

# Waxahachie couple fosters love in a multitude of children

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**By George Henson**

*Staff Writer*

WAXAHACHIE—A sidewalk marks the path to the door of Don and Rhodie Rawls' home—where 65 foster children have entered a refuge of love. And as clearly as concrete marks the pathway to their home, the Rawlses believe God directed them to their ministry of love and caring for children.

The journey began more than 20 years ago when the Rawlses attended a church in Garland. The church had a ministry to children under the care of Buckner Benevolences.

Families in the church served as surrogate families to the Buckner children. The Rawlses and their two children were paired with a girl who stayed with them every-other weekend and even went on vacation with them.

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Rhodie  
Rawls  
and her  
husband,  
Don,  
model  
love for  
children  
in need  
of an  
example.

The girl aged out of the program, and the Rawlses moved to Waxahachie. But it was their first exposure to children whose family lives were not ideal, and it left a deep impression.

Mrs. Rawls said foster parenting lingered in her mind, but she didn't do anything about it. God, however, kept putting people in her path who kept the idea before her—first a woman she didn't know but kept running into at a local discount store, and later a couple in Sunday school at First Baptist Church in Waxahachie.

Finally, the Rawlses decided to take the plunge. After the training and checks, the first baby came to live with them. Very soon after, a second baby needed a home, and Mrs. Rawls decided she could handle a second infant.

“That was the last time we only had two,” she said. “We consider it our ministry. We certainly believe God leads us to serve him, and what better way to serve him than to serve his children that need us?”

The rewards of caring for children in need of love and reassurance are many, they said.

“It’s such an amazing thing to be a part of the healing process—to see them when they are scared to death and know you have what it takes to make it better,” Mrs. Rawls said.

Rawls said his wife has been gifted with the ability to touch the hearts of children.

“Rhodie has the knack of bonding with kids almost immediately and to make them feel comfortable,” he said as he played cars with their youngest charge at present, a 3-year-old boy they met at Children’s Hospital in Dallas, where he lay with serious injuries due to long-term abuse.

The boy’s siblings, ages 8 and 9, also live with the Rawlses, along with their children, Joseph, 10, and Mikie, 8, whom they adopted. The Rawlses also have two adult children—Michael, 29, and Sarah, 25.

Together, the Rawlses try to give the children a different outlook on family life.

“I think there is no greater testimony than to have the opportunity to show these kids what normal is,” Rawls said.

“When we get these kids, you have to realize that they have a different perspective on what normal is,” his wife agreed. “Sometimes, that means they’re used to sleeping on the floor, and it takes awhile to get them sleeping in a bed. Or for some, bedtime is whenever they collapse—they are not used to having any boundaries or adult supervision.”

“We get to teach them what a family is supposed to look like,” Rawls added.

While it is their ministry, the Rawlses said they are aware it is not for everyone—even all Chris-tians.

“It’s ludicrous to say that it is something everyone can do. You have to be flexible and be able to just go with the flow. It’s a roller coaster ride—you

just hold on tight and know you're in for the ride of your life," Mrs. Rawls said.

Even so, she believes many more Christians are capable of being foster parents than choose to do so.

Many people have told Mrs. Rawls they couldn't be foster parents because of the pain of separation at the end of their time in foster care. She acknowledges that sometimes there is pain in the end, but that doesn't change the need for foster parents as families seek either to mend or find some other means of securing what is best for the children.

"It's what God has called us to do, and God's calling is not always pleasing and pleasant. But I could never not do this because there might be some pain at the end," she said.

Other people have told the Rawlses they feared they would want to adopt every child who came to their home. That's not a realistic expectation, Mrs. Rawls said.

"Every child who has come into our home has received every ounce of love we could give them. We have loved every single one of them with our whole hearts. But fostering is a lot like dating—you don't want to marry everyone you date, and you don't want to adopt every child you foster. We have had more than 60 children live in our homes, and we have loved every single one of them. But in the end, there have been only two that we were ready to make a life-long commitment to through adoption," she said.

"We do this to fill a spot for a time in these kids' lives," Rawls said.

"We didn't get into this to adopt. When we started this, I was 46, I wasn't looking to start a new family. We are here to help them move on, either back home or wherever life takes them," he said.

An important fact to remember is that “the No. 1 goal is always, always, always family reunification—sometimes things happen, but that is always the goal, and you have to go into it knowing that is the goal,” Mrs. Rawls pointed out.

Even though foster parenting is not for everyone, many more Christians are in a position to serve children through a lesser-known role as a child advocate, she said. Court Appointed Special Advocates—CASA volunteers—go through a 30-hour training program to be the representative in court for an abused or neglected child.

CASA volunteers are “the voice for that child in the court system,” Mrs. Rawls explained. “They don’t represent Child Protective Services, they don’t speak for the parents or the foster parents—their only concern is to look out for the welfare of the child.

“There are a lot of people who can’t be foster parents who would make ideal CASA volunteers.”

No special educational or vocational background is needed. Training is given in the areas of expertise needed. Wanting the best possible life for a child is the most important qualification.

Mrs. Rawls recruits volunteers for the program. “Churches are the places I love to go to find volunteers. They know what it is to be a servant and love God’s children,” she said.

While the CASA program is not employed in every county in Texas, it is more widespread than many people know. In 2005, 4,636 volunteers advocated for the best interests of 18,949 children in 194 counties. More information on volunteering or starting a program can be found at [www.texascasa.org](http://www.texascasa.org).

“It’s another adult in their life to show them what a normal adult life looks

like and someone who has their best interests at heart,” Rawls said. “It’s another way for Christians to show the love of Jesus.”

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