



Abuse case sheds light on necessity of support for adoptive parents

CHRISTIANA LILLY CLILLY@TRIBUNE.COM

The death of Nubia Barahona and the near-death of her twin brother, Victor, shocked South Florida and have led to discussion within adoption agencies.

Parents who adopted through Sunrise-based Jewish Adoption and Foster Care Options discussed the case recently at the organization's monthly meeting.

"[The dialogue] was good. It was a reality check. It doesn't let us forget... the importance of what we're trained on," said Steven Meisels, who adopted his son through JAFCO.

All children who come through JAFCO have been through some sort of trauma, as had the Barahona twins. According to documents released by the Department of Children and Families, the twins were born to a mother with a history of drug use. As they grew older, they were subjected to physical and emotional abuse. They were removed from their father's care when he was arrested for child molestation, and they went through the foster care system.

Parents who foster or adopt are required by law to go through Model Approach to Partnership and

Parenting (MAPP) classes. Other adoption agencies go a step further, offering post-adoption support. At ChildNet in Plantation, these services are still available even if the family moves.

"Parents need to know they have someone they can call who can help with their specific needs," said Natalie Gomes, the assistant director of permanency at ChildNet.

JAFCO requires foster parents to attend 12 hours of support meetings. The two-hour meetings take place once a month and highlight a different topic related to adoption and child-rearing.

"I think that it's very difficult to live with a child who has experienced trauma and is often reliving a trauma in their adoptive home," said Sarah Franco, JAFCO's executive director. "The parents were not there for the trauma... but yet they have to live with the result of it."

These services are not required by law, and not all agencies have the funding to offer such support. Franco said she hopes legislators will change that.

When Karen Roberts adopted twin boys seven years ago, she and her husband needed all the

help they could get. They had begun fostering the boys through JAFCO at the age of 3 and then adopted them just before they turned 6. From the beginning, there were struggles with the boys and their special needs.

"We probably spent the first two years dealing with temper tantrums that lasted three to four hours," she said, referring to one of the twins. "We had some armoires that he tipped over, he put holes in the wall. He would draw on the walls just out of anger and frustration of what had happened to him."

More recently, the second boy has been experiencing self-esteem issues and feelings of abandonment stemming from the absence of his birth parents.

At one point, he felt he didn't belong and ran away from home. Helicopters had to search for him before he was found.

The Roberts family had fostered children before, and all of them had their own issues. Ever since they started fostering children, the couple has attended the monthly support discussions at JAFCO. Without it, life as a foster and adoptive

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parent would have been very different.

"Honestly, I don't know if we would have made it," Roberts said. "It's good for me as an

adoptive parent to be able to go somewhere and realize there's someone else going through the same thing, that I'm not isolated, that these behaviors are normal."

Meisels adopted his

17-year-old son when the boy was 6 and started fostering him at age 3. He said that after an initial "honeymoon period," his son started acting out. But he and his wife were prepared because of JAF-
CO's training, he said.

All of the children who are adopted through ChildNet have suffered trauma and need parents who have "extraordinary patience," Gomes said, "to help their child grieve the loss of their family,

grieve the loss of their innocence and childhood."

"Unfortunately, the only news we get about foster and adoptive parents is the negative news," Roberts said. "It has been such an awesome growing experience for us. If I had to do it all over again, I would do the exact same route."

What do you think? E-mail Managing Editor Judith Jantz at plantation@tribune.com.