

## Change Agents

*Pete Irizarry Had to Turn His Own Life Around Before He Could Be a Positive Influence on Kids*

*Drug dealer. Addict. Thrice-convicted felon. Prison inmate.*

*Community servant. Inspirational speaker. Role model. Loving husband. Nurturing father.*

Two lists. Both describing the same man. The first is who German "Pete" Irizarry was. The second is who the COBYS adoptive father has become. Few would have predicted Pete's transformation, but with God's leading and a strong assist from a 4-foot-10-inch dynamo named Jeannie, that's exactly what happened.

Pete & Jeannie joined COBYS' team of foster/adoptive resource parents in 2005 and have cared for about 15 foster children since then. Currently they are caring for seven boys, ages 4 to 17, in their modest home in Lancaster City's southeast.

There's 17-year-old Elijah, their son by birth; Kaz, 13, adopted in December 2009; James, 10, adopted in August 2013; and Christopher, soon 8, and Jeremiah, 4, who both were adopted on March 9. Add in nephews Jayden and Shawn, 9 and 8, who also are living with the Irizarrys, and it makes for a very busy house.



Syndrome, the alcohol consumption increased.

During his teen years Pete's life spiraled out of control. In addition to dealing drugs, he became a user, beginning with occasional use of marijuana and graduating to harder and more addictive stuff.

At age 16 he was caught dealing and served time for the first of three felony drug convictions. Pete and

his partner would have two additional sons and a daughter by the time he turned 20 (and he maintains positive relationships with all three of his adult children).

Pete & Jeannie are "exceptionally positive, loving people," says Drew Scheffey, the COBYS caseworker who finalized the two most recent adoptions. "Jeannie is always smiling and happy. They both are outgoing and have welcomed and provided a very safe and loving home for their sons. Their relationship clearly is a partnership of working together to support and love these young men."

But before they could start caring for kids, Jeannie had some work to do on Pete. Pete & Jeannie both grew up in Brooklyn, New York. Jeannie was part of a large family with a hard-working father and devout mother. Pete's family was less stable, and his mom struggled with alcohol.

Pete became involved with a much older woman, and at age 13 he became a father. He moved in with his girlfriend and began to support his family by selling drugs. He soon fell into drinking regularly with a group of older guys and, when his daughter died a few months after birth of Sudden Infant Death



His relationship with the mother of his children eventually soured, and after several years in and out of prison, at age 22 Pete was paroled and in

need of a fresh start.

When he laid eyes on Jeannie at a gathering of friends and family in 1992, he found a positive force that would help turn his life around. They began dating, but he still was using drugs behind her back. A parole violation sent him back to prison for a short time, which turned out to be a blessing.

Jeannie, who was employed and had her own apartment, vouched for him and took him in upon his release, recognizing that it was important to get him away from people, places, and things that could drag him down. She laid down some clear guidelines, one of

*(continued on page three)*

## Mission Statement

*Motivated by Christian faith, COBYS Family Services educates, supports, and empowers children and adults to reach their full potential.*

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*Fostering Hope* is the quarterly newsletter of COBYS Family Services, a Christian family service agency, affiliated with the Atlantic Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren.

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## Sharpening Our Saw

In Steven Covey's book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the seventh habit is "Sharpen the Saw." He tells the following story:

*Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree.*

*"What are you doing?" you ask.*

*"Can't you see?" comes the instant reply. "I'm sawing down this tree."*

*"You look exhausted!" you exclaim. "How long have you been at it?"*

*"Over five hours," he returns, "and I'm beat! This is hard work!"*

*"Well, why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen the saw?" you inquire. "I'm sure it would go a lot faster."*

*"I don't have time to sharpen the saw," the man says emphatically. "I'm too busy sawing!"*



Over the past two years, COBYS has been doing a lot of sawing. That sawing has led to significant growth, which was the overarching theme of our recent banquets. Some examples of that growth included having to use a nearby church to park vehicles because our main office lot is full and overflowing, increasing our staff from 82 to 111 in the past 14 months (we added 5 more staff since the banquet making our current total 116), and having two or three staff in offices that used to house only one or two.

