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A family opens its home to foster children



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Finding Family

Wedekings grow through fosters and adoptions

BY JOHN CLAYTON

The hardest time was the day they took the little girl away. “There were a lot of tears,” Dustin Wedeking says.

Thirteen foster children, ranging in age from infant to 4 years old, came through Dustin and Ashley Wedeking’s home during a 15-month span that began in 2017. While the stories varied, the children’s backgrounds often shared a similar thread of neglect or abuse.

“We just want to be that positive influence, if we have them for one day or the rest of their lives, to let them know they don’t have to live that way,” Ashley Wedeking says.

But this little girl, barely a year old — she was something special.

The Mineola couple knew all along that the children in their care could be returned to family members as part of kinship placement by Texas Child Protective Services. They fostered the little girl for four months, and then she was gone.

COMPELLED TO HELP

Ashley Wedeking says the couple was called to become foster parents. They went to Lubbock-based Children’s Hope, which operates an on-campus facility for abused and neglected children. The organization also helps pair children with foster parents, and it

assists families in navigating the adoption process. And in addition to being foster parents, the Wedekings also wished to adopt.

When the little girl arrived at the Wedeking home, the couple thought she would complete the family that includes sons Cannin, 9, and Hudson 6. “She was the first foster care placement we ever had,” Ashley Wedeking says. “Losing her was literally like losing your own child.”

The couple had no idea where the little girl would be or if she would be returned to a situation such as the one that drew the attention of Child Protective Services in the first place. They didn’t know if they would ever see her again. They did keep some of her toys as mementos from her brief stay.

WELCOME NEWS

The Wedeking family was overseas on vacation in July when Children’s Hope reached out once again. The little girl was coming back, nine months after she was taken away. The kinship placement had failed.

This time, the plan was for the family to adopt, and the little girl would join them for good. “Losing that nine months was hard, but to see her now and pick her up, there’s no greater feeling,” Ashley Wedeking says.

The family had already grown by one after an infant boy arrived through Children’s Hope as a foster placement in March. “We brought him home from the hospital,” Dustin Wedeking says. The





With the adoption of the little girl and baby boy, the Wedeking family will be complete.



Wedekings expect the adoptions of both the boy and the girl to be finalized by early 2019, and they are thrilled their family has grown quickly.

“I tried to say no. I did say no several times,” Ashley Wedeking says of the 4-month-old boy. “But I’m head over heels for him. He was the piece I think I needed, and now our little girl just pulls everything together.”

FAITH DRIVEN

Dustin Wedeking, who served four years in the U.S. Air Force, now works in the network operations center at Peoples Telephone Cooperative. Ashley Wedeking is a sixth-grade English teacher. The two met during their high school years while working at a local grocery store. They married soon after. He was 19. She was 20.

They made the decision to become a foster family together, which is the way Dustin Wedeking says it needs to be for anyone. “It definitely brought us closer together because we have to lean on each other a lot more,” he says. “We have our two natural children, so if we’re not working together it can be tough.”

The Wedekings, who are members of Lake Fork Baptist Church, say their faith has played an important role in becoming foster parents and then working to adopt.

After serving on several mission trips to Haiti, the couple looked into pursuing an international adoption. But they found too many hurdles and too much expense when trying to work with Haiti’s government. “There’s a lot of corruption,” Dustin Wedeking says. “Someone might tell you \$30,000, but then you get there, and they want more money and then more.”

He says efforts to adopt internationally also required weeks of

travel, which meant added expense, time off of work and time away from the rest of the family.

The couple says both their natural sons have been supportive from the start and welcomed foster brothers and sisters. All of the children fostered by the Wedekings were purposefully younger than Cannin and Hudson so as not to disrupt the family hierarchy, Ashley Wedeking says.

“The boys keep me grounded because they are so great with their fosters,” she says. “It doesn’t matter how many there were or how long they stayed, they loved them.”

Ashley Wedeking did have a point of reference when setting the course into foster care for her family. Her parents, Bobby and Annette Chaney, were foster parents for about two years when she was a teenager, and she says she still sees the impact her parents made on young lives.

“We had a sibling group of three sisters who returned to their home,” Ashley Wedeking says. “We’ll see them out and about, and they still acknowledge my parents and what they did for them.”

Now empty nesters, the Chaney’s reopened their home to foster children in August. While the Wedekings are opting out of the foster program, other members of their family are seeking licenses needed to become foster parents. “Even though our doors are closed, we’re still going to get to be part of this,” Ashley Wedeking says.

She also has advice for those who are considering becoming foster parents in a system that desperately needs them in Texas and beyond. “I think doing this is a calling. If you’ve thought about it, just do it. Dive in,” she says. “Just take those kids and love on them.” 