



## To find a forever family

Focus on the Family is working to raise awareness among churches of the 130,000 kids in U.S. foster care needing permanent homes. And the woman leading the charge is doing it by example.

By Karla Dial

Walk into the Colorado home of John and Kelly Rosati, and you're greeted by controlled, happy chaos — followed immediately by Koa, their 1-year-old Labradoodle. John, a 47-year-old retired Air Force master sergeant, is in the kitchen, cooking dinner for Kelly, their four kids, and whatever guests might be scheduled to drop by this particular evening. Kelly, 41, is in the living room, holding 5-year-old Hope on her lap. The other three children — 9-year-old Daniel, 8-year-old Anna Grace, and 7-year-old Joshua — are busy playing Wii downstairs.

Just a normal night in the life of an average family. But this is a family designed through choice, not biology. And tough choices at that. All four Rosati children were adopted from the foster care system. The kids' exuberance may be where that initial impression of controlled chaos comes from, but what lingers long after everyone settles down is a sense of pervasive peace. It's in everything from the way John and Kelly reason with a child through a disciplinary issue to the words they use when telling their story. They never say "We adopted ..." It's always "[this child] came home [in such-and-such a year]" — as if these children always belonged to them, and they had only to discover it.

And yet this is hardly the life John and Kelly had envisioned for themselves. In 2000, they'd been happily married for nine years. John was in the Air Force, and Kelly was executive director of the Hawaii Family Forum, a state policy council associated with Focus on the Family. "We had been doing a variety of sanctity (of life) work in the public square related to pregnancy-resource centers," she recalls. "I asked the director of an adoption agency what kind of barriers exist that we could help change to do a better job of promoting adoption." That was the first time she heard the numbers: Half a million kids nationwide languish in the foster care system; of those, 130,000 are waiting to be adopted. Every year, 26,000 kids reach 18 and age out of foster care without finding permanent families.

"Because we don't have orphanages in America, we think we don't have orphans — but we do," says Kelly, who is now the senior director for the sanctity of human life department at Focus on the Family. "These are kids who wake up every day not knowing if they are going to be moved that day, who have no permanence in their lives. Many of them have only known neglect, abuse and abandonment. "So we were just really challenged that if we were going to be pro-life, we needed to do something about this and not just look away." Through Kelly's work at Focus, she's making sure others don't look away, either.



## One family's story

The Rosatis started by becoming foster parents — taking classes, doing a home study with their case worker, getting fingerprinted for background checks, etc. Shortly afterward, they took in an 11-year-old girl, and found it to be an eye-opening experience. “She lived with us for one month, and it was like a year,” Kelly says. “It about did us in, because she was very sick emotionally. She’d been violent in the past, and after our home, she went on to eight different places and then was institutionalized. Nobody told us; nobody prepared us. All we knew was typical parenting for healthy kids. What we learned, in a very painful way, was that we were not equipped to help these kids who’d been through abuse, neglect and abandonment.”

After a summer of doing their own healing — and a lot of praying and getting educated — the Rosatis gave foster care another shot, with adoption in mind. Daniel was born addicted to crystal meth, with fetal alcohol effects. Only 6 months old, he needed physical and occupational therapy. “Babies like that scream like they can shatter all the glass in the house, and he could do it for hours on end,” Kelly recalls. “It also came to our attention that he had attachment issues. Just when he started to get more independent and I was happy about that, I was told it was a really bad sign and that I needed to therapeutically parent him — I needed to be in his face holding him for eight hours a day. Only John and I could hold him and feed him — no one else — for two months. “If we hadn’t been through what we’d experienced with the 11-year-old, we’d have thought it was a lot of baloney. I shudder to think where we’d be now with Daniel if we hadn’t heeded that advice.”

Ten months later, just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, life in the Rosati house had settled into a manageable routine. Then, Kelly felt a strong impression to “call the social worker because there was ‘a great need,’ ” she says. “I couldn’t get it off my mind.” So she called and left a brief message. About 8 p.m. the next night, the social worker called back. “She said a baby had been born to a mentally ill homeless woman — did I want her? I said, ‘Can we pray about this and call you back?’ She said we had 15 minutes to decide,” Kelly says. “We knew then why the Lord had laid it on my heart so heavily to call. She was only 2 days old, our little girl Anna Grace.”

In 2005, the family was happy and settled and not looking to expand. Confronted with the enormity of the needs of orphans in Africa, however, the Rosatis resolved to welcome home another child. They pursued adopting from Kenya, only to find every door closing in their faces. Then, Kelly received a call from a friend who ran a local adoption agency, reminding her she’d once said she wanted a toddler — and she had just the toddler for them. “She said he’d been in five foster homes in a year, had been abused and neglected in foster care and before that. He was 4, not potty-trained, he didn’t talk, and he might be mentally retarded,” Kelly says. “I can’t even tell you how I mumbled under my breath, because I was not wanting that, but it was very clear it was God’s timing. “We went to meet him the next day, and my heart did this crazy loopety-loop, and I just went crazy for him!” she says. “I was like, ‘Wow, Lord, how did you do that? Now I love three kids, not two!’ ”

Several months later, the same friend called again — this time crying because her 2-year-old granddaughter was completely destabilizing the home where she and her husband were raising their five adopted children.