At least three main factors are behind our recent growth. First, the work that we do produces results. Motivated by Christian faith, our staff are committed to educating, supporting, and empowering children and adults to reach their full potential. Our partners wouldn't keep asking us to increase our existing services or add new programs if we weren't making a difference in the lives of the children and families that we serve.

Second, we are growing because of a heroin epidemic that is tearing families apart. More children are being placed into foster care and more parents are requiring education and support specifically because of drug use and addiction.

Third, along with growth in grants and public funding, our private support from generous donors, who believe in our ministry, continues to grow. We couldn't do much of what we do without your support.

So it isn't a huge surprise that quality services, plus increased need, along with strong financial support is leading to growth.

In recent months I have been asked and have reflected upon a couple questions: Do you want to grow? And is bigger always better? The short answer is that I don't know. Growth has never been a goal of mine. We don't sit in meetings and talk about how we can grow. We do talk about what we can do to more effectively serve kids and families who need our help. And because we want to help, because we want to make a difference in our communities, we are growing.

In order to help us ensure that we are moving in the right direction with the right motives, we are sharpening our saw. We have hired consultants Rob Skacel and John Frey from True Edge Performance Solutions. They are working with us to help us evaluate where we are, where we may be going, and how best to get there. It is important for us to take some time to sharpen our saw so that we are well positioned to care for the kids and families that need us to be at our best.

*Mark Cunningham, Executive Director*

*(continued from page one)*

which was attending Friday evening Narcotics Anonymous meetings at a church down the street.

To increase his investment in the meetings, Pete followed advice he had been given to arrive early, accept responsibility, and stay late. He made the coffee before the meetings and helped clean up afterwards. And he got paired with a sponsor who, along with Jeannie, helped keep him on track.

And though he had not yet met her, Jeannie's mother became another force for good. Much of Jeannie's family had moved to Lancaster by this time. Her mom would call regularly. When Jeannie was done talking with her mom, she would hand the phone to Pete, and late into the night Pete's future mother-in-law would read and explain Scriptures to him. Somewhere along the way Pete began to understand that God had a plan for his life. It hasn't always been easy, but he has been drug-free since the early 1990s.

Elijah, Pete & Jeannie's only birth son, came into the world in October 1999, and in 2001 the Irizarrys were married and soon moved to Lancaster to join extended family and provide a better living environment for their son.

They began attending church and eventually landed at Journey Church, which meets at Living Waters Theater near Strasburg. Pete and Jeannie both were baptized in 2011 as an outward symbol of their commitment to Christ.

Pete also was getting other aspects of his life on track. He completed training to become an Emergency Medical Technician and worked 11 years as an EMT, before back surgery forced a career change in 2015. His heart still is in the medical field, and he teaches occasional CPR courses.

With their life together on track, Jeannie thought it was time to nurture a seed that had been planted when she was a teen. She had a friend whose family took in a foster baby, and Jeannie remembered thinking that she



***The Irizarrys adopted Christopher and Jeremiah on March 9. Only after the boys were placed with their family did COBYS and the Irizarrys learn that Chris and Jeremiah are closely related to James.***

would like to be a foster mom someday. She came from a large family and had "mothered" some of her brothers.

When Jeannie broached the topic with Pete, however, he was less than enthused. Exaggerating slightly, Pete recalls, "One day my lovely angel here said, 'Babe, I want to get into foster care.' I was like, Un, uh. Nope. I'm not taking care of somebody else's kids. Not happening. They gotta deal with it. I don't want to do it. Forget it."

Jeannie encouraged him to pray about it, and eventually he came around. Attracted to COBYS by its Christian identity, they attended an orientation, completed their training, and two weeks later had their first—and still toughest—foster child in their home, a five-year-old boy with serious behavioral issues.

Pete describes some of the challenges: "He cursed us. He threatened us. He invited us to fight. He would throw things. He threw poop at me. It was *baaad!* But," adds Pete, "we loved him anyway."

The Irizarrys stayed committed to the little boy for nearly 18 months until an adoptive home was found.

"He was my hardest kid," Jeannie agrees, "but he made me who I am. There were times I thought, 'I'm sorry, I can't do it,' but I stuck it out."

"And people were like, 'How did you do that?'" Pete recalls. "God did it for us, because we wouldn't have been able to do it."

