

FEATURE



Courtesy photo

The Guin children pose for a photo while camping in Haines, Alaska, in June. They are (from left to right) Ramon, Mary, Diana, Caleb, Hannah, Max and Megan. Not pictured is Josiah.

Parents give thanks for eight blessings

Story by Capt. Tracy Velino
437 AW Public Affairs

It'll take more than a small turkey to feed one Charleston AFB family as they give thanks for their many blessings Thanksgiving Day. But large meals aren't out of the ordinary for Chaplain (Capt.) Phil Guin and his wife, Sandy, who estimate the monthly grocery bill for their family of ten is \$1,200.

Their eight children, all of whom are adopted, range from ages nine to 17. Five are special needs children, and all except Megan, 12, were adopted from foreign countries. Megan is from New Jersey.

The Guins adopted Max, now 16, from Korea in 1984. "Due to some issues with fertility, we had the choice between adoption and spending a lot of money on what was a new technology with no guarantees," said the 437th Airlift Wing senior protestant chaplain.

Max's adoption process began while Chaplain Guin was a seminary student in Atlanta, Ga. The Guins turned to a private adoption agency after a discouraging call to the State. "There weren't many children available, and waiting times were incredibly long," he said. Max joined the family nine months later in Cullman, Ala., where Chaplain Guin was a Methodist minister.

By 1985 the Guins had adopted then five-year-old Jessica, a Korean child who was quadriplegic and thought to have cerebral palsy. "My wife and I had never really considered adopting children with special needs," Chaplain Guin said. "Sandy was thumbing through a catalog that listed literally hundreds of waiting children, when she came across this wonderful child.

"I think she expected me to see the picture and say 'no way, we can't do it,'" Chaplain Guin said. "But I felt as compelled as Sandy toward this child. My heart just literally melted."

It turned out Jessica didn't have cerebral palsy—she had a progressive neurological disease, and she died in 1995.

"I don't have any regrets with Jessica," the chaplain said. "She was destined to live her entire life in an orphanage. We gave her a family to love her."

Less than two years after adopting Jessica, the Guins adopted Caleb, now 17, from Korea.

They said there were plenty of times they thought their family was complete. "But when approached by the agency

about a child, we thought, 'oh, a little kid won't take up a whole lot of room,'" Sandy said.

In 1988, Megan, an infant with a leg-length discrepancy as part of a genetic orthopedic syndrome, was adopted. Next came Josiah, 12, adopted from Brazil in 1991, a year after Chaplain Guin came into the Air Force.

"When Josiah came to us, he had no language skills and couldn't walk," said Chaplain Guin. "We were able to provide medically for him to help him walk, and he speaks now. He has a wonderful vocabulary."

They adopted Hannah, 9, from Korea in 1992, with a medical condition similar to Megan's. One physician recommended amputating a leg, but the Guins opted for surgeries instead. "We expect someday it will be similar in length to the other," he said. "But for now, she walks!"

The last of the adoptees were three siblings from the Philippines. Ramon, now 15, Diana, 12, and Mary, 9, were adopted in 1993. Ramon and Diana attend the South Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind. The school offers immersion programs in sign language for Ramon and brail for Diana.

Chaplain Guin said when Ramon was adopted, he had no language of any kind. "We taught him some basic sign language we had learned to prepare for his arrival," he said. Diana, who was completely blind, now has some vision as a result of surgery.

"Our goal as parents," said the chaplain, "is to try to make them as independent as possible, despite their limitations.

"Our expectations and the meaning of excellence for us have changed over time," said Chaplain Guin.

"I know I have at least 1 or 2 children that will never be Harvard graduates. But helping them realize their own potential is as rewarding.

"Each has their own unique gifts and contributions in my life," he said. "The joy my kids bring to me on a daily basis outweighs anything I've given."

However, Chaplain Guin every day brings a new challenge.

Their grocery bill is the next largest bill after the mortgage. "Thank God I'm about to pin on major," he joked. Now that the children are aging, they consume more. "This is the train wreck I knew was coming, that they'd all be wanting to eat more and more," he said.

The family lives in a five-bedroom, 2.5-bath home in Summerville. Chaplain Guin said one of their biggest challenges is getting to church on Sunday mornings. "2.5 bathrooms are just not enough," he said. "But we get by; we do it in shifts." They ride together to the chapel in their 15-passenger van.

The DOD recognizes adopted children the same as children born to an active-duty parent. Additionally, the DOD has an adoption reimbursement program for active duty members. "That program helped us greatly," Chaplain Guin said.

"But if you want to adopt children, money shouldn't be the biggest issue," he said. "I was a poor Methodist preacher, and yet we were able to do it," he said. They said military families need to begin the adoption process early in a tour to prevent the cost of repeating a home study due to PCS.

Initially, the Guins, like many couples interested in adopting, wanted an infant. "You go through different stages in your life," Sandy said. "For the first child, we just wanted a baby. Then after that...people have different motivations when they go to adopt, some to have a child, some to help a child."

Will they adopt any more children? "Never say never," said Chaplain Guin. "But as far as I can tell right now, we've reached the limits of what we can afford. Plus, if we adopted infants now, we'd be rearing teens in our sixties. I don't think I'll have that kind of energy then."

Chaplain Guin and Sandy said they would do it all over again. "My sense of self is stronger," the chaplain said. "I'm spiritually healthier."

(Editor's note: See related article about National Adoption Month (November) in next week's Airlift Dispatch)



Photo by Capt. Tracy Velino

Chaplain Guin and his wife, Sandy, help Max (left) and Hannah with their homework, as part of the family's regular routine.