

From the Heart

A Publication for Friends of Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services

Winter 2012

IN THIS ISSUE



- 3 Adoption Makes an Impact**
The Williston Story



- 5 New Lease for Single Mothers**
Expanding with St. John's in Houston



- 6 Lessons in Gratitude**
Brenda Morgan: From PCHAS to Ph.D.

Editorial Staff

Ed Knight, President

The Rev. Peter D. Crouch
CFRE, Vice President for Development

Margaret Barry
Editor

Writers: Margaret Barry, Brenda Morgan
and Rachel Short

Every day, the Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services' Adoption Services Program makes an impact on peoples' lives. Here are stories of two couples who've adopted children through PCHAS.



PCHAS Adoption Services Program Makes an Impact

The Suyen and Michael Ramos Story —By Rachel Short

Suyen Ramos was recovering emotionally and physically. She had lost her baby unexpectedly due to a medical complication. Then she found out that she and her husband, Michael, were unable to have any more children.

The Ramoses began discussing the possibility of adoption. When she heard the Ramoses were considering adoption, a customer at the hair salon where Suyen worked told her about Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services.

Before the Ramoses found PCHAS, they had worked with five different adoption agencies. Their experiences were not positive.

"It felt like all the adoption agencies were shoving us aside when we called—just telling us to set up an appointment. But PCHAS was different," said Suyen. "We knew that PCHAS cared about what was happening to each individual child, mother and

Continued on page 2 ►



Presbyterian Children's
Homes & Services



One of the wonderful things about Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services today is the scope of services we offer to help children, youth, young adults and families to find fulfillment of their hopes, dreams, and potential. This issue of *From the Heart* focuses on PCHAS' Adoption Services.

In this issue, you will meet Bianca Esquivel, a PCHAS Adoption Services social worker, and two couples who are providing "forever homes" to children who need them. You will also read about a courageous birth mother who realized the most responsible decision she could make regarding her newborn child is to allow that child to be adopted by other parents. Not mentioned in our

newsletter is the story of some of Bianca's other clients—birth mothers who, with the benefit of her professional counseling, find fulfillment in realizing they can keep their children and be good mothers.

Whatever the circumstances, it is truly rewarding to see clients mature, set goals, achieve them and fulfill their potential. Thank you for helping to make that possible.

► Continued from cover

adoptive parent by how they treated people," she said. "PCHAS took their time with us. Love and compassion was the difference between PCHAS and the other agencies," said Suyen. "It's tough going through adoption. You need a high level of compassion and we can tell that PCHAS cares about us."

Suyen explained that the PCHAS staff was never pushy, nor did the adoption seem forced on them. PCHAS social workers carefully walked the Ramoses through the paperwork, explained their responsibilities, listened and asked and answered questions.

When birth parents are found, the agency presents them with "Dear Birth Mother" letters from waiting adoptive couples stating their interest in adoption.

After a birth mother delivers a child, she must wait 48 hours after the child is born before she is able to sign legal documents relinquishing her parental rights so that her child can be placed for adoption. During this time, PCHAS was in constant contact with the Ramoses, checking in on them, supporting them emotionally, and reminding them to be "cautiously optimistic." The Ramoses learned that



“ God breathed life into this child and another person carried him for nine months. This child is a gift—a gift from a human being and a gift from God. ”

nothing is final until the legal documents are signed by the birth parents.

Suyen appreciates how PCHAS knows and understands the law when it comes to adoption. "I've heard tragic stories when agencies didn't know the law," says Suyen. When this happens, the potential new parents' hopes are shattered from one failed placement after another.

The Ramoses met the birth mother on a Tuesday; her son was born that Saturday. When the mother and father completed the paperwork, the Ramoses were finally introduced to their new son. They named him Elliot.

Even after their adoption was finalized, what impressed the Ramoses about PCHAS was how the PCHAS team continued to check in on the birth mother and then updated the Ramoses on how she was doing. The relational ties are not overlooked at PCHAS; the PCHAS team seeks to maintain whatever kind of relationship the birth mother wishes.

Reflecting on her experience, Suyen said, "I'm holding a baby that is somebody else's. Yet that somebody has placed her baby in my care. God breathed life into this child and another person carried him for nine months. This child is a gift—a gift from a human being and a gift from God." ♦

Cover: Elliot's first horse ride.
Above: The Ramoses on Elliot's Christening day.