Fourteen foster children later, they haven't had one quite as challenging, although little Jeremiah sometimes brings back memories of their first foster son. The qualities that carried them through that first foster care experience have served them well ever since. Drew cites their ability

to set clear expectations, provide structure, and still be flexible.

Each boy has age-appropriate chores like clearing off the table, washing dishes, sweeping floors, and taking out the trash. They pray together morning and evening and each boy has a clear understanding of their family's values, Pete emphasizes.

"Pete & Jeannie are very patient with the boys, and also very even-keeled," says Foster Care Caseworker Allison Huber. "They don't get flustered very easily. Despite the chaos of having seven boys and having different work schedules, you can tell they are united and have a strong marriage. A lot of their motivation is their faith and love for God, and showing that by loving others."

Their schedules *are* hectic. Pete works full-time as a postal clerk at the Strasburg Post Office. Jeannie works part-time from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m. for the City of Lancaster in parking enforcement and also is a crossing guard. She leaves for work while Pete sleeps. Pete heads off to work before Jeannie arrives home. Elijah helps stir his younger brothers so that Jeannie can get them off to school when she gets home from her shift.

The boys are showered and in bed by 7:30 or soon after so Pete & Jeannie can enjoy some brief quiet time

*(continued on back page)*



## Ball Brothers and Dr. David Uth to Headline Praise Dinner

Dr. David Uth will speak and gospel artists The Ball Brothers will sing at the 22nd annual Wenger Foundation Praise Dinner on Thursday, May 4, at 6:00 p.m., at the Lebanon Expo Center. The event will benefit COBYS Family Services and three other ministries.

Dr. Uth is Senior Pastor at First Baptist Church of Orlando, where his



primary responsibilities include preaching and casting vision for the Central Florida megachurch.

Winners of the 2011 Singing News "Horizon Group of the Year," the Ball Brothers began in 2006 and now perform 150 dates per year in the US and abroad. According to their website they mix a variety of musical styles, melted together by tight, four-part harmony that appeals to all ages. They have shared the stage with some of the biggest names in gospel music.

The Praise Dinner will include a buffet meal catered by Country Home Catering. Other ministries benefitting from the event are Evangelical Seminary, Friendship Community, and On Fire Youth Ministries.

The cost to attend is \$125 per person or \$1,250 per table of 10 guests. All donations support the designated ministries. Underwriting the event's expenses are: Ambassador Advisors, the John & Judy Byler Charitable Foundation, Brightbill Body Works, Dutch Valley



The Wenger Foundation, Inc., was established in 1996 as the charitable giving arm of the Wenger Family of Companies. Since then, the Foundation has awarded more than \$2.8 million to a variety of Christian and community

ministries. Last year's Praise Dinner attracted some 800 people, and raised more than \$121,000, including \$25,849 for COBYS. Since 1999 COBYS has received more than \$357,000 through the Praise Dinner. For more information about the event, please contact the Wenger Foundation at 717-866-2130 or [rwalmer@wengers.com](mailto:rwalmer@wengers.com).

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## Family Fun Walk Slated for May 7

COBYS Family Services will host the 23rd annual Family Fun Walk on Sunday, May 7, at Peter Becker Community, 800 Maple Ave., Harleysville. The walk begins at 4 p.m., with registra-



tion beginning at 3:30.

The event consists of a three-mile walk, followed

by ice cream, refreshments, and awarding of door prizes. Walkers donate, enlist sponsors to benefit COBYS ministries to children and families, or both. On a cool, dreary day, last year's walk attracted 70 participants and raised a record amount of \$12,700 to support COBYS ministries. With the help of some sunshine, this year we're looking to attract 100 walkers and establish a new income record.

The top two fundraisers receive grand prizes, including

## Work for the Well-Being Campaign Exceeds Goal

The Work for the Well-Being of the City Campaign has exceeded its \$300,000 goal and officially concluded with gifts totaling \$305,391.

In October 2012 COBYS purchased a 5,400-square-foot facility at 171 E. King Street, Lancaster, to house Family Life Education (FLE) staff and programs. The move was prompted by a need for consistent, well-equipped facilities for education and childcare and a growing realization that many people served by COBYS education programs live in the city.

