

Adoptive parents fill empty nest, meet child's needs

June 9, 2006

Posted: 5/26/06

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By Marv Knox

Editor

ABILENE—New parents Anna and Mike Chancellor's love shines brighter than all their birthday candles. And their compassion trumps conventional expectations for couples their age.

Ordinarily, 55-year-olds don't adopt an 11-year-old son.

Fifty-five is an age when most couples enjoy their "empty nest." With children grown, educated and independent, couples that old typically focus on the free time, discretionary income and leisure they set aside to raise a family.

Anna
Chancellor
and her
adopted
son,
James,
enjoy a
meal at
their
home in
Abilene.

But the Chancellors are focusing on homework, tae kwan do lessons, and tending to the special needs of a son who bounced from abusive birth parents, through two foster homes and past two failed adoptions before landing on their Abilene doorstep.

With sons Tim and Joseph grown and on their own, the Chancellors adopted James last year. That changed all their lives forever.

“Anna and I never saw this coming,” Mike Chancellor acknowledged, although they did talk about adoption—about 30 years ago.

They met after Mike graduated from Howard Payne University while Anna was attending East Texas Baptist University. They got married in 1974 while both were students at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

“We were one of those couples who thought we might have trouble having children,” he reported. After two years without children, they discussed adoption but also started fertility testing.

But not long afterward, she became pregnant with Tim, who was born in 1977. Joseph followed in 1979. Although they talked about adopting

another child during those early years, the busy-ness of raising two active boys soon put that out of mind.

Thirteen years ago, they moved to Abilene when he became pastor of Crescent Heights Baptist Church. She soon started working at Hardin-Simmons University. An institutional grant paid for both boys' undergraduate degrees at the Baptist school, and both parents also earned graduate degrees in counseling.

"The guys hung around through college," Chancellor said.

"We had the perfect 'empty nest'—they moved from home, to the dorm, to apartments. But they lived here in town, and they both would swing by."

Tim and Joseph both graduated from Hardin-Simmons in 2000. A year later, they each moved "more than halfway around the world," as their dad describes it. They served as missionaries—Joseph in Thailand and Tim elsewhere in East Asia.

"When they left, they really left," their mom observed.

Tim returned home in 2003 and soon married and started a family. He now is a patrolman in Rockwall and lives in Greenville. Joseph came back to the United States in 2004. He is on the staff of Purpose Driven Ministries of Saddleback Community Church in southern California.

After their sons left for the mission field, the Chancellors enjoyed their new station in life. They had more time to devote to causes they hold dear, including her private counseling practice and their joint ministry to hurting ministers and their families, as well as to their own aging parents.

Part of her private practice, Big Country Family Therapy Associates, involved working alongside a child-placement agency that coordinates both foster care and adoptions. Eventually, her primary task was to design

mental health treatment for foster children.

And that's how she met James. The boy was 7 when Child Protective Services removed him from his biological family.

"I was there the day he was placed," she remembered. "And I did counseling with him through the years."

By the fall of 2004, Child Protective Services caseworkers focused on getting James—by then 10 and already living with his second foster family—adopted.

A couple of attempts failed. The second time around, James already had started visits with his adoptive family. But the prospective family was not prepared for a little boy with a speech impediment who had been bruised physically, spiritually and emotionally by shameful treatment compounded by instability.

James' caseworker, foster mother and Anna Chancellor realized they could not send him into an adoptive family that didn't understand his special needs.

"His caseworker called the adoption off, and I had to tell him," she recalled. "I was devastated. Usually, I try to keep my objectivity. But James just had to be adopted. As he would get older, adoption would become increasingly problematic."

So, she went home and talked to her husband.

"Mike said, 'We're not too old to adopt,'" she said. "It had been in the back of my mind. But when he said the A-word, that was confirmation."

Chancellor received separate confirmation, he added.

"We were doing an intercessory prayer study at church, using material by

Andrew Murray, whose analogy is that God is like a loving father who finds great delight in his children," he explained. "What I realized was that a lot of the great joy of my life was being a dad.

"Through the years, God had sent not only my sons, but also a lot of guys into my path whose dads were absent or distant. I became their surrogate dad, and this still was part of my life."

As he thought about the possibility of middle-aged adoption, Chancellor weighed the human inclination toward a life of ease against the opportunity to deeply impact another child's life.

"What an incredibly selfish thing—to feel that, by raising your own children, you absolve yourself from responsibility for anyone else," he explained.

"Here this kid pops up. All he ever wanted was a mom and dad, to be safe and loved. How better could I spend the next 10 years than walking with a kid who never had what my boys had—unconditional love and safety?"

The Chancellors completed 30 hours of training and officially served as James' foster parents for six months before his adoption was completed last December.

"This changed our lives completely," she said. Not only did they re-enter the world of raising a young child, but this child carried the weight of burdens too heavy for his slender shoulders.

So, the Chancellors lifted those challenges—special education, emotional immaturity, delayed intellectual development, speech problems and hyper-needy desire for attachment.

Slowly, steadily, James has progressed, she observed. "This has been a whole lot harder than I thought it would be. ... (But) the joy of having James

is to begin to see him achieve. He has a lot of strikes against him. But he's getting better. We see the little victories."

For his part, James has embraced both faith and family. He has accepted Jesus as his Savior, and he takes pride in being a son as well as a younger brother to Tim and Joseph. "I'm part of it," he says of the Chancellor family.

They express grateful support for the help they have received from others.

"What has made this more manageable" has been the encouragement and tangible help provided by their family and by members of Crescent Heights Baptist Church, he said. "This whole thing would have been much harder without our church family," she added.

The Chancellors downplay the special nature of their commitment to James

"It's not going to be perfect here. We're not perfect," Chancellor said. "But he's safe, in a stable environment, in a network of folks who love him. ... I can't imagine what his future would be if he stayed in (the foster-care system) until he ages out. And many kids do."

In fact, he thinks many more Texas Baptists ought to do something about that.

"I'm concerned about what the state of Texas did to this child," he stressed. "James' condition was made worse by a system that pushed him on a family who didn't want him."

Unfortunately, the system reflects not only a shortage of funds, but also an acute shortage of people willing to adopt Texas children.

"Over 1,100 Texas kids are in foster care, waiting for adoption," he said. "Many Texas Baptists could take one child and do our best."

"What if 1,100 middle-aged Texas Baptist couples—couples who are in

reasonably good health, whose families have been good to us—what if we step up and each take one challenging child who has been through so much? We could give them the best our lives and experiences have to offer.

“Out of 5,700 churches, I can’t believe there’s not 1,100 middle-aged couples who could do this.”

The Chancellors hope and pray other Texas Baptists will share their dream for James with all the other Jameses out there.

“How much can he recover? I pray he will be a mighty man of God, a man of faith,” she said as tears welled in both their eyes. “He’s made his first step. He understands Jesus loves him.”

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