed away. In addition to being the mother of Donna and her 17 siblings, she had been the "Mama" to all of Possum Trot, a small town in eastern Texas with no pavement or stoplights. Donna was grateful for the sacrificial love her mom had shown while taking care of so many kids with so little means.

It was this sacrificial love that Donna remembered when God called her to do something similar. "Think about all those children out there who do not have what you had in a mother," He told her. "I want you to give back to them. Foster and adopt."

She convinced her husband, Bishop W.C. Martin, that he was part of that calling as well. Martin is the pastor of Bennett Chapel in Possum Trot, a church of about 200 members. Being already responsible for a congregation, he initially resisted the idea—"I thought Donna had flipped out," he says. Then he met Mercedes, 5, and her brother Tyler, 2.

Both children had many problems, and Martin wondered if fostering them was the right move. "The questions swirled around like a whirlwind inside me. How could I do this? Could I really, truly help them? Did I really have the time, the energy and the stuff it took to be the father these kids needed?" Martin wrote in his book, *Small Town, Big Miracle*.

But when it comes to His calling, God has a way of dealing with doubts. When Mercedes and Tyler first stepped into the Martins' home as foster children, Tyler ran to his new father, gave him a hug and shouted, "Hey, Daddy!" Martin's fears melted away. He decided that the call was real and his wife was right.

Eventually the Martins would adopt Mercedes, Tyler and their two siblings. The children were immediately accepted into the church community. And many members followed suit by fostering some of their own.

"The idea of reaching out to orphans was no longer a far-off notion. These were orphaned kids sitting right beside them in the pews. Beautiful kids. Well-behaved kids (after some work)!" Martin says.

The challenge was tremendous, but the blessings it showered on all who were involved led Martin to make foster care and adoption a churchwide emphasis. He began preaching about it from the pulpit: "God commands us to take care of the orphans. The power lies in the hands of the church."

In the first several years after the crusade began at Bennett Chapel, 72 children were adopted. The *Houston Chronicle* picked up the amazing story, followed by many other newspapers and magazines. Soon the tiny hamlet of Possum Trot was featured on *Good Morning America*, *The 700 Club* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

Then the Fox television program *Renovate My Family* came to east Texas and built the church an important facility for the kids, Pineywood Outreach Center—a 10,000-square-foot building that housed a regulation basketball court, full-size kitchen, playroom, and media center with the latest computers, books and educational videos.

According to Martin, "God blessed us exceedingly abundantly above all that we could ask or think."

Where Are They Now?

It has been 14 years since Donna Martin's life-changing decision started the process, and things have calmed down quite a bit in Possum Trot. There has been only one adoption in the last three years. But the cause has not been dropped.

Bishop Martin continues to preach about adoption from the pulpit. The Outreach Center is still running after-school programs and summer programs that minister to 75-175 people a day. The Food Bank still hands out boxes of groceries to 600-700 people a month.

Financially the church has hit hard times. The support the community received during the media attention was tremendous, but it has dropped off precipitously since. Referring to current economic times, Martin says, "We're not the only ones who are suffering."

The church is having trouble finding the money to pay the utility bills for the outreach center. The food bank is costing more than the church has. "I don't want to let that go," he says.

Donors are needed to fund Walmart gift cards that Martin would like to give all the children in the community for Christmas. He also dreams of adding an educational wing to the outreach center as well as purchasing a bus for shuttling more children to the church.

In addition, there have been critics of the church's work. After an Associated Press article quoted Martin criticizing the surrounding community for not being supportive of the church's efforts, he came under fire for his comments. He since has come to see the community more positively.

"They're embracing what we're doing," he says today. "They've got our backs."

There has also been some speculation in the media about the foster parents' motivation, with claims that many of these poor families are doing foster care to get the government subsidy. Martin thinks that's nonsense.

"When you foster a child, the state gives you a subsidy every month. But when you adopt that child, they cut that subsidy down quite a bit," he explains.

"So we weren't interested in the money part of it; we were interested in getting these children into a safe environment, to show them love, to demonstrate the love of God to them, and to teach them that they are not an accident but that they have purpose in their life."

The Impact Goes On

Despite the criticism, the impact Bennett Chapel has had on individuals is without question. The lives of 73 children, in particular, have been forever changed.

Mercedes, the Martins' first foster child, was taught how to steal by her biological mother, who would tell her to walk into a grocery store and take the food they would need for the day. When she was brought into the Martin home, Mercedes continued to do as she was taught. She was caught numerous times stealing from her family, her school and her church.

The Martins taught her that she didn't have to steal any more. They would provide her with everything she would need. Today Mercedes, 17, is a junior in high school. She plans to go to college to be an ultrasound technician, then she will continue in school to become a delivery nurse. She helps in the Pineywood Outreach Center, tutoring younger children.

Andre Brown came to live at the Lathan house after both of his parents died within six months of each other. Theresa Lathan and her husband, Glen, took him and his two siblings into their home though they had a family of eight already, five of

them adopted.

Theresa didn't know how she would be able to handle 11 children in her very small house, but she believed in her call from God. Today, Andre is a freshman at Sam Houston State University.

"He never would talk to anyone when he first came to our house," Theresa says.

"He didn't want to get near people because he was afraid they would be taken away from him. Now he mingles with everybody."

Shameria was abandoned at age 2 and adopted by the Lathan family. She is now in the ninth grade and someday wants to go to college and be a math teacher.

She says about Theresa, "She loved me through anything I did, right or wrong." Shameria began her life as an abandoned child. Now she feels unconditional love.

Some of the children want to go into the medical field, such as Mercedes, Rashaundria, Sharethea and Shenequa. Others, such as Lovey, Tameria and Shameria, want to be teachers.

The adoptive parents believe it is no coincidence that so many of the children adopted into this community now have ambitions to enter fields in which they can help people and serve others. They have seen it all around them for their entire lives.

"All they want to do is help people," Theresa says of her children.

People often ask the Martins how Bennett Chapel was able to do what it has done.

"It's not how we were able to do it, we just did it," Bishop Martin says. "It was not something that we sat around and thought about."

“It wasn’t about how we were gonna make it. We did what we did because God gave us a vision to do this thing. And we’re gonna make it.”

Marshal Younger *is a writer for Focus on the Family’s popular radio show Adventures in Odyssey.*

View a photo gallery of the success stories of Possum Trot’s families at