

Warm Hearts, Loving Arms

Keith and Cherith Marsh, pastors in New Hampshire, have adopted several foster kids-and have made room for more.

The phone call came on a cool October morning.

"Mrs. Marsh? We have a 3-week-old named Deborah who needs to be placed tomorrow. Can you take her?"

Cherith Marsh's heart raced when she heard the request of the state social worker. A 3-week-old, she mused.

"Oh, and Mrs. Marsh," the worker added, "Deborah is addicted to crack cocaine."

Cherith, 48, and her husband, Keith, 50-pastors of Grace Outreach, a church in West Lebanon, New Hampshire-prayed and said yes to the state's request. Their early days with Deborah were difficult-sleepless nights seemed darker in light of the quivering infant who had entered the world an addict and faced an uncertain future.

Six months later, however, Deborah's developmental team determined that she was only two to three months behind in her maturation. Three years later they cried over the success of her progress.

"This is truly a miracle baby," Deborah's doctor said. The child today is a testimony of the power of God's love and of prayer.

Deborah is just one of 17 children whose lives have been changed at Grace Children's Home, a 24,000 square foot mansion situated along the crest of a New Hampshire hilltop. Some of the kids have come to stay for weeks; others for years. In the end, almost all have been placed in loving, Christian homes.

"In the U.S. today, there are over 625,000 children in the system; 100,000 of these will never return home," Keith Marsh says. "Some will be adopted and many will simply 'age out' of the system, bouncing from foster home to foster home until they're adults. Many of these will wind up in jail. ... What an opportunity for the church to demonstrate God's grace and power.

"Scripture tells us that true religion is caring for widows and orphans, and foster children are America's orphans," he continues. "In New Hampshire there are 1,600 foster children and 900 churches. Just think of the dent we could put in this problem."

Keith points out that during the last 20 years the church in the United States "has mobilized and made major inroads in the arena of education and protection for the unborn." He believes more change is waiting in the wings, that God wants to give Christians who will ask strategies for caring for orphans.

Grace Children's Home began as a dream during Keith and Cherith's dating days 25 years ago. Then, in the 1990s, when Congress began to pass welfare-reform legislation, the Marshes studied the foster-care problem, and God began to show them how they could make a difference.

It turned out to be their time to act. They wrote the vision

God gave them and began to pray for a larger home.

Six months later, a 15-bedroom bed-and-breakfast went into foreclosure. The Marshes quickly raised half the cost and bought the house.

Church groups and youth groups came over for long workdays to do the renovations, and in September 1998, Grace Children's Home was born. Today it is a testimony to God's love and care for displaced children.

"One of our major prayers was that the Lord would do something worthy of His name. We wanted the kids who would come to know that they have a heavenly Father who loves them very much," Cherith says. "Did He ever answer that prayer!"

The Marshes have worked hard to build a relationship of trust and respect with state social workers.

"Most are very kind and understanding," Cherith notes. "They have a high regard for foster parents, and they're really grateful for what we're doing."

When the state calls and asks if they want to take in a child, Keith and Cherith pray-and usually answer yes.

"We believe there is a three- to four-week window of opportunity to get a major breakthrough in the lives of the children who come," Keith says.

Cherith agrees. "A quick change happens in a matter of weeks," she says. "Love and structure make a huge difference."

Keith and Cherith's four children play a major role in caring for the kids that come through their doors. A chart with chores and bedtime duties hangs on the refrigerator, and everyone has a job.

"When a foster child comes in, we work together," Keith explains. "All of our kids pitch in and help. Again and again, they see good overcome evil. It strengthens their faith and helps them to get out of themselves. Our lives aren't always neat, but it is well worth it."

Olivia, the Marshes' 14-year-old daughter, agrees.

"It can be challenging, but when you're done and you see the results of everything, you're glad you did it," she says.

Hannah Marsh, the couple's 23-year-old daughter, recently graduated from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and now works in that city. When she's home, however, her name appears on the chart of chores along with everybody else's. She doesn't mind, though.

"I feel blessed to have the kind of parents and upbringing that I had. It's a privilege to share it," she says. "When we first started, the Lord really showed me that this ministry is just as much mine as my parents'."

The Marshes demonstrate God's love for children every day. Over the years they have adopted three and cared for many others. They believe each life has value and potential. Although the problem of adequate foster care is a significant one, the Marshes believe they can make a difference, one child at a time.

"It's difficult, but not as difficult as you'd think," Hannah says. "In the midst of it, God gives you grace."

"The amount of love you receive is so much more than you give out," Cherith adds. "You get covered in kisses and hugs. Seeing light come back in their eyes and personalities blossom-that's the reward."

For Keith, it's also about the privilege of assisting God as the Father of the fatherless.

"God relieves the fatherless and the widow, and we get to be His hands of relief," he says. "Scripture says that God 'sets the solitary in families'-and we're just one of those families."

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For more information, visit www.gracechildrenshome.org. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Grace Children's Home, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-2248.