PCHAS Adoption Services Program Makes an Impact

The Chuck and Misty Williston Story —By Rachel Short



Chuck and Misty Williston had tried everything to get pregnant. They went to a fertility specialist where they tried in vitro fertilization and different combinations of medications, but still no pregnancy. After four years of trying, they gave up.

While exploring several adoption scenarios, which included adopting a baby girl from a Chinese orphanage, a family friend told the Willistons about Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services (PCHAS). When the Willistons received a phone call from PCHAS staff about a newborn baby boy available for adoption, they were thrilled. The moment they met the baby boy, they fell in love with him. One week later, they took their new son, whom they named Levi, home.

“ We knew that PCHAS is where God wanted us to go. He guided us there.” ”

Looking back on their experience with PCHAS and their relationship with PCHAS social worker Bianca Esquivel, the Willistons wax poetic. They describe Bianca as “the biggest blessing.”

“Bianca rode the roller coaster with us. She cried with us. She empathized with us. She listened to me yell when the process was frustrating,” said Chuck. “Bianca became a sister to us; she was so much more than a social worker.”

“We feel very safe at PCHAS,” said Misty, “Things are in order there; [the Houston office] is a peaceful place. We knew that PCHAS is where God wanted us to go. He guided us there.”



Top: Chuck and Misty cuddle their new bundle of joy. Below: Baby Levi takes some first steps guided by his new mom and dad.

Photos: Chelsea Davis

A PICTURE IS WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS

One Birth Mother's Story *—By Rachel Short*

"I can tell a lot about people by their pictures," says Shasta, who chose Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services (PCHAS) to help her place her newborn baby in the loving arms of an adoptive family. "I look at the pictures before the words," says Shasta (who goes by the nickname Shay), explaining how she turned through the pages of PCHAS' adoptive families booklet filled with "Dear Birth Mother" letters that articulate parents' desires to adopt. "Rob and Rachel's pictures just said 'pick me' and that was it—they seemed to be the perfect couple to adopt my child." Shay recounts how not only was PCHAS' staff amiable and thorough, but



also they were willing to set up a time for her to meet immediately with a PCHAS representative to discuss her options. PCHAS also provided financial help, which many of the other adoption agencies don't offer.

Shay has a very special and open relationship with

“ Rob and Rachel's pictures just said 'pick me' and that was it—they seemed to be the perfect couple to adopt my child. ”

Rob and Rachel. Thinking that they would appreciate knowing the sex of her baby before Thanksgiving, she made a special effort to invite Rob and Rachel, as well as Bianca Esquivel, PCHAS Adoption Services social worker, to her next sonogram appointment.

Finally Shay's daughter, Lyra, was born and placed in Rob and Rachel's home for adoption. They give Shay regular updates on Lyra's progress and wellbeing once or twice per month. They also share baby pictures with her and

inquire how she and Wayne, Shay's husband, and their dog Casper, are doing.

Shay continues to have a close relationship with Bianca—a relationship that, Shay says, is founded on complete trust and confidence. "I trust Bianca above anyone I know; I confide in her. When I need advice or help, I know she welcomes my call. If she can't help, she'll help me find someone who can. I know I will always be able to count on Bianca."

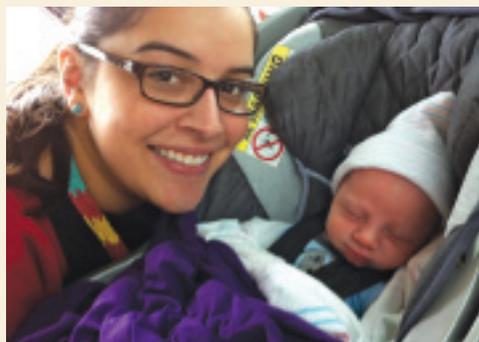
Rob and Rachael with baby Lyra.

