The Southwest Kansas
Register
dcdiocese.org/register
Vol. XLIV, No. 15
Sunday, Nov. 22, 2009
The Newspaper of the Diocese of Dodge City

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St. Martha of Bethany

Lizeth Lopez, 9, portrays St. Martha of Bethany. Students from Sacred Heart Cathedral School dressed as their favorite saint in celebration of All Saints Day. For more photos, see Page 16.

Photo by David Myers

Transforming the world
one adoption at a time

Photo by Rebecca Ford

(Clockwise from top, left) Selam, Grace, Mark, Kyra, Kambra and Krista Ball of Great Bend.

By Rebecca Ford
Special to the Register

Mark and Krista Ball had four beautiful children when they approached Catholic Social Service to inquire about adoption in 1992: Candace, their oldest, was eight; twins, Trever and Tyler, were four; Dayna was three.

"We would have liked to have had more kids, and for whatever reason we weren't having them, so we thought about adoption," Mark recalls.

Mark and Krista attended Catholic Social Service workshops about adoption, and created an informational folder about their own family. Birth mothers who were looking for a family to adopt their child had an opportunity to look at the Ball family profile.

"You tell all about your family and Catholic Social Service would take your folder to the respective mothers," Mark said. "They'd look at us and say 'Well, they already have four kids. They don't need any more.' So nobody would pick us."

Then, one day in 1997, a woman about to go into labor walked into the Catholic Social Service office. Mary Reed, the social worker, showed the folders of families to the expecting mother so that she could pick out a family. "No, you pick out the family," the woman told Mary. Mary picked Mark and Krista. Grace was born just a few days later. "We say it was by the Grace of God that she came into our family," Krista explains.

(See "Transforming..." Page 11)

Transforming the world one adoption at a time

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Heartbreak and Joy

Busy with their family of five, Mark and Krista also found time to take care of infants for short periods of time through the Catholic Social Service Cradle Care Program — a specialized foster care program for infants needing two to four weeks of care between birth and placement with their forever-family.

"We kept several babies like that, but it was so emotional and so heartbreaking," Krista explained. So they decided to look into special needs adoption instead.

"We had felt in our hearts that we were supposed to adopt outside of our race," Krista explains. "That was just kind of something that we felt like God was calling us to do."

> "We visited several orphanages. There was one, a boy's orphanage, that was just the worst: filthy, no electricity, no running water. ... They throw the pan on the floor and the kids eat around on the floor."
>
> -- *Krista Ball*

Working with Special Link Inc., a nonprofit national linking network for the adoption of "harder to place" children, especially African American and biracial children, Mark and Krista located an agency that was really in need of families who were willing to adopt. The difficulty was that agency policy gave the birth mom two weeks to change her mind.

"We had some real heartbreaks," Krista recalls. "We traveled a couple of times to Memphis, and one time in particular, we had this child; we couldn't leave the state with him for two weeks, but we had him in our care for two weeks until the last day, when they called and said 'I'm so sorry, the mom wants the boy back'."

Mark and Krista were about ready to give up when they received a call about Kyra and decided to try one more time. This time, though, Kyra stayed with Cradle Care parents in Tennessee while Mark and Krista called throughout the two-week period to check on her.

"Kyra's adoption went really well and we were able to meet her birth mom and spend time with her," said Krista. Much to Mark and Krista's surprise, they received another call from the adoption agency a few months later: "Sit down . . . we have something to tell you," said the voice on the other end. "The birth mom is pregnant again." Once more, Mark and Krista traveled to Tennessee. This time they picked up Kyra's new little biological sister, Kambra. "It's been real sweet to have the two together," said Krista.

Bonds of Friendship

With four biological children, and three children entering their family through adoption, Mark and Krista found mutual support with friends at their church who had adopted internationally as well as domestically. One day, they received a picture of a young girl named Selam from Ethiopia.

Having traveled to the United States with a large group of children in need of families, Selam had been paired with a kind woman who worked as a doctor. Selam faced a difficult choice. After years of living in the orphanage, she had become used to lots of children and noise. She also wanted her best friend in Ethiopia to have a good home, too. She finally decided that she needed to be with her best friend.

After hearing about Selam's story, Mark and Krista talked about it for a few days. "And then we just jumped into it," Krista recalls. "We called the Gladney Center for Adoption ... and started the whole international adoption process." After the adoption was finalized in April 2008, Krista and a friend traveled to Ethiopia to pick up Selam, while Mark stayed home with the other children. Since then, four families from Mark and Krista's church have adopted a total of nine children from Ethiopia, and ties of friendship have remained intact: Selam and her two close friends, Tarik and Birukti, go to school together in Great Bend where they live with their respective families.

Photo by Rebecca Ford

Close friends in Ethiopia, (from top) Selam Ball, Birukti Their and Tarik Williams have been able to maintain their friendship since being adopted by three different families in Great Bend.

The Gift of Hope

Giving these children a second chance in life has been a remarkable experience for all of those involved in Great Bend. For international adoptions, however, it isn't easy for families or the children. On average, it costs $25,000-$30,000 per child for paperwork that is intended to protect the children from predators and bad situations, and for travel arrangements to pick them up.

"Basically, you know, we sell it just about any way we can," Mark laughs. "You spend $5,000 per child each year anyway for the children you have right now; so if you get a 10-year-old, you would already have saved .... That's a very good deal!"

There are significant adjustment challenges for at least six months once the children arrive. "You can imagine how it is so different," Mark explains. "The first day that Selam got here she probably took a 30-minute shower. You could tell she was just thinking 'hot water!' They would have to bucket water and pour it over each other to bathe, and they wouldn't have hot water; it was cold outside. And the first time she walks into Wal-Mart or Dillons or someplace and there's aisles of stuff as far as you can see . . . it's just a totally different mind-set."

Learning English — they speak Amharic — and adjusting to American food have been two of the most difficult challenges.

For Mark and Krista, however, such challenges pale in the face of orphan life in a developing nation. "We visited several orphanages," Krista recalls. "There was one, a boy's orphanage that was just the worst: filthy, no electricity, no running water. ... They throw the pan on the floor and the kids eat around on the floor."

"If you are 12 years old and you're in Africa, you have a 25 percent chance of being an orphan," Mark explains. "Disease like AIDS, and famine, conflict, [these are] all the things that just make it real easy to be an orphan. There are no jobs for them to work in, especially the girls. The girls have it the worst because there's even less labor; of course, none of it pays anything. It would just be a poverty kind of existence. And a lot of the girls go out and do bad things and live on the streets ... if they're not adopted."

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Children who have been raised in the orphanage receive a little bit of money from the government when they leave the orphanage at 18, but as Krista explains, the kids don't know what do with it and it's gone within 10 minutes.

"Basically," Mark explains, "we are out to give hope to kids who have no hope unless somebody else adopts them .... You could send anybody our way to talk about how to get from here to there, or Catholic Social Service would have ideas too."

For more information on domestic and international adoptions, call Catholic Social Service at (620) 272-0010. For information about the next Adoption Support Group, call (620) 792-1393.

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