

## Local couple finds adoption challenging, rewarding; November is National Adoption Awareness Month



**CAPTION:** Daily Mining Gazette/Dan Schneider

**Mark Gockenbach reads to half of he and his wife, Joan's (second from left) children while they work on puzzles. It's a popular pastime with the family. Over the last two years, the Gockenbachs adopted David (at left), his sister Bikiltu (seated with Mark), and Abraham (not pictured) from an orphanage in Ethiopia.**

By Dan Schneider, DMG Writer

PORTAGE TOWNSHIP — For Mark and Joan Gockenbach, adoption has been a long but rewarding journey.

It started in 2005, when Joan heard a radio program about a family in Wisconsin that had adopted three children from Ethiopia.

"I was just driving the kids to piano or something like that and it caught my attention," she said.

The Wisconsin family had similarities to the Gockenbachs.

"They had seven kids, actually, and they home-schooled just like us, and they adopted a sibling group of three," Joan said.

The Gockenbachs had talked about adopting for a long time, particularly focusing on adoption of children from Africa after reading stories about AIDS orphans there.

"It never seemed to be the right time because we kept having our own children," Mark said.

Like the family from Wisconsin Joan heard about on the radio, the Gockenbachs have seven biological children. With their large family, it wasn't their own needs that prompted them to adopt.

"People might ask us 'why do you do that, you've already got seven kids,'" Joan said. "And we say we don't need more kids, they need us."

David, the first adopted son the Gockenbachs brought home from Ethiopia, was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia soon after his arrival. Joan feels their adopting David probably saved his life, since he may not have been able to get treatment for the cancer in Ethiopia. He will undergo chemotherapy treatments at regular intervals until 2009.

David, who is now 9 years old, arrived in the U.S. June 6 of 2006. The Gockenbach's adopted David and his younger sister Bikiltu from an orphanage in Adis Ababa run by Adoption Advocates International, the same organization through which the family from Wisconsin adopted.

Joan and Mark Gockenbach Jr., the couple's oldest son, traveled to Adis Ababa to pick up both children over two weeks in April 2006. When they arrived, they discovered Bikiltu had tuberculosis and could not get a visa to come to the U.S.

"It was very heartbreaking because Mark (Jr.) and I had had the two kids with us both weeks, staying in a guest house," Joan said.

"We had to tell Bikiltu that Friday night she couldn't come with us and with the language barrier and everything, it was a pretty awful scene."

Joan brought David home to the Copper Country and Mark Jr. stayed with Bikiltu. He lived in the home of the orphanage's director and did volunteer work at the orphanage while the Gockenbachs waited for a waiver that would allow Bikiltu to get a visa.

It never came through.

"I think in the end it just languished on the desk of some CDC employee," Mark said.

In the end, the family had to wait for Bikiltu to complete a full six-month tuberculosis treatment before she could come to the United States.

On March 6, the Gockenbachs other adopted son, Abraham, became part of the family. Also from Ethiopia, Abraham, too, traveled a long road to get here.

Abraham was first adopted by a family in Boston. But before the adoption was final, that family decided they could not handle adopting children.

The Gockenbachs had been in contact with a family from Wisconsin who had adopted Abraham's brother and the Gockenbachs decided to adopt Abraham.

Throughout their adoption experience, the Gockenbachs have depended on help from a variety of sources.

"We get a lot of help from our friends, especially at our church," Joan said. "We've gotten a lot of meals made for us while we were going back and forth to the hospital (with David)."

The Gockenbachs attend Evangel Baptist Church in Houghton.

November is recognized as National Adoption Awareness Month in the U.S. Based on his family's experience, Mark Gockenbach had this advice for families considering adoption: "It's well worth doing.

The chance to make a difference in the life of a child like that is well worth all the difficulties along the way."

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