BIANCA ESQUIVEL:

Lending a Helping Hand to Adoptive Parents and Women with Unplanned Pregnancies

Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services' Adoption Services Social Worker, Bianca Esquivel, says it's thrilling to celebrate with adoptive parents when a child is placed in their home—and she's had plenty of opportunities to do that. But one of the most satisfying parts of her job is helping women who are experiencing an unplanned pregnancy. "I love being able to walk alongside a birth mother during her difficult journey and be a support to her," says Bianca. "I am there before, during, and after a birth mother relinquishes her parental rights—and none of it is easy. It is very satisfying to lend a helping hand to a woman who is upset and feels very alone."

Bianca has been working for Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services since she received a Master of Science in Social Work degree from the University of Texas in



Austin a year and a half ago. While at U.T., she served as an intern at Austin LifeCare, a pregnancy resource center in Austin. There she gained valuable experience working with women facing unplanned pregnancies. She says she's been interested in the concept of adoption since she took a church-sponsored mission trip to an orphanage with her parents as an

eight-year-old. "My family took me with them on what became annual mission trips. I remember visiting orphanages in various countries all over the world. I knew at a young age that I wanted to adopt a child someday. As an adult, I realized that I could do more than that. That's when I decided to pursue a career in social work with a focus on adoption," she said.

Bianca is thankful to PCHAS in general and to PCHAS Associate Vice President Celeste Ross in particular for hiring her and for allowing her to pursue her passion. "I am so blessed," she said, "to be able to be a part of an organization that puts Christ at the center of all of its services."

Bianca picks up Levi Williston from the hospital to deliver him to his new parents.



A NEW LEASE for Single Mothers and Their Children

PCHAS Signs Lease with St. John's Presbyterian Church for Single Parent Family Program in Houston



St. John's Presbyterian Church of Houston and Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services (PCHAS) have signed a long-term lease agreement, paving the way to assist single mothers and their children. The Presbytery of New Covenant has approved the arrangement.

The agreement gives PCHAS permission to use a portion of the church's property. This land will be used by PCHAS to build and operate its Single Parent Family Program to be housed in seven residences for single parents and their children and one residence for the Program's onsite manager. PCHAS will pay \$1 per year to St. John's for the use of its land.

PCHAS plans to share working construction drawings with the church by February and hopes to begin construction in the second quarter of 2013. Other project participants at this time include HomeAid Houston, Ryland Homes (Builder Captain), and Masa Studio (architect).

"St. John's and PCHAS are excited about signing the lease and achieving the first of many milestones. God continues to bless our service to struggling single parents and their children," said Ed Knight, PCHAS president.

HomeAid Houston, one of the largest builders of housing for struggling people in Houston, is partnering with PCHAS and the Greater Houston Builders Association on the Single Parent Family project. This will allow PCHAS to save approximately 40% on construction costs.

There is a serious need for these programs in the Houston area. Statistics show that almost 25% (300,000) of the children in Harris County live in households below the poverty level. Of these, 38% live in single female-headed households, and 44% of these children are under the age of five years old.

Seven single mothers and their children will live in the Houston Single

Parent Family residences for nine to 12 months, or longer if necessary, during which time PCHAS will work closely with them to strengthen their ability to live independently.

In addition to housing, the program offers financial, emotional, and spiritual support, including family therapy. The Single Parent Family staff will support parents in their job search and academic endeavors, teach parenting and life skills, including budgeting and financial management, time management, wellness and nutrition.

"Our program's services focus on the goal of self-sufficiency for each family, but only when the families' physical, emotional, social, educational, spiritual, and financial needs are met can the parents focus on what they need to function independently," said Ed Knight.

PCHAS currently has two highly successful Single Parent Family residences in Weatherford and Waxahachie, Texas. Of the women who've left our care, 91% moved into their own apartments and 9% moved in with family; 91% left with full time employment or enrolled in higher education and 9% moved out of the area. ♦

Please visit www.pchas.org to read more about this project. There you can find answers to Frequently Asked Questions.

Lessons in Gratitude

Former Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services client Lt. Col. Brenda Morgan gave an inspirational speech at an October fundraising luncheon in San Antonio. Here is an abbreviated version of her talk.