“She said they’d made a really hard decision that they couldn’t parent this little one, and she would need an adoptive family,” Kelly says. “And there was only one family in the whole wide world she would trust her granddaughter with. I told her I’d have to check with John. I thought he would think she was crazy. So I went out to the garage and told him, and he said to me, ‘Oh, whatever God has!’ I just knew in that moment.” The next day, the entire flock of Rosatis went to meet their new family member. “She’s 2, running around trying to bite all the other kids, wearing this dirty diaper, and they all think she’s cute,” Kelly recalls. “They got it. Daniel and Anna said we would take care of her.”

And so it came to pass that when National Adoption Day — a decade-long tradition in which the courts and adoption agencies volunteer their time to finalize mass adoptions — rolled around in the fall of 2007, Kelly Rosati not only emceed the event for the state of Hawaii, but participated by finalizing the adoption of her youngest daughter, Hope. Six months later, the family moved to Colorado — and through Focus on the Family, found their personal ministry growing into a national movement.

### **Ministering through government**

Shortly after arriving at Focus, Kelly called Dr. Sharen Ford, the manager of permanency services for Colorado’s Division of Child Welfare Services. If Focus handled the logistics and spread the word through churches, Kelly asked, could Ford use her contacts to get adoption agencies and county government officials together to help Colorado Springs families learn about and start the adoption process all in one day? Absolutely, Ford said. Fourteen licensed child placement agencies came to New Life Church for the first Wait No More event in November 2008. During the half-day event, 1,300 people learned more about the 700 kids in Colorado’s foster care system looking for permanent homes. By the end of the day, 265 families had taken steps to initiate the adoption process. The numbers doubled Ford’s wildest expectations, and set child welfare advocates nationwide abuzz as Colorado’s foster care adoption waiting list dropped to 550. In 2009, Kelly traveled to the White House to discuss the issue with other child welfare advocates.

Wait No More events also have been held in St. Louis, Los Angeles and Loveland, Colo., resulting in another 1,300 attendees hearing the message, and 338 families beginning the adoption process. According to National Adoption Day figures, the average foster care child looking for a “forever family” is 8 years old and spends two years waiting to be adopted; of the 130,000 kids available, 19 percent spend five years or more in the system before they are adopted.

But by Kelly’s estimates, there are more than 300,000 churches across the United States — and that equals more than enough families for these kids. “If only one family from every third church would do this,” she says, “we could wipe it out.” The church-government partnership is making a huge difference. “One of the things Sharen and I worked on is (helping) people in state government be faith-competent, and people in the faith community to be government-competent,” Kelly says. “We could get everybody in every church fired up and ready to do this, but if they don’t understand the process in the agencies, people will become so frustrated they don’t want to do it anymore. The only way the adoption system can work is if you go through the background checks and get available.”



Ford — one of 14 recipients of the federal government’s 2009 National Adoption Award — agrees.

“In most states, 75 percent or more of kids (in foster care) go back home, and that’s the goal,” she says. “For the (other) kids, it’s our responsibility to find forever families. It takes people who aren’t perfect, because none of our kids are. It takes people willing to do a lot of giving to kids who’ve had people take a lot from them. We need families who are flexible, with a sense of humor, who are willing to be a mother bear for their kids, give them tough love and advocate for them in school and the community. “Our kids have seen a lot of loss and a lot of hurt, and they just wonder, ‘Is anyone ever going to step up for me?’ Not for a week or a month, but consistently, like a marriage, till death do us part.”

As John and Kelly can tell you, it’s not an easy road. It’s a lifelong commitment to children who often come with a variety of short- or long-term physical, emotional and behavioral issues. They tend to be older, with special needs, and often come as part of a package of siblings. But as the Rosatis will also tell you, unconditional love not only conquers fears, it heals wounds. “If you’re someone who’s really looking for a ministry to sink your teeth into, that’s full-time and heavy-adventure-forever kind of stuff,” John says, “this is it.”

## National movement

At least 25 states have asked Focus on the Family to work with them on their own Wait No More events, hoping to replicate the results. “As budgets get really tight, state agencies are realizing we can’t handle this on our own. We need to encourage our churches and faith communities to pick up the slack,” says Jim Kallinger, the chief child advocate in Florida, where the next Wait No More event will be held on Jan. 30. “Even if we had all the money in the world, government still makes a lousy parent. It takes real parents to do this. If people don’t have faith, why would they care for somebody who’s having a hard time? The caring and compassion is in the Church.”

Of the 19,000 children in foster care in Florida, 850 are available for adoption, according to Kallinger’s office. A hefty chunk — some say 700 — are in South Florida, where 4KIDS of South Florida has been working with 190 churches for the last decade to place kids in permanent homes. Along with four other Christian foster care providers in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties, 4KIDS is sponsoring the next Wait No More. “We’ve sheltered over 9,000 kids since 1997,” says executive director Tom Lukasik. “We’re excited we’re kicking off the new year with that event. By partnering with Focus on the Family, it gives credibility to our efforts. If we add another 100 churches, we can have a significant impact on the foster care situation in Florida, especially for teenagers. There truly is a cost-savings measure for the state when the Church goes back to being the Church.”

There’s also a cost-counting measure for adoptive families — but Kelly and John have found that as they seek to bless children without expectations, they’ve found themselves far more blessed in the long run.

“These kids have been through hell in their very young lives, and God is using adoptive parents to help them heal,” Kelly says. “It’s about changing us, how to love and accept and model the unconditional love of the Father — and kids begin to heal in the midst of that.”



“We’re the Church. We’re the body of Christ, and God has given us the blessing of family. It’s not about what we can get — it’s about what we can bring.”

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