

Heroes Among Us : People.com



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Carolyn Twietmeyer lay in an Addis Ababa hospital bed in July 2008, holding 11-year-old Selah, who had been her daughter for only a few weeks. Swatting

biting insects that swarmed through the window, she listened as doctors said there was little hope for her child: Selah had AIDS, weighed a mere 32 lbs., and had long been denied blood transfusions due to limited supply. With Carolyn's blood now pumping through the girl's body, she prayed Selah would be well enough to board a plane to the Twietmeyer home in the Chicago suburbs. "I realized I wasn't the only mother with a sick child in Ethiopia," says Carolyn. "I am no different, just luckier."



“I FEEL LOVED AND SECURE AND THERE ALWAYS SOMEONE HERE FOR ME.”

But what they all grew up to understand, they were their gift back to a grateful neighborhood. “I learned Andu here to eat,” Ethan, 18, says proudly. “And he thought I should eat because it feels like my job of brother and sister here always has been.”

Today, Kael is a student at the University of Chicago. “That is due to better medical care, but also the nutrition and love they are getting in the Transwonder house,” Kael says happily. “I’m glad to go back and to be ahead,” she says. “They aren’t get HIV by having sex. Children are doing because people aren’t helping. They’re not taking care.”

To that end, in 2008 the Transwonder house received Project Hopeful (transwonderful.org), a nonprofit that, unlike his big plan emphasis, says with HIV, says the families in the U.S. Shane and Diane Lewis, of Chicago, Ill., worked with Project Hopeful to adopt their daughter, age 10, to live out all HIV positive. “Carolyn is always available with support and encouragement,” says Shane. Adopting a child with serious medical needs, he adds, “is not easy. Our commitment will be tested, but it’s absolutely worth it.”

The Transwonder also had the challenge. Kiel’s \$60,000 salary is divided into and Carolyn, then 31, is a nurse and lives in a small apartment. “I’m not sure if it’s possible,” she says. “I’m not sure if it’s possible.”

Carolyn and Kiel, 35, preside over a somewhat unwieldy but demonstrably loving clan. “We’ve never had issues where someone feels entitled because they were here first,”

Luck may have played a part, but Twietmeyer's determination made a difference in Selah's life-she's now an energetic 13-year-old-as it has done for Carolyn and husband Kiel's 12 other kids, ages four to 21. With seven biological children and six adopted (two of whom have HIV), Carolyn, 40, and Kiel, 35, preside over a somewhat unwieldy but demonstrably loving clan. "We've never had issues where someone feels entitled because they were here first,"

says Kiel. "Living with many brothers and sisters," says Andu, 18, "makes me happy."

The couple didn't always intend to have quite such a sprawling brood. Carolyn, who homeschools the kids, had four children (Matt, now 21, Kylie, 18, Brendan, 16 and Ethan, 13) from a previous marriage when she and Kiel, a construction contractor, wed in 1998. After the birth of Gracie, 10, Hank, 8, and Danny, 6, they still thought of expanding their family-by adopting one needy child from somewhere. "We had seven kids I love dearly," says Kiel. "But I never felt completely fulfilled."

Carolyn had been drawn to Africa since seeing famine victims on TV as a child. When they looked into adopting there, she learned of the need for parents for orphans with HIV. "My first thought was, 'I am not going to endanger the rest of my family,'" she says. But with research she found that "HIV is much more manageable than I knew." Soon, she received photos of three Ethiopian siblings: Sam, now 8, who has HIV, Rachel, 15, and Seth, 4. Adopting Sam alone was an option, but, says Carolyn, "Siblings separated? I couldn't bear it. I just knew they all were going to be our kids. "

Kiel was apprehensive: "I said, 'How can we push our budget that far?'" But two weeks later, moved by a Christmas song with the lyrics, "father of the fatherless," he came around. They took out a second mortgage and prepared their 3,160-sq.-ft. home by adding extra bedrooms.

They would need more. While at the orphanage to pick up their three children,

Carolyn saw a girl who had just been taken from her home. This was Selah. "She was weeping, terrified," says Carolyn, who promised to find the girl an adoptive family. Back at home, "I had such a deep sadness, I could hardly function," says Carolyn. A year later she returned to Ethiopia, and brought home Selah, then 22 months later Selah's siblings Andu, 18, and Sarah, 15. "I was surprised because Selah was so tall," says Andu of their reunion in Chicago. "I was afraid she would die."

Complete at last, the whole family went through a period of adjustment. Teenagers Andu and Sarah, says Carolyn, "had not been parented for four years. They had been on their own, with basically no rules." For months Sam would wake in the night to stealthily eat all he could. "He still had that mentality of 'it might be a while before you eat again,'" says Kiel. The younger kids "get less time in our laps," says Carolyn. Kylie, who was 15 when the first three arrived, "definitely took on more responsibilities: meal preparation, household chores and reading to the younger ones," says her mom.

But what they all gave up in undivided attention, they more than got back in joyful togetherness. "I showed Andu how to swim," Ethan, 13, says proudly. "And he thought Avatar was awesome. It feels like my adopted brothers and sisters have always been here."

Today Sam is medication-free; Selah takes antiretroviral medication daily. "Both are improving dramatically," says their physician Dr. Kenneth Alexander, chief of pediatric infectious diseases at the University of Chicago Medical Center. "That is due to better medical care, but also the nutrition and love they are getting in the Twietmeyer house." Selah now hopes to be a doctor. "I tell people not to be afraid," she says. "They won't get HIV by hugging me. Children are dying because people aren't helping. They need families like mine."

To that end, in 2006 the Twietmeyers founded Project Hopeful (projecthopeful.org), a nonprofit that, so far, has helped place orphans, many with HIV, with 180 families in the U.S. Shane and Diane Lewis, of Crown Point, Ill., worked with Project Hopeful to adopt four daughters, ages 6 to 8, who are all HIV positive. "Carolyn is always available with answers or encouragement," says Shane. Adopting a child with serious medical needs, he adds, "is not easy. Your commitment will be tested, but it's absolutely worth it."

The Twietmeyers also feel the challenges. Kiel's \$64,000 salary is stretched thin and Carolyn rises at 4 a.m. to prep meals and lesson plans. But the happiness, they say, far outweighs the costs. One evening 12 of the kids stage a break-dance contest in the family room. Watching them collapse into a pile of giggles and shrieks, Carolyn catches Kiel's eye and smiles. "We're not wealthy," she says. "But we feel rich."

DEC. 1 IS WORLD AIDS DAY 2.1 MILLION CHILDREN ARE LIVING WITH HIV.
FOR MORE INFORMATION SEE WORLDIDAIDSDAY.ORG

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Coming to America

For orphans with HIV, finding adoptive parents is hard enough. Coming home to immediate medical attention shouldn't be another hurdle. But a 1993 law required foreign adoptees with HIV to wait 3 to 9 months to enter the U.S. (The time was for both countries to process the parents' proof of insurance and a pediatrician, and a signed vow to educate their child about the disease.) But with new antiretroviral drugs in the U.S., delays became "the difference between life and death," says Dr. Kenneth Alexander. In 2007 the Twietmeyers' Project Hopeful helped reduce the wait to 10 days; in January it was waived entirely. Here, child fatalities from HIV have virtually ended. Says Alexander: "These kids are doing so well."

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