I moved to the Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services' Itasca campus when I was ten years old. I lived there for nearly four years, then moved to a foster home until I graduated from high school. After high school, I joined the Army, where I studied Korean and served three years as a Korean Linguist. I'd always wanted to be a nurse, so I attended college and earned a Bachelor of Science in Nursing. Eventually, I joined the Air Force and, after serving for nine years, was selected from among a pool of 2,000 nurses and named the Air Force Company Grade Officer Nurse of the Year. This past year, I completed a Ph.D. degree in nursing with a 4.0 grade point average and was recognized by the university with an award for academic excellence. I am a Senior Nurse Scientist in research and a Lieutenant Colonel. I would not have been able to achieve these goals if it hadn't been for my wonderful husband of more than 22 years, Parrish, and my daughter, Katherine. I am also grateful to my PCHAS Home Parents, who exposed me to healthy ideas and values. Spending even a few years in the right environment can make a huge difference in a child's life.

I don't remember a lot about the events that led to my placement in the child welfare system. Some people, when they hear about my childhood



experiences, are amazed that I have turned out to be so well adjusted. There are thousands of children passing through the same welfare system with similar childhood experiences. Unfortunately, some are unable to overcome the odds and break free from their pasts. We tend to focus on these failures. But I want to focus on the positive—children whose lives are literally saved when they are placed in loving homes. I am one of those children.

I recently requested my files from the Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services' "intake" process. The psychologist who assessed my mental health said that I had suffered "severe and prolonged emotional deprivation,"

and that I was "impulsive and slightly isolated" and "very vulnerable to criticism." The psychologist said that I required a great deal of adult support and affection. It's sad for me to think about that child and what might have become of her. Luckily, there were people who cared enough to intervene on my behalf.

In the PCHAS Group Home, I learned about such things as responsibility and personal accountability. I also learned pretty quickly that if I studied hard and made good grades, I could be on the van that left for special trips to the zoo, the movies, the circus, or the museum.

I have learned that education can be a great discriminator and once you have it, no one can take it away. If, God forbid, you lose everything, if you have a decent education, you can recover and start over. I have taught my daughter these valuable lessons, and she has excelled. She has earned a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and a Master's degree in Applied Statistics. She has a very good job; she works as a data analyst in Atlanta.

There is another set of Presbyterian Children's Home rules that have benefited me immensely over the years—rules about expressing gratitude. In the Home, we were

required to write thank you notes to family members, sponsors and church groups for the clothes, school supplies, birthday gifts and other things that we received. This emphasis on showing appreciation to others evolved over the years, and now I seek out opportunities to show gratitude.

When I think back on the hardships in my life—whether early childhood experiences with hunger and homelessness or the death of my first husband when my daughter was eight months old—I always try to search for something within the experience that I can be grateful for. This focus on gratitude helps to keep things in perspective and reminds me that while there have been bad times in my past, and there will certainly be hardships in the future, I can still find something for which to be grateful.

The importance of gratitude is a life lesson I share with just about anyone who will listen, including my daughter. As soon as she was old enough, I began helping her write thank you notes for the many birthday and Christmas gifts she received. Of course, she eventually reached the age where, like all children, she rebelled, but the rule was simple: if you're not thankful enough for the gift to write a note, you simply return the gift. My daughter knew that no checks would be cashed or gift cards spent until the thank you notes were mailed. This was something she enjoyed reminding me of this year after my graduation.

This brings me to the Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services programs that support children both emotionally and academically. There are two which really excite me. At this year's Itasca Exes Day, a reunion of Group Home alumni, we toured the schoolhouse, and I admit I was a little jealous. It is wonderful that the students have access to tutors who can help them strive for academic excellence. The outcome for these children is nothing short of miraculous.

Last May, I attended a graduation reception for one of the San Antonio Presbyterian Children's Home graduates, Marti. What a beautiful, extremely bright, poised young woman.

As I learned about the Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services support offered to the graduates, I was amazed that so much effort is expended to ensure they get a good start and don't "fall through the cracks" as they maneuver through the sometimes very difficult transition to college. It is very tough to navigate these waters



“ I will be eternally grateful to those who cared for me and supported me both emotionally and financially—those who taught me values and life lessons that set me on a path to success. ”

without parents. It is reassuring to know that their Group Home will still be there—a place to return to on holidays, school vacations, or just when they need to be reminded that they have a place in this world where they are special and loved. And by the way, I received a very nice thank you note from Marti for her graduation gift.

