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## 54 Kids and Counting

By Diane Claytor



Foster Moms Kristin Koelzer, left, and Nancy DeWeese look at a recent picture of former foster child and newest member of the Koelzer family, Isaac. Photo Diane Claytor

challenging for me. I'm not good at the discipline part. But I'm really good at getting up at 2 a.m., feeding a baby, getting him back to sleep."

A neo-natal nurse at Children's Hospital Oakland, DeWeese was working in the intensive care nursery, taking care of very sick babies who were often there for months. Knowing many did not have strong families to go home to, DeWeese said she would worry about them long after they were gone. "I kept thinking, here I've done all this work to get them better and I'd love to be involved in their development, see them grow." So she went home and convinced her family that they should foster children. "Our youngest child was in first grade. All four were happy, healthy, doing well in school and a joy to raise. We had the resources to help others. It was something I was so passionate about," DeWeese reported. "I really wanted more children in the house. I love what having a baby in the home does for a family."

Luckily, the rest of the DeWeese family agreed, with one caveat. "We would take babies in, care for them and do whatever was needed for as long as it was needed, but we would not adopt," DeWeese explained.

For the next 26 years, that's exactly what they did - 34 times. Most of their babies lived with them for up to a year - some less, some more. Most were picked up directly from the hospital. "Our home was their first home," DeWeese noted. The majority had been exposed to drugs and/or alcohol and many of their birth mothers had received no pre-natal care.

The goal of the foster care system is to reunite children with their biological family. Sometimes this is not possible; in those cases, the hope is that a family will come forward to adopt the children,

For 26 years, Moragans Nancy and Gary DeWeese have had a hand in lovingly raising 34 kids. And that's not even counting their four biological children, all now adults. On the other side of town, Kristin and Tim Koelzer have, over the past 12 years, warmly and caringly welcomed 20-plus children who temporarily lived with them in their beautiful Sanders Ranch home. And that's in addition to their daughter, now a college senior, and twins, who will graduate from high school this year.

The DeWeese and Koelzer families can easily be called angels. They are foster families, unselfishly taking in, nurturing, caring for and loving babies who, through no fault of their own, are unable to safely live with their biological families. In 2014, Contra Costa County alone had close to 1,200 children in the foster care system.

Nancy DeWeese proudly states that she has always been a baby person. "I wanted 6 or 7 kids," she proclaimed. But once they had four healthy, happy kids, "My husband said that's enough. And he was right," she acknowledged. "Teenagers are more

providing them with a loving home in which to grow and flourish.

DeWeese sounds like every proud parent when she talks of her 'kids.' Her eyes light up as she tells story after story. A back bedroom is filled with children's furniture and toys and hanging prominently on the wall is a collage featuring photos of 34 beautiful babies. Eleven of the DeWeese foster children were adopted and DeWeese maintains an excellent relationship with most of them, as well as their adoptive families. Over the years, she's attended their sporting events, family gatherings and birthday parties. She receives updates, cards and pictures. One of her 'kids' recently called to excitedly report that he is about to become a parent himself. She proudly displays pictures of these 11 kids in her living room and, as she shows them off, touching each one, the love she feels is obvious.

DeWeese readily admits that it's always hard having to give a child up; she said she could never have done this if she hadn't known that her own children could never be taken away from her. "We came in knowing we wanted to help lots of children and that we weren't going to keep any of them. That doesn't mean that I didn't get emotional and weak-kneed each time one had to leave," she said.

As president of the Contra Costa Foster Family Network, DeWeese works with foster families throughout the county, offering education, advice and support. "I always advise new foster parents that their job is to love and nurture their foster children for whatever time they have them."

As for her biological children who are now having children of their own - nine and counting - DeWeese said she loves what being a foster family did for them as they were growing up. "It definitely had a positive effect and I imagine that some, if not all, will become foster parents themselves someday."

Kristin and Tim Koelzer also love kids and love being parents. New to Moraga in 2000, Kristin Koelzer saw DeWeese at church holding an adorable five-week-old baby. Koelzer started asking questions. As she learned more about what DeWeese did, she and her husband decided fostering would be a good way for them to give back and continue having young children in their lives. They began the foster training and approval process. "We also wanted to get approved for adoption," Koelzer said, "just in case we were ever in a situation where we fell in love with a child we were fostering." And it's a good thing they did.

