

Taking Flight

Adoptive family creates new paths to peace for abused children.

by Aria Seligmann

Seven-year-old Donna Drews backbends into a flip, turns around and does a perfect cartwheel, landing into graceful form on the living room carpet. A few minutes later, she and 5-year-old brother Jonah are jumping on the trampoline in the backyard.

It's a typical Sunday, and as their adoptive mother, Meleah Drews, takes care of two foster children who, along with dad, Jim, round out the family, the children are constantly reminded and encouraged to treat each other with respect, be mindful of their own and the others' safety needs, and use appropriate language and actions with each other.

The Drews are creating a new paradigm: a family of children rescued from households where they knew violence, and raised in an atmosphere of love and peace that will break that cycle.

Like the nearly 1,000 children neglected or abused annually in Lane County (2003 figures cap off at 958 reported), Donna and Jonah were removed from their biological mother's home and placed in foster care. The children had suffered physical abuse and neglect. Repeated attempts to rehabilitate their mom, who suffered from drug addiction, failed. She was offered parenting classes and drug treatment programs, but other factors in her life affected her ability to see those commitments through. Donna and Jonah have different fathers, and neither were in the family picture.

The two were placed in a few different foster homes, and previous foster parents tried to be very strict with them, which didn't work. But these kids weren't easy. On a scale of 1 to 10, easiest to most difficult to deal with, both children were classified an "8."

The Drews wanted a large family, but weren't able to conceive easily. Rather than go through extensive and expensive fertility testing and treatments, they chose to become foster parents, keeping the idea of permanent adoption open. Both had experience working with children, and wanted to merge their vision of having a large family and helping kids.

They attended training classes at LCC and became certified to take in two children. Just months after they completed their certi-

fication, in autumn of 2000, they were matched with Donna, 4, and Jonah, 2. In July 2001, their mother relinquished custody and the Drews adopted them in May 2002.

The children were considered "high needs." Donna was "loud," according to Meleah, and definitely the boss. "She was like Jonah's mother, telling him everything to do," she says. Donna was aggressive and violent. In her room she put all of her Barbie Dolls into the corners facing the walls because they were "bad," she'd tell her mom. She regularly hit her little brother. Jonah had no concept of pain. "He'd fall down and hit his head hard and not even cry," says Jim.

The children would awake often at night with nightmares and visions of monsters. They'd play one of their favorite games, "It's time to move again."

Despite the difficulties, Jim and Meleah worked with the children, establishing an emotional, heart connection through the use of Nonviolent Communication techniques. Jim has helped Donna to develop an expanded vocabulary list of needs and feelings, so that Donna can express herself without resorting to hitting. If Jonah lashes out at her, rather than hit back, Donna can say, "That made me feel scared. I have a need for safety." Jonah will repeat back to her what she said to show he understands.

As Jonah began to feel safe, he began to relax and "this sad little boy came out," says Jim. At the final visit with their birth mother, Donna informed her, "Guess what, Mommy, I'm a good girl now."

Today, both children are homeschooled by their dad, with extracurricular activities such as dance, gymnastics and music woven into their day. Jonah needs lots of time for "big outlets of energy," says Jim, and once he's had them, he can sit and read a book for an hour. Donna needs lots of time in her imagination so she can then start writing one of her many stories. She excels as sports, and she wants to be a lawyer one day.

Both the children, who at first wouldn't let anyone touch them, are outgoing, loving and affectionate. With their two younger foster brothers, they form a very tight-knit family.

The Drews have formed a non-profit called Children Rising. It will include a facility large enough to house more children and



Jonah and Donna Drews

allow mentors and teachers to work with the children on site. The concept would fill in gaps in the foster care system, which does not have enough families to meet the needs of the number of children in the system. In Oregon in 2003, there were 11,086 children in 4, 450 foster homes. In Lane County in 2003, there were anywhere between 301 and 500 family foster homes at any given time serving approximately 1,400 children, according to Oregon Department of Human Services.

Despite the lack of homes, DHS Communications Officer Patricia Feeny says DHS "never really puts out a so-called quota because we want quality foster homes." She adds that even if DHS would like to have 500 foster homes ideally, they don't have the resources to certify that many.

"If we recruit and get two or three families, that's great," she says. But foster parents are lost when they adopt the children. And they do adopt more now. In 1997, the federal government passed the Adoption and Safe Families Act, to keep children from languishing in foster care for long periods of time.

"Plan A is to get the parent rehabilitated

and the child back home. If that is impossible, Plan B is to get the child placed in a permanent home," says Feeny.

Many people have considered taking in foster children, either temporarily or possibly leading to adoption, but are unsure of placing a foster child in school or childcare where their needs might not be met.

The idea behind Children Rising is to create a safe place where parents could bring those children to be cared for and educated in a setting that addresses their needs while working to decrease the tendency toward violence they may have known all of their lives. Mentors, or older teens, will help out with the younger ones, thus serving their own needs for healing and growth.

Currently, the Drews are looking for a site to house a facility and playground for their children and others.

"We want to model a new way to communicate with each other and a safe place to do so," says Meleah.

Jim adds, "We want them to soar." **EW**

For more information on Children Rising, see www.childrenrising.org or e-mail childrenrising@yahoo.com

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A VOICE FOR CHANGE
LOUIS GOMEZ
 FOR LANE COUNTY SHERIFF



AS ONE WE CAN SUCCEED. The revolving door at the jail needs to stop now! Reactive policing is not effective and we must become proactive problem solvers and develop partnerships with the communities of Lane County. I will look at all positions within the Sheriff's Office and restructure the department to fill the void in the jail and criminal patrol. I will also be fiscally responsible and reevaluate the purpose of the traffic teams.

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