

https://www.citizensvoice.com/lifestyles/area-families-share-their-stories-of-love-found-and-shared/article_3c9ea60c-9579-524a-9de4-5c6f37594d2d.html

Area families share their stories of love found and shared

By Paul Ellis (correspondent)

Jun 25, 2011

On the night before the grand opening of an Ithaca, N.Y. Wendy's store back in 1984, Dave Thomas sat next to Steve Kepic at dinner.

Thomas turned to Kepic and asked, "You know I was adopted?"

Kepic replied yes, of course he did: he'd read Dave's book.

"I was adopted from foster care when I was 9 years old," explained the Wendy's founder. "They have a term for foster care kids when they turn 18: 'Aged Out'. When you turn 18 when you're in foster care, you no longer have a family."

Kepic was floored.

"That hit so hard with me because I come from such a big family in northeastern Pennsylvania," he said. "It sunk in so hard, you gotta do something about it."



Kristen Mullen / The Citizens' Voice All smiles, the Kramer family gathered recently for a photograph at their home in Berwick. From left, are Mary-Angelina, 12; Lilly, 13; Madison, 15; father, Fred; mother, Larina; Andrew, 18, and dog Roxy. Lilly and Madison are blood sisters and were adopted by the Kramers in July 2009.

Since then, the Scranton-born Kepic has thrown his full support behind everything he can do for foster care adoptions.

A Wendy's employee right out of college in 1980 when there were only 240 stores in the system, Kepic opened his first Wendy's in Dallas in 1996, took over the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Wendy's franchise group in 2000 and owns 11 local franchises today.

In 2004, Wendy's launched a one-of-a-kind partnership that funds adoption professionals to find families for children in foster care. The Wendy's Wonderful Kids program was piloted in seven major U.S. cities and "awards grants to public and private adoption agencies to hire adoption professionals who implement proactive, child-focused recruitment programs targeted exclusively on moving America's longest-waiting children from foster care into adoptive families," according to their website.

Kepic asked to get involved, but was told the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton market was too small to participate in the national program.

"I argued, and I had to use Dave's daughter Wendy to let them let us be the small market test in 2004," explained the Dallas resident, who is personal friends with the Thomas family. "My rationale is ever since I became a franchisee in '96 we were raising money for adoption, giving it to the Dave Thomas Foundation way out in Ohio, and nothing was staying local, so we really weren't getting anywhere with our problem here in NEPA. I wanted to do whatever it took to bring the money back."

By 2006, this Wendy's Wonderful Kids program had expanded to every state in the U.S., the District of Columbia and two Canadian provinces.

"We raise money through our local Wendy's and everything from Stroudsburg down to Pottsville over to Williamsport and Lock Haven," he said of the 30 stores in the regional footprint. "We're all raising money for adoption through different fundraisers throughout the year and canisters at the stores. That money goes to the foundation earmarked for our Wendy's Wonderful Kids program in NEPA."

Kepic chose the Wilkes-Barre-based Children's Service Center of Luzerne County to partner with "because we had a need for a strong adoption program and they also had all the support services necessary to make adoption successful with the greatest depth and ability to help kids. We've had a lot of success, but in my mind, one kid is a success," he said.

Kepic hopes to continue to increase fundraising to support "a second and a third" foster care adoption representative "because there are enough kids needing to be placed," he said.

"Dave Thomas' vision wasn't to get the babies adopted - those are fairly easy. It's the 8, 9, 10 and 12-year-old kids, they still deserve a home, they still deserve somebody to love them at Thanksgiving and Easter and Christmas. It's uncanny to me that you can't have some place to come home to," he said.

Soon, local businesses got involved to help foster kids prepare for aging out.

"Unfortunately, not every kid is going to find a home. That's why Wilkes-Barre Racing was created," he said.

A non-profit organization dedicated to getting the word out on foster care adoption and how to do it, Wilkes-Barre Racing started in 2010 and kicked off with an inaugural race in Wilkes-Barre and a Wendy's Wonderful Kids half-marathon, Kepic said, adding that parts of the \$18,000 raised went to the foundation, helped create a website and "a few other things to raise awareness - this year we built a bigger racing schedule too."

"We're harnessing the energy of athletes to help spread the word about adoption and the wonderful things that can happen with it," he said.

