May 29, 2005—The Anniston Star (Alabama)

Family is family

By Rob Jordan

ASHLAND—Over the years, Grace Wood has watched her family grow, changing shape, size and, sometimes, color.

An elegant, soft-spoken black woman in her 50s, Wood has been mother not only to her own two children and three stepchildren, but also, at one time or another, to more than 20 foster children.

Sitting under a park shelter at a recent cookout for Clay County foster-care parents, Wood reflected on the meaning of family and the most recent addition to hers – a white 9-year-old girl. She remembered wondering if the willowy little girl from Los Angeles would put up resistance, struggle against living in the countryside with a black woman.

“I thought maybe I’d have a problem her first night here,” Wood said.

The two sat down that night, Wood easing the child’s fears with funny stories about her other foster children and assurances that the house was safe with alarms and locks.

“In about half-an-hour, she opened up,” Wood said.

Many Americans are familiar with trans-racial adoption of children from abroad and, occasionally, within the country, as in the well-known case of Olympic track star Dan O’brien.

Trans-racial foster-care placement, however, remains relatively obscure. Researchers began to look at the phenomenon seriously only in the years after a 1996 federal law prohibited delaying foster-care placement based on racial considerations, according to Mark Testa, director of the Children and Family Research Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,

“A lot of it’s too new to have a lot of solid evidence,” Testa said.

It’s nothing new to Wood and the other foster care parents in the area. While white foster children outnumber black foster children 14-to-9 in thinly populated Clay County, four of the six active foster-care families here are black. All four of the black families either have or have had white children placed with them.

Social workers at the Clay County Department of Human Resources can’t explain why black foster families outnumber white foster families in a county that is less than 16 percent black.

A payment of $14-$15 a day per child makes money an unlikely motivation. And, as any parent can imagine, the job is far from easy.

Before even taking on the challenge of caring for an abused or neglected child, foster parents must complete a 10-week course and submit to a thorough criminal, child-abuse and family background check. They must have at least a general equivalency diploma, be in certifiably good health and meet minimum home standards.

Telling figures

Clay County’s foster-care figures buck a national pattern in which trans-racial foster-care placement most often means white families taking in black children, according to experts in the field.

There is little dependable data on rates of trans-racial foster care placement, but adoption figures may provide insight based on the fact that a high percentage of foster-care parents become adoptive parents. The percentage of black adopted children placed in families of another race is almost double that of white children – 19 percent as opposed to 10 percent – according to the Child Welfare League of America.

Of the 532,000 children in foster care nationwide, 39 percent are white, 37 percent are black and, 17 percent are Hispanic, according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services figures from 2002, the most recent year for which data is available. Among the 126,000 children waiting to be adopted, 36 percent are white, 42 percent are black, and 13 percent are Hispanic.

While Alabama's Department of Human Resources doesn't track trans-racial foster-care placements, Calhoun County's figures are telling. With 283 children in foster care as of April, the county's foster-care population is the state's highest per capita, according to John James, director of the Calhoun County Department of Human Resources. James estimated that about 20 of current placements are trans-racial, usually black children in white families. Of the 14 placements the agency has made since October, three were trans-racial, James said.

It's not an issue James or any of his social workers pay much attention to. With children entering the county's foster-care system at a rate 10-20 percent higher than just five years ago, and with only 45 foster homes available, there are bound to be more trans-racial placements, James said.

"We're just looking for a good home for that child to be in," James said.

Like the other foster parents at the Ashland cookout, all of whom were black, Lucille Maxwell said her definition of family is color-blind. A 62-year-old grandmother, Maxwell has been taking foster children into her Millerville home for almost 30 years. Black or white, they're all children and they all need love and guidance, Maxwell said.

"All they do is drop 'em off, and I do the best I can with 'em," Maxwell said.

For Rita Hunter, 44, of Ashland, it comes down to acceptance and unconditional love.

"The only thing you can do is make them comfortable with you," Hunter said.

About six years ago, Hunter took in a redheaded 11-year-old girl. The girl's grandfather, an avowed racist, was upset with the girl's placement.

"She told me, 'He's probably about to die,'" Hunter said.

Despite her background, the girl formed a strong bond with Hunter and still visits her regularly.

Now, Hunter is a foster mom to another white girl and a black baby girl. While they may not share blood or skin color, the two girls are nothing short of sisters, said Jodie Kleinmeyer, a county social worker.

Mary Wilson, 65, a foster parent for 30 years, recounted a similar story.

A now 17-year-old white girl placed with Wilson several years ago came with some reservations. The girl's father was "skeptical" about the situation at first, Wilson said, but came to accept it when his daughter told him how happy she was. She loved singing in the choir of Wilson's all-black church and answering to "little sister" from Wilson's three grown sons.

If there's a secret, Wilson said, it's to maintain an honest and open dialogue, make expectations clear and go light on criticism.

"I learn them and they learn me," Wilson said of the 25 or so foster children who have called her Millerville house their home.

Celebrating diversity

As trans-racial placements become more common, foster families and social workers all must learn to adapt.

Training in this realm is “totally lacking,” said Dr. Joyce Maguire Pavao, chief executive officer and founder of the Center for Family Connections, a treatment and advocacy group in Boston.

It’s essential that foster parents commit themselves to ethnic and racial awareness when caring for children of another race, said Dr. Joseph Crumbley, an adoption therapist in Pennsylvania specializing in trans-racial adoption. Children as young as 3 are aware of race, and by 6 or 7 are susceptible to feelings of inadequacy in the face of racial stigma, Crumbley said.

“A child of 3 or 4 might say, ‘I wish I had hair like yours,” Crumbley said.

Because of prevalent stereotypes, it’s especially important for black children in white families to maintain a sense of racial identity, Crumbley said. Spending time with adult role models of the same race or ethnicity is crucial to developing a child’s comfort level with his or her own differences, as well as building the child’s ability to cope with social prejudice, Crumbley said. A successful foster-care or adoptive family celebrates diversity and encourages experimentation with music, art and food of other cultures, Crumbley said.

“To me, that’s the next civil rights movement,” Crumbley said of trans-racial foster families.

While important, racial awareness shouldn’t trump the imperative of finding homes for foster children as quickly as possible and keeping them connected with siblings, said Sue Christie, director of the Association of Administrators of the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children.

“There’s no doubt that kids benefit from being culturally in tune with their communities and their families. That said, there are all sorts of social and developmental issues that have nothing to do with a kid’s ethnic or racial background,” Christie said.

Finding home

After almost four months, Wood’s foster daughter seems comfortable in her new home, an accepting and open-minded survivor. On her first day of school in Clay County, the girl handled herself with aplomb when an administrator asked her if she was living with a black family.

“No, they’re not black,” the girl said after a moment’s thought. “They’re brown.”

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