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Homer Glen woman counts blessings

4 adopted children later, she's thanking program that helped her family flourish



Jeremy Babel serves dinner to his children Jan. 13 at their home in Homer Glen. (Chris Sweda/Chicago Tribune)

BY DARCEL ROCKETT CHICAGO TRIBUNE

At age 22, Kerry Babel was married and had already had the conversation with

her husband about foster care. She'd wanted to be a mom since she was 7. But endometriosis and unsuccessful fertility treatments made the biological option impossible. Husband Jeremy suggested they adopt. A trip to Central America led Kerry to her daughter.

"I came home on a Sunday, told my husband we need to adopt from Central America," she said. "That Monday, I found an agency that was placing babies from Guatemala. And by Thursday of that week, we were matched with my daughter, who was 4 days old. Five months later, she came home with us. My infertility was really my greatest blessing."

The Babels were both 26 at the time. While Kerry recalls having built an online support group specific to Guatemala, they didn't have much training on what would happen after they were stateside, or what the years would look like with the new addition to the family.

"By the time she was like 5, 6 years old, we were looking for some really specific supports for our adopted family," she said. That support came from Metropolitan Family Services' Adoption Support and Preservation (ASAP), an Illinois Department of Children & Family Services-funded program that provides counseling, support groups, workshops, crisis intervention and assistance to help adoptive families and foster parents address adjustment, grief, loss, attachment, education and emotional issues. At 16, the eldest Babel child has used ASAP's services through the years to work through difficulties with self-expression and processing her adoption history, among other things.

According to ASAP Program Director Cara Siebert, the program, which serves Cook County and eight surrounding counties, helped 293 families and 352 young people during its last fiscal year. Provided to clients for free since 1991, ASAP offers a continuum of services to help families stay together, Siebert said, from preventive measures to intensive, personalized aid. The common themes that she has seen over her 16 years in adoption work at Metropolitan revolve around trauma, detachment, identity and acting-out behaviors.

"A lot of times when families do finalize their adoptions, their thought is that that's their final step in the journey, and everything's going to be great. And sometimes it is, but this is a journey, so it doesn't just stop," Siebert said. "Any need that a family has post-adoption ... basic education or offering some creative ways to form a connection with your child, we're here to walk with you through that, and to stay with you on that path."

Social worker Hannah Sedlacek said staff social workers and counselors see clients weekly (virtually during the pandemic; at home prepandemic) to provide therapeutic parenting techniques, individual and family therapy, and skill-building groups for young people. Many families return for services to address different issues as children reach different developmental stages.

“We really just try to meet these families where they’re at,” said ASAP Clinical Program Supervisor Samantha Brady. “I’ve had a lot of parents come into my office for the first session like: ‘This child needs to get out of my house. I’m done. I’m over it.’ And our response is, ‘I hear you. What can I do to help?’ Sometimes all they need is to be heard.

“Adoption is a very isolating way to parent,” Brady said, “because when you go to other parents who have biological kids, the parents are like, ‘Well just do X, Y or Z to get your kid in line,’ and the adoptive parents are saying, ‘That doesn’t work for my child.’ When they come in to see us and we’re giving them empathy ... it gives them hope. I’m not a bad parent. This child does have hope of healing, and they’re willing to do the work at that point.”

Mitchell and Laurie are doing the work with their two sons, whom they adopted in October 2016.

The couple requested we use pseudonyms to protect their children’s privacy. The family started using Adoption Support and Preservation services in March 2019, taking advantage of family therapy, kids groups, parent groups and other assistance. Before that, the parents said in an ASAP survey, their children were surviving, not thriving.

Laurie said the support groups are good for crowdsourcing general adoption and foster resources and information, but Metropolitan has helped them learn how to parent their specific kids. “This isn’t for funsies; this is necessary education. And we need it. So, we’re using it,” she said.

“We still had issues connecting with the boys at times — behavioral issues that we needed help with,” Mitchell said. “We needed to come together as a family and find ways to help them, and that’s where Metropolitan came in.”

Kerry Babel looks back at her naivete of thinking love would be enough, and laughs. The Babels have adopted three other children since their first — a son, 14, from Guatemala; a daughter, 9, and a son, 8, both from foster care and both people of color. Kerry said the work that she and her husband have done with

their older children with ASAP has benefited the younger ones.

“Adoption, in and of itself, is a trauma,” Kerry said. “That is a loss of connection with your biological family — mother specifically. And when we know that ... when you understand more, you can do better in helping to support your child.”

“We’re able to give families that are struggling hope and then help them to make those changes and to kind of get to a better place,” Siebert said.

To access ASAP programming in Cook County, call 773-884-2211; Lake, McHenry, DuPage, Will, Kane, Kendall, Grundy, Kankakee counties, 630-784-4800.

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