

STURGIS JOURNAL

Print this story

Thanksgiving

By Audora Burg
Sturgis Journal

CENTREVILLE - 'I didn't even know you were adopted.'

Those words were among the most powerful spoken Tuesday in St. Joseph County's probate courtroom in Centreville.

The context was a local celebration of Michigan's fifth-annual "Adoption Day," held annually on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving.

Unlike previous years, no adoptions were finalized on this day. But in that courtroom was a celebration of the essence of hope, of dedicated adoptive parents who work to heal broken lives.

Anita Schlabach, mother of nine, including five adoptive children, said when she and her husband got married 24 years ago, they had wanted to get involved in the mission field. Now, they realize their home has served as that mission field, through the children they have taken in.

Schlabach spoke of the four-to-six weeks' worth of challenges and tears she, her husband, and their two oldest children shared in getting one newborn foster child through cocaine withdrawal process.

Of another child: "They said he would never bond with anyone. I said that's OK - I'll bond with him." Today, he is "doing great," she said.

"I think it's important we band together as a community," Schlabach said. "These children need to be cared for - and they're just children. Even though it was very challenging and difficult, we are a better family than we were before," she said. "We're better at nine children than we were at four."



Regina Conklin shows Judge Thomas Shumaker the first official family photo taken in 1995 when her parents adopted her and her two younger siblings. At an Adoption Day celebration Tuesday, Conklin shared the harrowing story of her early years and talked about how being adopted gave her a chance in life.

Print Page

By the 'batch'

Fifteen years ago, Barb Kinney planned to adopt only "one or two" children.

"I didn't have such a good home life myself," Kinney said. "I've known a lot of battered children. I had a daycare center, and someone suggested I should foster parent."

The first child they took in was 8.

"He just kind of blended in. He accepted us, we just totally accepted him," she said. "One month later, we got another one. Those two, we adopted."

She is now mother to 16, including 11 adopted children, and explains her family in "batches."

"My first batch, my second batch, my third batch, and we had five of our own before that," she said.

Some have chosen not to be adopted, like their 16-year-old foster child. Although he won't be adopted, she still claims him.

"The one we have in our home - he's ours," Kinney said. "The paper doesn't make him ours. He's going to age out with us. Or I'm going to age out with him."

One of Kinney's adopted children, Tyler, spoke briefly at Tuesday's event. He talked about being in four homes before finding permanence with the Kinneys.

"I appreciate how she helped me through all that - and adopted me," he said. "I asked her, 'could I be adopted?'"

He choked up, then finished.

"I appreciate it. That's all I can say."

From horror to love

Not a dry eye remained in the courtroom when 22-year-old Regina Conklin told her story.

"This is a very personal story and it's very difficult to share," she began. "But being given the opportunity to speak about my experience as a 'successfully adopted adult' was too good to pass up.

"Where I came from - by first grade, I had learned that men are mean and scary, and mommies don't protect their kids."

She went on to describe unspeakable horrors: of being sexually molested at 3; being held under the Christmas tree and having her nose and mouth covered, until she passed out; having hot peppers forced down her throat; potty training "lessons" where she was forced to eat the fecal matter from her "accidents."

At age 6, she tried to run away, but "lost her nerve." She was punished for her concern for her younger siblings by having her head repeatedly banged against the floor until she was unconscious.

At 6 1/2, she entered foster care with her sister. Her younger brother was placed in a

separate home. When she was 9, they were all adopted.

"His foster parents wanted to adopt him. He asked if they could adopt his two sisters as well," Regina said.

His foster parents, Terry and Lanette Conklin, of Burr Oak, hadn't known of the two sisters.

"My mom says that the day they met Deanna and I, they fell in love with us and had to have all three of us, so it was a package deal," Regina said. "I'm happy to say that my parents chose me."

Lanette Conklin spoke.

"I'll be one of the first to tell you it wasn't all roses, and taking in three kids - my husband kept saying, do you know what you're getting yourself into? And we just decided that was the right thing to do. You have to take them in as your own."

Regina, a graduate of Central Michigan University, now helps in the system that helped her.

"I work as a caseworker for DHS and I feel blessed every time I get to interact with a family," she said. "It's not a job, it's an opportunity."

One of Regina's colleagues was surprised to see her name on Tuesday's Adoption Day agenda.

"I didn't even know that you were adopted," the colleague told her.

[Close Window](#)