

Bridging Troubled Waters

Sometimes life can be deluged with challenges. A young foster and adoptive family in a small town in southern Wisconsin have faced some pretty high waters, both literally and figuratively. Their house flooded in the June storms of 2008 that ravaged most of southwestern Wisconsin, and they've also faced some difficult parenting challenges with grace.

Within two years of marrying, Terry and Sherry decided to follow in Terry's aunt and uncle's footsteps and become foster parents. They fostered several children, mostly teens, until Morgan and Luther were placed with them.

The Flood (figuratively)

Luther's mom, "Judy" (not her real name) suffered from brain trauma and mental illness, with drug abuse compounding her problems.

And just like the floods that destroyed southwestern Wisconsin, Judy's and her kids'

lives were also destroyed when the kids' father died in an accident. He was the sole provider in the family, and Judy had difficulty coping when he died. Her drug abuse sky rocketed, she was not making good choices, and the children were removed from her care.

Morgan was three and Luther was six when they were placed with Terry and Sherry.

The wonderful gift that Sherry and Terry gave to everyone, especially Judy, was that they never judged. In turn, when Judy realized how the flood devastated their home, she and her husband spent the day helping Terry and Sherry.

Morgan would not stay dressed, used a bottle and had little language skills except for swear words. She screamed constantly and threw herself into hard furniture. She had a significant

hearing loss that was later corrected by tubes in her ears.

Luther was sad and parentified. He defecated in drawers and could not cry or express emotions. He urinated on the walls until it ran down to the next floor. With therapy, it was apparent that the loss of his dad was harder than the loss of his mother. But with therapy, good parenting and the assurance

Continued on page 2

that he would have a permanent home, Luther began to heal.

After two years, Judy began to realize she was unable to take long term care of her children. She also realized that Terry and Sherry loved and cared for her children and that they were willing to let her continue to see them and be a part of their lives.

She made the difficult decision to voluntarily relinquish her rights as their parent.

Sherry said the TPR was really difficult because it was hard to see the tears and sadness of their birth mom in court. But the adoption ceremony was wonderful, if not also bittersweet. The judge made it a celebration—he even let the kids sit in his chair and hold his gavel.

Sherry also recalls another difficult moment after the TPR when they arranged to bring the children to a park where Judy could say goodbye.

“It was hard to watch,” says Sherry.

The Flood (Literally)

Fast forward to June, 2008. On the night that the house had to be evacuated, Terry was

working with the flood crews to try to keep the water from breaching the city limits. Sherry was alone with the kids when the water pushed in the foundation. She woke the kids and told them to dress. But she told them to take off their shoes and socks when they got downstairs to leave. The floors were wet.

It was then, says Sherry, “that the kids freaked.”

A second flood came not long after that, and they went to Sherry’s mother’s home three blocks away, but soon had to leave because the the entire town was being evacuated. They moved in with friends and finally to a school evacuation site in a neighboring town for the first two

weeks. With the help of the Red Cross, they eventually found a rental in another county.

Although they had never had water before in their basement, the flood filled it to the rafters. The foundation crumbled. To add to the mess, their fuel oil tank spilled into that water and into the foundation. That was soon followed by dangerous black mold that grew in the walls and up to the second floor in some areas.

Their house was unsafe and condemned. They



Terry and Sherry’s children

Continued on page 3

could not move back until they could gut their house, bleach what was left to kill the mold and rebuild the inside.

Terry started by emptying the basement of the oil and water mess. It took a month and a half. Then the walls had to be torn out, the boards bleached and drywall hung and finish coated. They are still working on it, but the end is in site.

Sadly, FEMA money did not cover all of the cost of rebuilding.

They recalled how kind people were at the time. Prisoners from a local facility helped with the enormous job of clearing the water. "They were hard working and polite," they say.

Sherry also tells of a man they had never met who handed her \$300. He later gave them another \$1000 but kept his anonymity.

Help also came from Judy and her husband (she had remarried by then). They drove from their home town and spent a day dry coating the walls of the living room.

Wonderful Gifts

The wonderful gift that Sherry and Terry gave to everyone, especially Judy, was that they never judged. They supported visits and invited Judy into their home for Christmas and for summer cookouts along with her other children.

In turn, when Judy realized how the flood devastated their home, she and her husband spent the day helping Terry and Sherry when

they needed help. The open adoption in this family benefits everyone, especially the children.

Now the kids use Terry and Sherry's last name. But they use "mom" for both moms.

The giving continues to be mutual. Sherry made a scrapbook of the children's pictures for Judy when she remarried. The kids were in the wedding and the whole family attended. Judy is now much better, working on staying clean, and runs a business with her new husband.

At the adoption, Terry and Sherry chose to hyphenate the kids' last name with that of the birth family. They did not want to take away the last name by which the children knew themselves. They gave the kids the choice of which name to use. Now the kids use Terry and Sherry's last name. But they use "mom" for both moms.

The Family Today

Terry and Sherry's foster care license has been on hold since the flood, although they still do respite. Sherry is a co-trainer for PACE in her county, and she works as a legal aide to a Guardian Ad Litem.

The five kids are all teens now, but this couple appears to be a good team for parenting busy adolescents.

This family's life is amazing. They were featured on the *Wisconsin State Journal* front page, and their picture was subsequently syndicated around the state. As

Continued on page 4

heart rendering as their loss is, the story of the gain in the lives of Morgan, Luther, and Judy is even more heart rendering.

Terry and Sherry face life with open hearts and great energy for the tasks at hand, and they do so with great humility. Trouble comes up, but this family rises above it, whether in family and adoption issues, or in muddy flood waters. May they continue to build the strong bridges for their children, their children's birth mom and family, and for themselves. May their foundation stay strong.

With all that they have done, Sherry and Terry say, "We just think of ourselves as ordinary people." The world could benefit from a few more "ordinary people" like them.

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Advice for New Foster Parents

When asked if they have some words of wisdom for new foster parents, here are some of their suggestions.

- Their first children in placement were four kids who had a history of running away. They required treatment-level care. It was hard. They stress how important it is not to blame yourself if all does not go as planned.
- Tell yourselves that you are doing as much as you can for the children, but don't feel guilty if the placement does not work.
- They have had hard times with children placed in their home, faced allegations, had an arrest in the house, and had a teen get pregnant while in placement with them. They say to remember that you cannot control everything.
- Document everything no matter how trivial something may seem. If you are questioning whether it is worth reporting, call in that report and tell everything.
- Have a policy for teens who come into your home. Tell them that your relationship with them begins with trust. Tell them that they have your trust until the teens give parents a reason to not trust them.
- If you adopt, have a party. Make it a special day and a big celebration.
- You are lucky to work with good social workers. They have worked with Rebecca since she was a caseworker with the kids they have now adopted. She is now the coordinator for their county. They really like working with her and the kids love her. She, in turn loves working with this family.