My doctoral dissertation explored the effect that gratitude has on one's resilience. My research shows that the act of looking within oneself to identify in our lives that for which we are grateful will, in turn, spur us on to search outward for opportunities to share those blessings with someone else. This cycle of gratitude is self-perpetuating. There are children who, like me, will count the support they

receive from PCHAS as a blessing. Like me, this feeling of gratitude will lead to great things and they will want to share the joy of these blessings with others.

I have experienced that self-perpetuating cycle of gratitude and today, as part of that cycle, I would like to express my appreciation to each and every one of you. I represent the many children in need of help today; you represent hope for the children who will be taken out of harm's way and placed in the care of Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services.

These words by Melody Beattie sum up my thoughts: *Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow.*

I truly believe, without a doubt, that who I am and all that I have accomplished is a direct result of my time in the Group Home in Itasca. I will be eternally grateful to those who cared for me and supported me both emotionally and financially—those who taught me values and life lessons that set me on a path to success. Thank you so very much for what you've done for me. ♦

Opposite page: Brenda Morgan with her daughter Katherine as Brenda receives her Ph.D.; This page: Brenda and her husband Parrish.



Presbyterian Children's
Homes & Services

4407 Bee Cave Road, Suite 520 • Austin, TX 78746

NON-PROFIT ORG
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
AUSTIN, TX
PERMIT NO. 64

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services is an independent ministry in covenant relationship with the Synod of the Sun, a governing body of the Presbyterian Church (USA). PCHAS is a 501(c)3 charitable organization. All gifts are tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law. We do not render professional tax advice. Each person should consult a professional advisor.

Are you receiving duplicate mailings or no longer wish to be included on our mailing list?

Contact us:

Call: 1-800-888-1904

email: info@pchas.org

Write:

Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services
Development Office
4407 Bee Cave Road, Suite 520
Austin, TX 78746

Be sure to include your complete name and address.



For sound financial advice and transparency, PCHAS has earned a four-star rating from Charity Navigator, the highest ranking the non-profit organization bestows.

Newsletter design: Rona Ebert

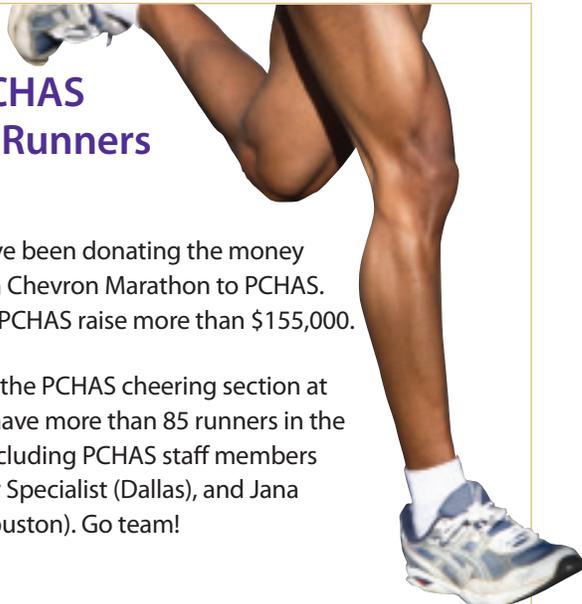
Help us cheer on PCHAS Houston Marathon Runners January 13!

Since 2005, teams of runners have been donating the money they raised through the Houston Chevron Marathon to PCHAS. So far, the marathon has helped PCHAS raise more than \$155,000.

On January 13, 2013, please join the PCHAS cheering section at mile five of the marathon. We'll have more than 85 runners in the marathon and half-marathon, including PCHAS staff members Shavana Lopez, Child and Family Specialist (Dallas), and Jana Hobbs, Development Officer (Houston). Go team!

"We can't all be heroes because someone has to sit on the curb and clap as they go by." — Will Rogers

For more information, please contact: *Jana Hobbs*, jana.hobbs@pchas.org, or *Donna Lujan*, donna.lujan@pchas.org, 800.888.1904.



You're Invited!

Presbyterian Children's Homes and Services cordially invites you to attend fundraising events this spring:

Kilgore Luncheon	April 9, 2013
Houston Luncheon	April 18, 2013
Austin Luncheon	May 2, 2013

For more information contact *Donna Lujan*, donna.lujan@pchas.org, 512.476.1234 ext. 38 or 800.888.1904.

Connect with PCHAS

