

INFONET



O.J. and Henrietta Frazier

The Fraziers: A Lesson In Caring

By Elizabeth Billips, True Citizen Staff Writer

Bringing up children today is one tough job. But raising someone else's children? Well, that takes special people - O.J. & Henrietta Frazier fit the bill to a tee.

The Frazier family began its great expansion in 1991. The high school sweethearts were busy raising six children of their own, but as the older ones set out into adulthood, Kimberly found herself in a house brimming with boys. Rather than relishing her position as the only daughter left at home, Kimberly began begging her parents for a sister.

The Fraziers found that they too longed for another child and after much consideration decided to become foster parents. They hoped for a little girl to raise as their own. Their hopes were soon sparked to life as 13-year-old waltzed into their home and their hearts. "She has been our blessing," Frazier said with a soft smile spreading across his face. Mary slipped the stone from a spring of love that has showered 18 children in the past eight years. The parade of children is enough to send the brain spinning and put even the Brady Bunch to shame. Now 21, Mary is the oldest in the crew, living at home and commuting to college. The house is literally spilling over with teenagers: 17-year-old Kimberly, 16-year-old Helen, 15-year-old O.J., and 12-year old Lindsey. Pulling up the rear are Charnesia, who is almost seven, and 19-month-old Shahonda. The Fraziers make no distinction between the children, whether natural, adopted or foster. "They're all our children," Frazier said without hesitation. "This is not just babysitting...this is real life. We form life bonds."

For Mrs. Frazier, a house full of children is absolutely normal. Being next-to-the-oldest of 12 siblings, nursing & mothering is simply second nature. "Children have always been my thing," she said, brushing her lips against the baby's forehead. "All I know is children." A visit to their home confirms the deep lines of devotion entangling each child who has been a part of the Frazier family. Photographs of gurgling babies, giggling preschoolers and proud teenagers line the walls of the family room, creating a colorful mosaic of life and love.

"The hardest part is turning them loose," Frazier said softly, looking down at his well worn work boots. "The children reach a stable point after all the trials and ups and downs, and so often when they leave, I know the parents aren't going to do all that they should. When a child leaves it's almost like a death within our family, and we actually go through a grieving stage. The rewards, however, are great, Mrs. Frazier said. "The hugs, the kisses, the laughter...the love."

Many children come to the Fraziers cloaked in protective shells layered thick by years of neglect or abuse. Their recipe for helping children break back into a world of trust is richly stocked with patience, understanding and trust in God. "We couldn't do it if we didn't have God in our lives," Mrs. Frazier said. "It gives the kids a sense of stability and order, Mr. Frazier explained. "There's a reason why things are right or wrong. Laws were built on religious fundamentals. We can relate to those rather than just 'do what I say. For me and my wife, religion offers strength...to know that there is a higher order and we are just stewards. It's more than feeding the kids and giving them a place to stay, and our religion helps us recognize that we have to do the best we can."

Frazier is the president of the Burke County Foster Parent Association and Regional Vice-President in the Adoptive and Foster Parent Association of Georgia. In Burke county, he's become something of a local expert, and he'll be the first to tell you that foster parenting is a family affair. When it comes to a productive household, he believes it takes each and every member to make it work. "It takes the whole family, not just me and my wife," he said. Their own children had to be willing to share their parents and home with new kids who often carried adult sized problems on their little shoulders.

The Fraziers made a fateful decision eight years ago...a decision they have not once regretted. "These kids are life," Frazier said gently. "I can't think of a better way to live."

Parents Dismiss Negatives About Raising Foster Children

By Kelly R. Daugherty

Rise Wampler knows the joys and sorrows of being a foster parent. She also believes the stigma attached to foster children is keeping other potential parents away in Henry County's desparate hour. Currently, 121 children in Henry County are out of their old homes by court order due to abuse or neglect, but only 80 have been placed in homes.

Sandra Chavis, deputy director of the Henry County Department of Family and Children Services, said not all children are necessarily waiting on homes, but many are. "Some are in emergency shelters and some have medical problems so that they need to be placed in an institution that can provide that kind of treatment," Chavis said.

Wampler and her husband, who have housed 21 children in the past four years, said she is trying to raise awareness in the community since some Henry County children are having to be housed in other counties. "They have to leave everything they're familiar with," she said. "To stay in the same county, they could still see some things they're familiar with. They're already scared out of their minds." Wampler, president of the

Henry County Adoptive and Foster Parent Association, said many people look at the words "foster parent" like they're "bad words."

"People look at you like you've taken in some dirty little child," said Wampler, who currently houses four foster children. "It's not what people think it is. These kids have already been abused, neglected or just thrown away. THEY just want to be loved."

Scott and Elizabeth Holtzman of McDonough have adopted two children through the foster care program and hope to adopt two more. "A lot of people are afraid of these kids because they think they'll be like the birth parents," Elizabeth said. "But there is always hope." Elizabeth said the children do come with problems. She was told that one of her foster children would never be able to function in a group setting. "He screamed 24 hours a day," she said. "But now he's a little socialite. I have watched him evolve into the boy God intended him to be. Once you give them the stability they need, they can see themselves in a positive way."

Both the Wampplers and Holtzmans said they persued the foster care program because of their inability to have children of their own. "We didn't want to adopt overseas like most people," Wampler said. "We wanted to help the people in our own community first. Even though we can't keep them, we just wanted to have a child here at Christmas. It's still one of the best ways to adopt."

Elizabeth said she has had such a positive experience with the foster care program in Henry County that she will continue to keep her home open to those in need of temporary shelter.

"A lot of people still don't know that after a year and a half, the foster kids must either be reunited with their birth parents or with a permanent family," she said. "The foster parents get to choose first, too."

"For children reunited with their birth parents," Wampler said, "it can be a heartbreaking experience. One of the hardest parts of foster care is letting go. My heart broke to let one little boy go, but I watch this woman who's raising him and she is succeeding and she loves him."

"It gives you a sense of accomplishment to know you have made a difference like that. He is going to grow into a wonderful boy."



JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD

Left, Rise Wampler of McDonough started collecting dolls soon after she and her husband learned they could not have children, but now she looks after four foster children.

Below, Amy Painter picks up toys Monday afternoon in the room of the 15-month-old she is fostering.

Photos by John Beck