In 2003, the Koelzers received their first foster placement. "Calvin was a beautiful, five pound African-American boy and we all instantly fell in love with him," Koelzer said. In fact, she noted, everyone fell in love with him. "He became a fixture in Lamorinda; everyone embraced him." After six months, the County found the home where his two older siblings, also adopted, were living; the adoptive parents wanted to add Calvin to their family. But, Koelzer said, "We loved him, knew we could give him a good home and wanted to adopt him. I absolutely did not want to give him up." The County believed the other home would be a better fit. As Koelzer told the story of losing Calvin, even now, 12 years later, her eyes filled with tears and her voice choked up. "It was such an amazing experience having him," she said. "And it was very tough on all of us when he left - we had to grieve the loss of a child." While the Koelzer family remained close with both Calvin and his adoptive family, and, in fact, still have contact, "I knew I never wanted to go through anything like that again," Koelzer explained.

Although there were several other longer-term placements over the next 12 years, the Koelzers began doing mostly short-term respite care - taking in kids whose foster families needed relief, were going on vacation, looking for a short break. "It was similar to babysitting," Koelzer noted. "It was great still having babies around, but because we knew it was for a short time, we didn't get quite so emotionally attached."

In 2012, when their older daughter went off to college, "instead of getting a puppy, I put our name back on the emergency care list," Koelzer said with a chuckle. Six weeks later, 2-month-old Isaac came into their lives. "His birthday is the same as mine, which we took as an omen." There were so

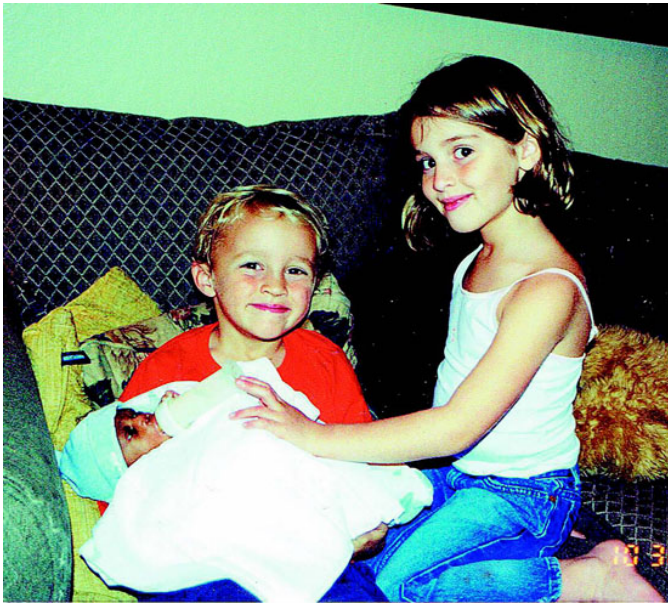
many other signs that "Tim and I knew this child was placed in our lives for a reason," Koelzer, a spiritual woman, continued. "He deserved a good life, we loved him and we certainly didn't want him to go back into the system." Within the year, the Court terminated the birth mother's parental rights and the Koelzers began adoption proceedings. It was a very lengthy process, but last year, Isaac officially became a member of the Koelzer family.

Koelzer knows Isaac's biological mother and knows that she loved him but, sadly, was unable to care for him. "Isaac will always know where he came from and that he was loved. He is social, funny and energetic. He just exudes happiness," Koelzer reported. But, she admitted, he has issues that are common in children whose birth mothers abused drugs. "It's nothing we can't handle and every day it gets better. He's already in an early intervention program through the Moraga School District and is receiving amazing support."

Koelzer, who is a marketing consultant and teaches at Saint Mary's College, plans to continue doing respite foster care. DeWeese, who still works at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital and helps out with her grandchildren, said once she retires, she'll "definitely take in babies again."

Like DeWeese, Koelzer believes fostering has taught her biological kids so much. "I know this experience has had such a positive impact on them and I know one thing for sure," she said. "They will always serve others ... because of what they've seen and experienced."

Both Koelzer and DeWeese praised the Lamorinda community for the love and support they so willingly gave. Local pediatricians provided services to all the foster children at no charge; friends have lovingly embraced the children over the years. And both are so humbled by their roles as foster parents. "It's been far more rewarding than I ever thought it would be," DeWeese said. "And it's had more of a far-reaching influence than I ever thought it would - on us, our children and our community."



Five-year-old twins Matt and Maddie Koelzer hold Calvin, the first Koelzer foster placement, in 2003. Photo provided



The Koelzer family, from left: Tim, Kit, Isaac, Kristin, Maddie and Matt Photo Terry Riggins Photography

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

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