

# Adoption Success

The Bowman family, parents Valerie (in pink) and Greg (in red), are pictured with eight of their 10 children – one biological son and nine others through adoption and foster care.



# one BIG

## happy family

**T**he idea of adopting children danced in the back of 37-year-old Valerie Bowman's mind when she worked as a nurse in the E.R. and saw foster children come in with their foster parents.

After having one biological son, Valerie was unable to have more children. She and her husband, Greg, 43, wanted more children. So adoption became a viable option for them and a natural alternative because Valerie, herself, was adopted as an infant.

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BY VIRGINIA J. PILLSBURY

There are now 10 kids from different backgrounds, Caucasian, African-American, Russian, Ukrainian and Haitian – ages 19 years to 22 months – who call Bowman “Mom,” and while that may cause interesting comments from bystanders, the mix of color doesn’t bother the kids.

“They don’t see color. They just see love,” says Bowman of her children, who are a mixture of children who started out as foster children, are adopted, foreign adopted, children from adoption disruptions, and one is still in foster care (not pictured in photo) with the Bowmans.

“I’ve found that kids are very resilient,” said Bowman of her adopted children. “They seem to



miss their parents for awhile and then they get acclimated to their new family.”

Bowman said she believes it’s important to explain to her children their circumstances before becoming a part of their family. “I don’t say anything bad about their birth families and I give more information as they get older.”

“We love knowing that we are giving children a good life and positive experiences that they’ll never forget,” said Bowman. Though she says it’s heart wrenching to say goodbye to a child they cared for in their home for a long time, they trust that God will take care of them when they leave.

### All Corners of the Earth – Foreign Adoptions

Clinical psychologists Claire Huisentruit and her husband Val Bee, know firsthand how to prepare and what to be aware of when adopting a child from a foreign country.

Three years ago, they adopted their 7-year-old son, Sean, from the Ukraine, because they knew they could provide a dramatic improvement in the quality of life in a child from an impoverished country. Plus, they knew that with a for-

## Things to Consider

“There are some special medical points to consider if you are adopting a child or children from another country,” says Aylin Ozdemir, M.D., a local pediatrician with Pediatric Associates of Jacksonville. She suggests the following:

- 1 Immunizations should meet U.S. standards.
- 2 Testing for infectious diseases such as HIV, hepatitis B and C, syphilis, tuberculosis and parasites.
- 3 Tests for nutritional disorders including lead poisoning, anemia, rickets and iodine deficiency.
- 4 Tests for vision, hearing and developmental abilities, such as language, as soon as possible.

eign adoption, there was only a small chance of the paternal party wanting to gain custody.

The Bees decided on the Ukraine because at the time, only one visit was needed to the country for the adoption with letters of recommendation, legal, financial, medical, and professional documents in tow.

After being in the Ukraine for a month, the Bees returned home with 4-year-old Sean to greet their biological children, 3-year-old Alex and 5-year-old Kevin. The first meeting, according to the Bees was, “like a cannonball into the family dynamic swimming pool. The nor-

mal sibling rivalry was intense with jealousy issues on both sides.”

Even through all that, the Bees credit having strong support and excellent resources to help with the transition. “Knowing behavioral therapy techniques will help,” said Val Bee.

“The easiest part of the transition was Sean adapting to the English language,” said Huisentruit. “Within 4 to 6 weeks he was speaking English.”

Bee advised those planning to adopt a child from a foreign country to be patient, trust your instincts, and be willing to change your expectations if necessary.

When the Bees went to the Ukraine, they were expecting to adopt a daughter, and instead they brought home a son. "Don't be surprised if you don't receive all of the facts you hope to receive about your child," says Bee. "The artificial atmosphere of meeting a child allows for only a crude assessment. You can't always find out all you want to know, but it helps if you can talk to the child's caretaker."

Huisentruit said it's best to be familiar with the country your child is coming from in order to understand the culture as well as things to look for in the child relating to emotional and physical health.

**Private Adoptions** This type of adoption is handled by attorneys and not by community agencies. Legislation for private adoptions has changed during the past few years and is a two-fold process, according to a Jacksonville Beach attorney Suzanne Green, who handles many adoption cases.

"Birth parents must file a termination of parental rights before the adop-



tionary parents can file a petition to adopt," explained Green. Generally, this process involves two different courts and judges, but Florida's unified court system makes it possible to use the same court. What makes private adoption more difficult and time consuming is the registry used for finding the birth father so his parental rights can be terminated. Men involved in a relationship may register

Clinical psychologists and parents of two biological sons and one foreign adoptee, Claire Huisentruit and Val Bee say patience, trusting your instincts and being flexible are vital.

themselves in the registry if their partner becomes pregnant. But, Green says, the problem is not many men know about the registry. "The extra layer of first terminating the rights of birth parents and then filing the petition for adoption makes the process more difficult and time consuming," said Green.

