

Church of the Adopted Child

Written by Carol Pomeday
Wednesday, 06 October 2010 15:42 -



Adopted and foster children have a special place in the hearts of the congregation of Friedens Church in Port Washington

When the Rev. Brandon Lemons and his wife Shelly were interviewed last year for the job of pastor at Friedens Evangelical Church in Port Washington, the couple asked how the congregation and Port Washington would react if they adopted a child who didn't look like them.

"Every single person was so excited to speak about the families in the parish that had adopted children," Mrs. Lemons said.

"I had chills from my head to my toes. I thought, 'Wow, God is so good that he could lead us to this church that is so welcoming to adoption.' It was kind of a miracle."

The couple is in the process of adopting a boy from Africa, confident he will be loved by the congregation.

Of the 170 people who attend services each week, Mrs. Lemons said 40 to 50 of them are part of an adopted or foster family in some way. Children and adults have been adopted from the United States, India, Romania, Guatemala and other countries. Foster children come from various ethnic backgrounds.

"It's nice to know our son will see other children with his color skin and a white mother and

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father. It's good for him to see other families like his," Mrs. Lemons said.

"It's not just Friedens. The whole Port Washington community appears very open to adoption."

The congregation, which has always been supportive of adoptive families, is going a step further, starting Friedens Forever Families Fund to help with the costs involved in adoption and foster care.

Its first fundraiser will be the Forever Families 5K Run and Walk on Saturday. There will also be a bake sale and silent auction.

The cost of international adoptions can easily exceed \$40,000, said Rose Morgan, church council president, who is organizing the event.

The fund will also help foster families with expenses, such as school fees, clothing, athletic equipment and tuition costs.

"If people think foster parents are getting rich, they are mistaken. The pay they get doesn't begin to cover the cost," Morgan said.

A portion of the funds will also go to orphanages to help the approximately 175 million children worldwide who are waiting for a home, she said.

Friedens' previous two pastors — Mark Voll and Philip Schowalter — adopted children.

Among the runners Saturday will be 15-year-old Katie Arhelger, who was born in Calcutta, India, and adopted at 6 months by Michele and Dan Arhelger. She is a sophomore at Port Washington High School.

Katie's adoptive mother died in 2008 from heart and kidney failure following surgery to replace a heart valve the previous year. She was in the intensive care unit for four months.

During that time, Katie's father was diagnosed with cancer and underwent chemotherapy, radiation and three surgeries. Katie spent a lot of time in hospitals with her family.

"I had my real family, my church family and my hospital family," said Katie, who wants to be a nurse. "I know every corner of St. Luke's Hospital (in Milwaukee) and had fun with the nurses."

Katie and her father are very close. When she needs a woman to talk to, there are several in the congregation she can turn to.

"If my family had decided to adopt a child from Peru instead of India, I would probably not be alive," Katie said.

Katie plans to run with classmate Paul Schlenvogt, 16, who was adopted from Romania when he was 4 by Doris and Gary Schlenvogt. His 13-year-old sister, Bobbi, was 2 at the time.

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“But it was like having two 2-year-olds because Paul was so behind in language and fine motor skills,” Mrs. Schlenvogt said. “He was the perfect completion for our family. He was the missing link to the puzzle.”

Although they squabble like most siblings, the teenagers said they couldn't imagine not growing up together.

The Kohn family is the one most people point to when foster care and adoption is mentioned. Ed and Lila Kohn were foster parents to numerous children and adopted a teenage girl.

Now their daughter and son-in-law Litha and Gary Mueller care for infants who are removed from their homes because of abuse. The Muellers adopted Elijah, an African-American boy.

Litha's brother Kent Kohn also adopted a child and her sister Lisa Krier helps with her nieces and nephews.

Morgan said all the money raised by the fundraisers will be given to families or orphanages. She expects it to be replenished each year.

Mrs. Lemons agreed.

“We firmly believe there will always be Friedens families in the adoption process or fostering children because of the strong legacy we have here, and we will always support them,” she said.

Rev. Lemons said he's impressed with the congregation's commitment to caring for orphans.

“It's exciting to see the congregation rally around this fundraiser,” he said. “The money is important because it will help families, but I think equally important is the awareness it's raising for the needs of orphans around the world. I feel blessed to be part of a parish that values adoption and foster care.”

“When people adopt children who are in need of a ‘forever family’ that is a powerful illustration of God's love for us and a constant reminder of his act of adopting us into his ‘forever family.’”

The run/walk will start at 9 a.m. Oct. 9 at Friedens Evangelical Church, 454 N. Milwaukee St. Registration will be from 8 to 8:40 a.m. The fee is \$30. For more information, call 284-2471.

Friedens adoptive and foster families include (front row, from left) Katie Tyree, Olivia Brown, Elijah Mueller, (second row) Paul Schlenvogt, Alyssa Brown, Melissa Strand, (third row) Beverly Tyree, Melanie Strand, Litha Mueller holding a foster child, Grace Mueller holding a foster baby, (fourth row) Mike Brown, David Wetzel, Ian Tyree, Doris Feider-Schlenvogt, Roberta Schlenvogt, Ilynn Brown, (back row) Robert Tyree, Jacob Mueller, Gary Mueller holding a foster child, Shelly Lemons, Rev. Brandon Lemons, Gary Schlenvogt and Ed Kohn. Photo by Sam Arendt