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'Imperfect' parents build perfect family

By Lorene Parshall

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"There are 125,000 cases of abuse and neglect reported every year in Michigan," said Ismael Ahmed, state director of the Department of Human Services (DHS) at a recent press conference in Gaylord. "The department believes in keeping children with their parents, but that is not always possible."

Of the approximately 16,000 in foster care in Michigan, around 4,000 are available for adoption due to parental abuse and neglect. DHS has started a year-long recruitment campaign to attract foster and adoptive parents.

The campaign is meant to find safe, loving homes, and the theme of the campaign explains the DHS philosophy: "You don't have to be perfect to be a perfect foster parent."

Gaylord foster parents-turned-adoptive-parents, Jill and Mark Brazelton agree wholeheartedly.

"Perfect?" Jill said, responding to a question, "We're far from it. I work and I never feel I have enough time to spend with the kids."

"We're not perfect, but when you look at where they were to where they are now," Mark added. "Here they get the right food, the right atmosphere, structure and lots of T.L.C."

Inside the Brazeltons' home is a relatively small, but cozy living space. Besides Jill and Mark, the homey interior houses four dogs, Jill's 17-year-old daughter Riley, 10-year-old twins Emily and James, and Andrew, age four.

The twins and Andrew, all three from the same family, started as foster children in the Brazelton home.

Returning the children to their biological parents was not a possibility, and eventually DHS suggested that the Brazeltons adopt them.

"We got into fostering because we wanted to give back to the community," said Mark. "We loved the kids, but we didn't have a lot of money. When they asked us to adopt, we were worried that we couldn't afford to raise them. DHS said they would help."

The family has also had a lot of community support. School bus drivers, concerned about what they'd observed when the children were living with their biological parents, showed up with box after box of gifts on the first Christmas the kids spent with the Brazeltons. Some of the bus drivers attended the Juvenile Court adoption ceremony, applauding and cheering, when the adoption was finalized. Neighbors, who have known Jill since childhood, play auntie and granny to the siblings, helping to watch over them.

When asked what they liked about their new home, James shouted, "Everything." His twin, Emily, beamed at her adoptive mother and sister, and declared, "I finally have other girls around." Four-year-old Andrew, who had been coloring throughout the interview, and clearly a fellow who lives in the moment, said, "I like being able to crayon."

Jill works at Aspen Ridge Retirement Village and Mark drives a total of 80 miles each day to his job in Alanson. Although both claim imperfection as far as being parents, the many smiles and hugs, the easy interaction between children and parents, proclaim the Brazeltons as just perfect enough.



Adopted siblings Andrew (l), Emily and James enjoy the trampoline in the back yard of the Brazelton's modest bungalow, while their new sister, Riley, 17, looks on.

Tracie Cary, DHS foster care specialist for Otsego County also agreed that perfection is not a criteria, but there are some expectations of potential foster parents.

“They must meet with a licensing worker.” said Cary. “There is a criminal history check, medical evaluation and a family assessment. Foster parent training is a requirement. If a family is not able to be a foster home, other opportunities to volunteer, such as being a mentor, are also available.”

For more information on fostering children in Otsego County, call Cary at 989-732-1702. For general information about foster care and adoption, visit www.michigan.gov/fostercare and www.michigan.gov/adoption on the Web.

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