For babies six months and younger, birth parents cannot change their minds once the consents for adoption or surrenders are signed. For people wanting to adopt babies six months and older, there is a 3-day waiting period in which the birth parents can change their minds.

The entire process can take as little

# The Face of Change

## Transition Tips for Foster and Adoptive Parents

One of the most important things a foster or adoptive parent can do for a child is provide love and security.

Local pediatrician Aylin Ozdemir, M.D., of Pediatric Associates of Jacksonville, suggests that parents create a "life book" that contains both the difficult and happy facts that are known about the child's history.

"This can be an effective tool for parents and children as the child processes thoughts and feelings," said Ozdemir. "The pediatrician's job is to help adoptive and foster families with positive strategies to help ensure the best emotional health for the child or children."

Nancy Dreicer of the Department of Children and Families explains that there is usually a gradual transition for older adopted children, starting with an initial meeting and then supervised visits. Next, maybe a trip to McDonald's or to the park and finally a weekend visit to the new home. If all goes well, the adoption can then become finalized.

She suggests making an album for your new child to help acquaint them with their new family.

"Include pictures of family members, family pets, traditions, vacations, and anything to help the new child feel more familiar in the new home," said Dreicer.

"Getting them quickly integrated into the family routine is also helpful."

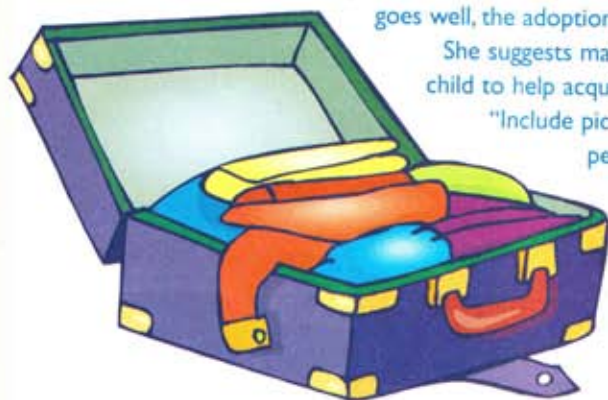
Ozdemir said until around age 3, adopted and foster children

don't realize that there is a difference in the way they joined a new family. She believes using words such as "adoption," "adopted," "biological family," and "birth family," in normal family conversation from the onset. "I discourage parents from waiting until the right moment to tell their children of their adoption," says Ozdemir. "Children may feel betrayed and wonder about what else their parents have hidden from them. The magic years – generally from age 3 to kindergarten, are when children love to hear their adoption story."

By kindergarten, adopted and foster children realize that they are in a minority and they become more aware of the reality of their birth. Between ages 6 and 12, Ozdemir says they become even more aware of differences and may internalize their feelings and stop talking about their adoption. "They realize that by gaining an adoptive family, they have lost a birth family," says Ozdemir.

This can lead to self-esteem issues when children either blame themselves or wonder if the birth family thought them bad or unlovable. A sense of loss may continue throughout adolescence. "Children who have been adopted across racial and cultural boundaries also may have issues about their identities," says Ozdemir.

As issues are worked out in the child's mind, there may be a change in behavior typically in the form of acting out, withdrawal, unusual sensitivity to criticism and difficulty fitting in with peers. "Educators and pediatricians need to be sensitive when helping a family identify possible triggers for unpleasant behavior and develop a prevention plan," said Ozdemir. "A support system of help from professionals as well as caring friends is invaluable."



as 30 days or up to a year or more, according to Green. As with agency adoptions and foster care, a Model Approach for Partnership in Parenting (MAPP) class is required for potential adoptive parents. Background checks, fingerprinting, and in-home visits are also part of the process.

The cost of private adoptions is costly due to living and medical expenses of the birth mother prior to delivery, as well as attorney and filing fees. Also, with private adoptions, there is the chance that the birth mother may change her mind before the baby is born.

**Guardian Ad Litem** Another way to become involved with foster children and those waiting for adoption is through the Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) program.

Volunteers for this program are advocates for children. "They are the eyes and ears for the judge," explained Richard Komando, Circuit Director for the 4th Judicial Circuit, Guardian Ad Litem program. "While advocating for clothing, food and shelter for a child is vital, the right to have a stable environment is just as crucial."

**Happy Endings** It was a long anticipated day for many Florida families sitting in Courtrooms 4 and 5 of the Duval County Courthouse, as more than 50



Families anxiously await finalizations of hundreds of adoptive children last December in Duval County.



Circuit Court Judge David M. Gooding cradles an infant recently adopted in his courtroom.

children officially gained permanent homes through the adoption finalization process last December.

This is the happy ending that the court, the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF), Family Support Services, community agencies and attorneys all work toward – permanent loving homes for children.

Duval County led the state in the number of adoptions finalized last year.