In June 2013, COBYS launched the campaign to pay for the building—known as the COBYS Family Life Center—and undergird education programming. The campaign theme was based on Jeremiah 29:7.

In concert with the education theme, the campaign goals were summarized in three R's: **R**etire remaining debt on the Family Life Center (\$185,000); **R**ecoup a portion of costs for furnishing the building (\$45,000); and **R**aise new funds to



support Family Life Education programs (\$70,000).

The move to the city of Lancaster and the modest injection of additional resources for programming was part of a huge expansion of Family Life Education programming that has been fueled primarily by growth in grant funding. The FLE budget has more than doubled from \$203,600 in 2012/13, when the building was purchased, to \$419,000 for the 2016/2017 fiscal year.

Individuals supported the campaign primarily in 2013-2015 and churches were asked for two-year commitments during 2015 and 2016.

The campaign was conducted entirely by COBYS

board members and staff. Former Board President Rose Walmer chaired the campaign. Serving on the Lead Gifts Team were Steve Echternach, Brenda Spence, and John Wise. Church Gifts Team members were Wendy Egolf, Nancy Fittery, and Debra Krantz.

The Work for the Well-Being campaign was COBYS' third since the organization's founding in 1980.



two tickets for "Jonah" donated by Sight & Sound Theatres. All participants receive a free t-shirt, ice cream and refreshments, and a chance to win a door prize. Additional prizes are available for those who reach certain levels of support. Youth groups who raise \$1,000 or more receive a free gym and pizza night.

For more information about the event, including brochures and sponsor sheets, visit the News & Events page at [www.cobys.org](http://www.cobys.org), or contact Don Fitzkee at 800-452-6517 or [don@cobys.org](mailto:don@cobys.org).

### Sponsored by:





# Commercials Banquet ‘Advertises’ COBYS Ministries, Establishes Income & Attendance Records



*(Left) Ava kind of stole the show while the adults talked; (Bottom from left) Soloist Eva Strawser provided inspirational music; Dave Mueller fit right in with the spirit of the event with his good humor; Steve Faus was deeply grateful for his “very valuable prize” until we took it from him; Ava’s adoptive parents Kyle & Laura Beltle and birth grandmother Karen Zerbe shared some of their story; Mark Myers of SR Film & Video donated video and photography services for the event.*

It appeared that a good time was had by all (or at least most) at the March 2 COBYS Commercials Banquet at Middle Creek Church of the Brethren. The event established new attendance and income records.

Banquet income exceeded \$60,500, up from last year’s record of \$56,575. A total of 598 people were served at the noon and evening seatings. Accounting for 16 who attended both events, we established a new attendance record of 582, up from 574 last year.

The program drew on familiar commercials and advertising slogans to entertain and educate attendees about COBYS ministries. Emcee Don

Fitzkee explained at the outset, “We will be advertising a few things, but mostly we hope you will leave this place sold on the value of COBYS ministries to children and families.”

The program included video segments highlighting COBYS ministries, including:

- A commercial for the COBYS counseling program that played on the high number of Micheles and Michelles currently serving as COBYS therapists;
- A “Can you hear me now?” piece emphasizing the rapid growth of COBYS programs; and
- Some new words to the Oscar Mayer Wiener song, sung by Olivia

Shenk, interspersed with interviews of COBYS resource families.

Live presenters included adoptive parents Kyle & Laura Beltle and birth grandmother Karen Zerbe, who shared how the Beltles adopted Ava, while also welcoming her grandma into their lives; and Dave Mueller, Director of the Lancaster County Office of Juvenile Probation, who did an “unpaid infomercial” promoting several COBYS Family Life Education programs that help him meet the needs of his clients.

Along with the more serious content was some of the usual silliness, including a new ad for Gene Wenger’s Famous Hamloaf that gave a nod to the old Leggo of my Eggo



Mark Myers



Sharon Kingsley



Mark Myers



Mark Myers



ads and featured Executive Director Mark Cunningham and his wife, Mari, fighting over hamloaf; and an ad jingle sing-along of the Alka Seltzer and Oscar Mayer Bologna songs, led by Cindy Umberger and Abby Keiser. Gene Wenger's Meats & Fine Foods donated the hamloaf that was served at the dinners.

