

Foster parents can't say 'no' to children who need a home_30705

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By Craig Bird

Baptist Child & Family Services

BULVERDE-If Cliff and Karen Sepulveda's house seems crowded with foster children, it's because their hearts won't let them say "no."

Less than two years ago, the members of First Baptist Church in Bulverde decided to open their lives to "show some kids who've been removed from abusive homes that where they came from is not all there is."

Now the Sepulvedas are on their third placement—even though none lined up exactly with their request for "one boy, younger than our son."

ABOVE: Cliff and Karen Sepulveda get to know their latest foster child, a 14-year-old girl (with her back to camera) the couple convinced Baptist Child & Family Services deserved "one more chance" after they had agreed to take her 11-year-old brother.

BELOW: The 14-year-old girl shared a prized possession with Karen Sepulveda-a framed photo of her mom and two other siblings she is separated from. (Photos by Craig Bird)



First was a 15-year-old girl. Then they added a young boy who came as part of a package deal with two younger sisters, as well as two other brothers who had been in another foster home for two years.

The last week of February, the placement request was for an 11-year-old boy-but when the Sepulvedas heard his teenaged sister was about to be terminated from the foster program for disruptive behavior, they petitioned to take her too.

“Sometimes it seems like we just can't say 'no' when a caseworker calls from Baptist Child & Family Services,” Mrs. Sepulveda admitted as the latest set of foster children were unpacking. “That may be true, but each time it has just seemed like the right thing to do, and God has been with us each step of the way, so we say we'll take them.”

That is pretty typical of foster families, said Asennet Segura, who directs the program for Baptist Child & Family Services in San Antonio.

“I call them 'super parents' and 'superheroes' because if they come to us and say they want an infant or a 7-year-old or whatever, we still train them and expect them to be able to take care of the whole range of children who need foster care, because a child who matches their request may have a sibling needing placement who might be anyone from a 6-year-old who is ADHD to a sexually abused teenager.”

Such scenarios were not even on the radar when the Sepulveda's decided to become foster parents in 2003.

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They had just completed and moved into their “retirement home” in a gated

community in Bulverde, just north of San Antonio. Five of their six children were either married or in college at Texas A&M. They looked around and saw a nearly empty nest and an opportunity for a special ministry.

In 2003, San Antonio newspapers and television stations were full of stories about abused and neglected children and articles about problems with the state's Child Protective Services program. Perhaps that planted the idea in Mrs. Sepulveda's mind. One day, she asked her husband, "What would you think about getting a foster son—one a little younger than Shawn, one we could take to church with us and show that families can be different, can be loving and kind?"

He didn't need convincing. So they literally got out the Yellow Pages and looked up "Foster Parents."

"We had never heard of Baptist Child & Family Services, but since we're Baptist, that would have gotten our attention even if they hadn't been the first name on the list," Sepulveda insisted. "We didn't even know there was a stipend to help with the extra expenses. We just felt like we needed to help."

After some home visits, some intensive training and a pile of paperwork, they were good to go—except there were no boys in the system right then. But there was Faye.

"So we kicked our teenage son out of his bedroom so a 15-year-old girl could move in," Sepulveda said.

The placement lasted less than three months. Twice they had to admit her to a mental hospital because of continued threats to hurt herself. After the second commitment, she ran away from the hospital and called the Sepulvedas three days later asking them to bring her money.

"She had had only two meals the entire time, but I told her if we brought

her money, we would be breaking the law and as much as we wanted to help her, we couldn't do that," Mrs. Sepulveda recalled.

"Then I told her that if she wanted me to come pick her up and take her back to the hospital I would. She agreed but didn't tell her boyfriend (who had helped her run away). She just told him we were bringing some money."

She ran away a second time, however, and they have not heard from her since.

"I cried and cried," Mrs. Sepulveda said. "I felt like we failed her, that there was something we could have done to reach her."

The couple still keeps pictures of her wearing the formal they bought for her to attend a military ball at Randolph Air Force Base.

That was the somber mood when Baptist Child & Family Services called again in the summer of 2003.

They had a 10-year-old boy, but there was a complication. He was currently in a foster home with two sisters, 7 and 5.

"Not a problem," replied the Sepulvedas. The boy could share one bedroom with Shawn, and the girls could have the other bedroom. The weekend visit was successful, so they told BCFS to move ahead.

Then came another phone call. There were two younger brothers at a second foster home. The two sets of siblings had been separated for two years, but it would really improve the chances of them all being adopted together if they could live together.

"We've had six kids in our house before," Mrs. Sepulveda reminded her husband. "There's no reason we can't have six again."

But when the 4-year-old and the 2-year-old, arrived they had reason to wonder. The baby, diagnosed with severe fetal alcohol syndrome, could only say three words: "no," "stop" and "welcome" (for "your welcome"). He could not walk, and he was unresponsive.

"You could talk to him, pick him up and move him, turn off the television or turn on the radio-he never changed expressions, never responded," Sepulveda recalled.

Actually, he would react sometimes. The first time the Sepulvedas tried to give him a bath, he began to tremble "like he was having a seizure" when they turned on the faucets, and they had to bathe him in the kitchen sink. The official prognosis was that he would never talk and never walk.

Meanwhile, the other children also started displaying behavioral problems-lying, bedwetting, defying authority or simply withdrawing into silence,

So Mrs. Sepulveda arranged her work schedule to be off every Friday, and her husband took off every Monday. They took their five foster children to church and to Sea World and out to eat. They played games and just sat and talked.

After a few weeks, the behavioral problems disappeared, and the 2-year old was running around the house and jabbering.

The first Internet posting of the children as adoptable attracted 20 responses, including three families who already had passed home visits. So the Sepulvedas figured their time with this placement would be short. But none of them worked out.

Months passed. Members of First Baptist Church in Bulverde fell in love with the children, and Miranda made a profession of faith and was baptized there.

"Somebody said that I acted like those kids were my own, and they were right," Mrs. Sepulveda said. "They were my kids, and they better treat them right."

After 18 months, the five became so embedded in the family that when their teenaged daughter asked her parents to come meet her boyfriend and his family, she insisted her foster brothers and siblings come along too. At that point, an adoptive family appeared.

"It was hard," Mrs. Sepulveda said. "But we also knew that that is what we had hoped for and prayed for them. They were scared and cried, but we told them they were afraid because they didn't know the family yet, that they would not be afraid after they joined them."

"We're just grateful that they were adopted by a San Antonio family instead of someone from West Virginia—we've been able to see them from time to time. We asked their new parents to think of us as grandparents and not competitors," because all kids like to go visit their grandparents sometime.

The adoption was finalized just before Christmas, and the Sepulveda house became suddenly quiet—until a caseworker from Baptist Child & Family Services called about a boy needing a home. He has a sister, but she had been so disruptive at school (23 discipline referrals since September) she was being removed from the foster program.

They couldn't ask the Sepulvedas to take her because they couldn't be expected to take off from work all the time to meet with the school principal.

"Well, maybe she needs one more chance. Let's see what we can do," Mrs. Sepulveda said, recalling one of their foster sons "had problems at school before he got here, but he did great in this system."

So their new foster daughter signed a contract that if she has more than

three referrals, she will have to leave the Sepulvedas and her brother and be placed in a group care facility. She also agreed to other specific rules.

The first weekend went smoothly. "Sunday after we went to church, we went out to eat and then went bowling," Mrs. Sepulveda reported. "I think they are going to be OK."

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