Nancy Dreicer, district administrator for the Department of Children and Families in Jacksonville, said three years

ago 106 adoptions were finalized. Since then the number of adoptions has tripled in DCF's five-county First Coast district, and has become one of the state's leading districts in adoptions. From July 2004 through June 2005, more than 300 children were adopted, and from July through December 2005, nearly 200 more adoptions have been finalized in Duval County.

"We are truly doing something special and we have a good community-based care partnership," says Dreicer, who added that Florida finalizes thousands of adoptions each year.

The DCF works with Family Support Services and others like Circuit Court Judge David M. Gooding to achieve its goal of giving children the security they need through adoption.

Gooding is known as a trailblazer, eliminating much of the "red tape" to make adoption finalizations happen more quickly. He credits the collaboration and diligence of many people coming together to help increase the number of adoptions finalizations.

"Every child deserves a loving home," said Gooding. "When there has been a

## Resources

For more information on adoption:  
1-800-96-ADOPT or [www.adoptflorida.org](http://www.adoptflorida.org)

### Other Resources:

Family Support Services, (904) 421-5800  
[info@fssnf.org](mailto:info@fssnf.org)

Child Guidance Center, (904) 745-3070  
ext. 327, [chardin@childguidancecenter.org](mailto:chardin@childguidancecenter.org).

Mental Health Resource Center, (904) 744-1121, ext. 217 [mhrccps@bellsouth.net](mailto:mhrccps@bellsouth.net).

daniel, (904) 296-1055, ext. 2722  
[imcconnell@danielkids.org](mailto:imcconnell@danielkids.org).

Children's Home Society, (904) 348-2811  
[sherry.bruner@chsfi.org](mailto:sherry.bruner@chsfi.org).

Boy's Home Association, (904) 743-3611  
[jwalters@jaxboyshome.org](mailto:jwalters@jaxboyshome.org).

Jewish Family & Community Services,  
(904) 443-2700 [clloyd@jfcjax.org](mailto:clloyd@jfcjax.org)

Jacksonville Youth Sanctuary,  
(904) 389-7067

PSI Family Services of Florida,  
(904) 723-6049

The Guardian ad Litem program:  
[www.guardianadlitem.org](http://www.guardianadlitem.org)

To report suspected child abuse or neglect,  
call 1-800-96ABUSE. The names of those  
who call are kept confidential.

crisis in the family which results in a child or children being removed, the adoption is the last, best hope."

According to Gooding, adoption is the creation of a family or legalized child birth. He says that adoption has eternal significance because it impacts extended families through the generations. "The government is a poor substitute for a parent," said Gooding. "Children need arms to hug them, ears to listen to them and a heart to love them."

In Duval County, Gooding initiated the Families First Friday, modeled after National Adoption Day proceedings. At these often festive and hope-filled events, he schedules a block of time each month for final hearings on petitions for adoption, which helps to elim-

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— Circuit Court Judge David M. Gooding

inate scheduling roadblocks. "It is not uncommon for me to finalize adoptions for 25 children or more at these hearings," he says.

At the adoption hearings, the adopting parents must tell the judge why they want to adopt the child or children. He says the reasons are compellingly, honest assertions of love. "I tell them what I'm doing legally – officially making you a family, is already true in your hearts."

Just as Gooding is passionate about placing children permanently in loving, caring homes, he is just as driven about children placed in foster care homes.

He holds regular Foster Parent Town Meetings designed to allow foster parents to meet with the judge, case workers, directors of community-based care agencies, and Guardian Ad Litem. At this forum, foster parents can ask and receive answers to their questions as well as receive help with

problems. He also started a program to give children in foster care a chance to speak up about their family or possible problems they are encountering during monthly meetings.

**Fostering Love** Becoming a foster parent involves making a commitment to care for a child who has been removed from the natural family due to death, abuse, neglect or other reasons that may make the birth family unable to safely care for the child, and when there is no other family member available.

Typically, children remain in foster care until the birth parents have completed case plans to correct the issues that caused the child or children to be removed in the first place or when other permanency options are made such as placing the child with relatives. The objective is to ultimately have children placed in permanent homes. State laws require that birth parents be given no more than one year to complete case plans. If the birth parents have not resolved these issues, a court can terminate their parental rights and place the children up for adoption or continue having the child live with relatives.

Foster care is handled by community-based agencies such as the Family Support Services (FSS) of North Florida. This agency serves as the lead community-based child protection agency in Duval County and works with eight social service agencies to provide foster care.

Once the decision to become a foster parent is made, parents work with a community-based care agency to begin their journey. Foster parents must complete a checklist similar to the one potential adoptive parents must fill out, said adoption specialist Mozella Jackson of the Department of Children and Families.

The process begins with enrollment in a Model Approach for Partnership in Parenting (MAPP) class, followed by a comprehensive background check including fingerprinting to check for a history of abuse, family stability, financial ability, the number of current children in the home, and other checkpoints. References are also requested. If all checks are cleared, foster care may begin. **H**

*Virginia J. Pillsbury is an Orange Park-based freelance writer.*