At the noon banquet, Bernice Petticoffer was awarded a "very valuable prize" (a COBYS mug and a Snickers bar) for correctly counting the 28 advertising references in the banquet invitation. In the evening, Steve Faus was well into his acceptance speech as the announced winner, when planners discovered a terrible mistake had been made. (This despite the supervision of the awards process by COBYS board member Scott Moyer, who is an accountant for PriceWaterhouse-Coopers, the firm that oversaw the recent Academy Awards, where there was a similar mix up.) The actual winner was Melanie Lutz. Patty Snyder also submitted a correct answer.

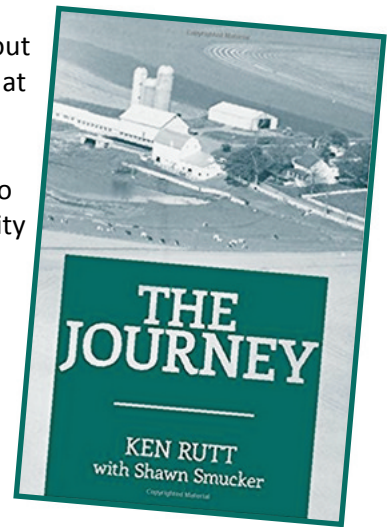
The full program and some of the individual video segments are available on YouTube. A photo gallery is available on Facebook. Access either through the News & Events page at [www.cobys.org](http://www.cobys.org).



## Rutt Memoir Sales Benefit COBYS

Longtime COBYS supporter Ken Rutt has lived an interesting life. You can read about it in his new memoir and support COBYS at the same time.

Co-written with Shawn Smucker, *The Journey* traces Ken's path from farming to real estate to community service to agricultural development work in Nigeria. The book is available on Amazon.com for \$14.99, with a portion of the proceeds



benefitting COBYS ministries. If you purchase through AmazonSmile, COBYS gets even more.

Ken and his wife, Connie, are members of the Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren. Ken is an avid motorcycle rider who has served the past few years on the committee to plan the COBYS Bike & Hike. Last year he led the motorcycle ride.



Helping adoptive families overcome challenges through free services including case advocacy, respite care, and support groups.



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*Little Ava didn't mind being on stage at the March 2 COBYS banquets. Read about it on page six.*



*(continued from page three)*

together. Pete emphasizes that he and Jeannie seek to never go to bed angry with each other, and they never part without a kiss and "I love you."

They recognize that they need to take care of each other so they can take care of their family, and they are grateful that oldest son Elijah can take responsibility for his brothers now and then so Pete & Jeannie can get away for a short time.

And they make other sacrifices. Finances sometimes get tight. Currently their living room is sparsely furnished. They have plans for some sprucing up and new furniture, but now their focus is on making sure the daily needs of seven boys are met.

"God provides," says Jeannie. "God is always there when we need him. We don't go without." And despite at times

having to delay some of her own plans and desires for the sake of the boys, Jeannie insists, "I'm very happy." And you get the idea she's telling the truth.

Pete also has embraced his role as a father. Both Drew and Allison observe the strong partnership that the Irizarrys have formed. Despite being a fun-loving guy, Pete takes his parental responsibilities seriously. He is an involved and nurturing father. And while he wouldn't want to repeat the many mistakes of his youth, his personal story does provide him with some credibility with his sons and others.

"I try to tell my kids a little of what I've done," says Pete, "so that they can understand the experience that I went through so that they don't have to go through it."

Pete also has been a mentor to neighborhood youth and men in the community. For a number of years he

spoke weekly to youth at the nearby Boy's Club, and recently he shared his testimony at an addiction recovery center.

Pete seeks to be a positive influence for Christ wherever he goes, but Pete and Jeannie's primary ministry right now is to the children in their home.

"This is what the Lord is calling us to do," says Jeannie, who is 45. "We don't want to spend all of our life raising kids."

"Yeah, I want to retire someday," interjects Pete, 48, with a chuckle.

"But right now this is where God wants us to be," Jeannie concludes.

"Our goal with these children," says Pete, "is always to be able to say we made an impact in their lives. There's always something you can do to help them to change."

Pete & Jeannie know better than most that people can change.