



New Homes, New Hope

Professional Parenting and Adoption Plus offer a brighter future for children in foster care

By Kate Cahow

Tiffany and Jacob are as close as a sister and brother can be. And for reasons most children and their parents cannot begin to understand.

When Tiffany was 8 years old and Jacob 7, they escaped the severe chronic abuse and neglect of their biological family and were placed in Catawba County's foster care system. There, they bounced from one home to another over the next two years.

Through the services of Professional Parenting and Adoption Plus, two outreach programs administered by Appalachian State University, Jacob and Tiffany, now ages 15 and 16, found homes with adoptive parents they love and trust.

For more than 20 years, Professional Parenting (PP) has provided stable foster care for children in North Carolina who have been removed from their biological families with no hope of reunification. Most of these children need specialized care and treatment due to backgrounds of abuse and neglect, or for physical and/or behavioral needs. Adoption Plus (A+) grew out of PP's efforts to provide permanent adoptive placement for these children.

With offices in Winston-Salem and Asheville, the programs are part of Appalachian Family Innovations, an umbrella of child welfare and family service programs in Western North Carolina that operates out of Appalachian's Reich College of Education. Founded in 1973, the project was known as Bringing It All Back Home until 2003.

In North Carolina, the number of children in foster care in 2006 reached about 10,000, with many waiting for a family to adopt them. PP and A+ were able to serve approximately 100 of those children who could not be served by other agencies due to their high level of needs as a result of early life trauma, and chronic abuse and neglect.

"Most of our kids have major emotional problems," said Bonnie Judkins, director of Professional Parenting. "Probably 80 percent of them have been sexually abused. This type of abuse is very traumatic. Extensive work is required to help these kids establish relationship skills and to heal.

"The critical part of their treatment is finding a family they can trust and be a part of into adulthood. What makes our program unique is the emphasis placed on teaching skills to parents who can create a positive, structured environment for the kids geared towards social and academic success. Children learn life skills such as accepting consequences, following instructions and problem solving," Judkins said.

Judkins and a staff of highly specialized

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DREAMS COME TRUE: Tiffany, pictured in the first bedroom she's ever called her own, would like to be a special education teacher. Jacob, above, loves to learn and discover new things. He dreams of becoming an archaeologist.

support professionals work to recruit and train foster families who will provide these children with a loving, supportive and safe environment, and to ensure the match will be a good one for both child and family.

Through 40 hours of pre-service training, families learn about specific behavioral strategies, the impacts of abuse and neglect, developmental milestones, and how to work with community organizations, such as mental health services, the medical establishment, and special services in the school system, to serve the specific needs of each child.

After the child is in the home, the parents are provided with round-the-clock support and consultation to help them and the child through the transition and healing process.

"We try to keep all of our kids with one family as long as they are in foster care," she said. "Our hope is that families become attached to the children and choose to adopt them. Stability and structure are things these kids haven't had in their lives, and they are essential to their recovery and healthy development.

"Every day, they have to know what to expect and what is expected of them. They have to know when bedtime is and, if they act out, that they can rely on fair and consistent consequences."

According to Judkins, to be a part of their program, foster and adoptive parents must be strong, nurturing individuals who can love these children regardless of their behavior.

"We focus on empathy with our families because children who have been traumatized early in life act out that trauma until they are treated therapeutically," she said. "The individuals who fit our profile are amazing. They understand these kids' needs and wrap their lives around them."

Linda Swarts and Karen Hensley are two of the "amazing" individuals Judkins described. Both live in Asheville and have been involved in Professional Parenting for many years. Swarts is Jacob's adoptive mother. Hensley and her husband, Roger, are Tiffany's adoptive parents. Prior to their work with Professional Parenting, they were strangers. But today, the Hensleys and the Swartses are one family living under two roofs.

Swarts, a former day care director, was part of the Professional Parenting family for nine years. In that time she worked with more

than 50 kids. She also pioneered PP's therapeutic respite program, which provides respite care to weary, over-stressed foster parents, and intensive therapeutic care for the child. She met Jacob through the respite program, did foster care with him for a few months, and finally adopted him last September.

Swarts describes the help she received from PP and A+ during the transition from foster parent to adoption as "fabulous."

"They provide so much support through in-home consultations, workshops, their library, video trainings, and both parent and child support groups," she said.

"When Jacob was angry and acting out, they reminded me his anger was not about me.

He was dealing with issues that went way back in his history. They helped us both recognize that and come up with effective strategies to help Jacob change his behavior. Through the program, Jacob has learned to respect, trust and love himself. These are skills kids coming into the program don't have," Swarts said.

After Jacob's adoption was secured, Swarts said Jacob's behavior transformed.

"I'm amazed at the calm that's come over him, the change in his maturity," she said. "His teachers and program managers all have remarked on the changes. I think he just needed to know that he had a real home, a real family.

"Tiffany and Jacob are so fortunate they found their way into Professional Parenting. They got the best care available. And, through the program, we are now one family. We get the kids together quite often. They play basketball, rake the leaves together and jump in them. Karen and I are basically co-parenting these kids, and it's been a blessing for all of us," Swarts said.

Hensley, who was a professional parent for seven years, couldn't agree more. The story she tells of her adopted daughter Tiffany is about a skinny 11-year-old girl with a basket full of emotions and horrible memories.

"She had night screams and terrors every night for a year," she said. "It was the memories of her life with her family, and she just couldn't cope. She'd say, 'Momma, it's like a machine gun. They're coming at my head all the time.'"

"There were times I needed support 24 hours a day. Professional Parenting was a huge partner in this. A program manager would show up whenever I needed help. They would go and sit with Tiffany and process with her whatever she was going through."

Hensley and her husband fostered Tiffany for two years before they adopted her. Today, Tiffany continues to make progress. She is a confident young lady of 16, more than capable of speaking for herself.

"When I was little, I never knew when someone was going to hurt me. I didn't know who to trust. When I first came to Karen's, I knew this was my home. For the first time in my life, I have peace," Tiffany said. ■

How You Can Help

- Spread the word about the need for foster and adoptive families
- Be a weekend respite family
- Help with financial donations
- Learn more at www.professionalparentingnc.org

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— Bonnie Judkins, Professional Parenting director.



ONE FAMILY, TWO ROOFS: Karen Hensley and her adopted daughter Tiffany visit with her brother Jacob and his adopted mom, Linda Swarts. Both families live in Asheville.