Five years ago, Dallas-based entrepreneur Rich Pais approached Kepic with a proposal: if he could help him raise money for foster care adoption, Pais would run in the the Ironman triathlon in Lake Placid, N.Y.

"He reached out to me and said, 'I want to help,'" said Kepic. "With our 11 stores locally, combined with Rich and his outreach activities, we raised over \$55,000 in four weeks."

Behind Wilkes-Barre Racing is Dallas-based entrepreneur Rich Pais and his wife, the parents of two adopted children from Luzerne County foster care: Maria, 7, from Mexico and Drew, 5.

"The overriding purpose of this is to not just have an athletic event, but to change people's hearts and minds toward foster care and adoption," Pais said.

Clearing social barriers and raising awareness for foster care adoption was demonstrated this past April at the 8.2-mile Harvey's Lake Run, where each mile marker seen by the 250 runners around the lake displayed the name and photograph of another child available for adoption, Pais said, adding that race volunteers wore shirts identifying them as "adopted parent" and "adopted children."

"If we can get 50 to 100 people a year to adopt these kids, it changes generations of people's lives. We're really trying to change people's attitude and make them do something here. We need more people to get these kids in better homes," he said.

This year, the Xterra Trail Run Series comes to NEPA, and in August the Giants Despair Challenge is a one-mile cycle race up the hill, he said, adding "The Xterra is an international series. You can qualify for world championships and trail running right from northeastern Pennsylvania. It's a big deal to have a brand like that come to northeastern Pennsylvania."

The fight for a cures for Leukemia and Cancer are two great causes that get athletes involved, Pais said, "and if you said Wilkes-Barre Racing, you can have \$10,000 or 10 new foster parents, I'd take the 10 new foster parents."

At the Children's Service Center this past January, after six years as adoption worker and foster care coordinator for the CSC, Marian Kolcun became NEPA's first Older Child Matching Initiative Child-Focused Recruiter charged with matching match foster care children with happy homes.

Placing foster children between 10 and 18-years-old in happy homes, Kolcun conducts "family-finding" upon request by the county in which the child resides. Family members are researched to establish connections with a child, which could include making a phone call to the child, sending a card on the child's birthday, or having family member adopt that child.

With a continuous case load of 16 children, Kolcun sees a 50 percent matching success rate for home placement. Once a child is successfully placed, a new child coming out of group homes, foster homes or residential facilities in Lackawanna, Luzerne and Monroe Counties enters into the matching system.

To raise awareness for foster adoption, monthly matching events are held where biographies and photographs are reviewed, and child profiles and their lives discussed by case workers who promote the children to available families. The Pennsylvania Adoption Exchange maintains a website and social media pages also support the program.

"We try to tell these families what the child is like and find out what exactly what they're looking for in a child. We can give them a lot more specifics about the child's behavior and the child's needs, and we determine if the family is willing to go forward to work with this child," she said.

Typically, it takes a few sessions with the family to determine if they they're ready for a child to move into the home, she said.

Berwick residents Larina and Fred Kramer adopted sisters Madison, 15 and Lilly, 13 from the Children's Service Center foster care program in 2009, making their biological children Andy, 18 and Mary, 12 happy campers, Larina said, adding her husband also has two sons in their 30s from a previous marriage.

At the start of the process, the Kramers contacted Kolcun at the CSC in Wilkes-Barre, who in turn reached out to Monroe County for the best match.

"They match families up, and I can't tell you how blessed we are. It's difficult when you change the whole dynamics of your family. In our house they all get along very well. The three girls are very close. They have a great time together," explained Larina.

"Madison wants to work with animals, she's in ninth grade and Lilly wants to be an actress, she's in seventh. Although they're in different teams, they have lunch together. We encourage them - they're both enrolled in extracurricular programs," she said.

"You meet these kids and they're so energetic. You can see they're loving children, and they need stability. Most kids don't get that, especially as they get older. It's a hard thing for people to do, to take kids who are a certain way or have certain habits."

"We weren't looking to adopt sisters, but I'd do it again," she said. "In fact, we're thinking about doing it again after our son goes off to college in the fall."

Of primary importance to the adopted child is providing stability, guidance and support, explained Kramer.

"A lot of the older kids just want to be in a home - that's the important thing. They want to feel like somebody's there for them," she said. "They need that security and the boundaries. A lot of these kids don't do well because they never had anybody to direct them, things keep changing on them."

