

COBYS Celebrates Adoption Milestone

First Adoptive Family:

The Hesses Share Their 20-Year Journey

In the past 20 years COBYS Family Services has finalized nearly 500 adoptions, providing a fresh start for children who have experienced abuse and neglect. Jerraca Hernandez was the very first one.



Jerraca Hernandez on her Adoption Day, October 22, 1998.

At seven years of age, Jerraca's young life had been riddled with overwhelming challenges. Her birth mother was emotionally and physically unavailable, leaving Jerraca and her siblings un-

tended, forcing them to fend for themselves. Jerraca sometimes took on the role of mother and provider—stealing food from a nearby grocery store so she and her siblings would have something to eat.

Eventually the county children and youth agency stepped in and placed Jerraca in foster care. Her first few placements did not go well, so when she arrived at Brent and Julie Hess's home on October 21, 1995, she was filled with fear and apprehension.

But this time things were different.

As COBYS foster parents, the Hesses had been trained and approved as resource parents earlier that year.

Brent was working as a pastor, and both he and Julie felt the calling to help.

Prior to Jerraca, Brent and Julie had cared for one other foster child—an 11-year old boy—who had been especially difficult. That challenging experience would turn out to be valuable preparation, because Jerraca would prove to be an even bigger handful.

"I was scared," Jerraca recalls, "but I remember coming to the Hesses' home and feeling comfortable right away. I called Julie 'Mom' and Brent 'Dad' right from the start. From the day I got there I had everything normal kids would have—my own room and clothes that fit me. They gave me a fresh start. I remember feeling loved, safe, and welcomed."

Even so, Jerraca's next three years in foster care would be an emotional rollercoaster with high peaks and low valleys. She was often in trouble at school and filled with rebellion. The Hesses say their active faith and the decision to love in dark times lifted them up and pulled them all through it.

"Oftentimes people go into foster care and adoption thinking they are going to help children and change them," said Julie when she spoke at the COBYS banquet in March. "And, I think we do. But, you just have no idea how much they will impact us, too. It has changed us; changed our hearts, changed our outlook on things."

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Two Decades of Adoption Services



This year COBYS Family Services is celebrating 20 years of providing adoption services to children and families. COBYS' first adoption took place on October 22, 1998, when Julie and Brent Hess officially welcomed Jerraca as their daughter. *(See related story on this page.)*

COBYS was founded in 1980 as a teen foster care agency. By the mid-1990s it was becoming clear that it would be advantageous if COBYS also could help families adopt.

"During that time," says Adoption Supervisor Jen McDowell, "we saw a number of children and families involved with our agency who were in need of adoption services because children couldn't be reunified with their birth families. Once a case moved toward adoption, COBYS had to refer the family to an approved adoption agency."

So, we asked, "Why can't we provide adoption services?" says Jen, who had begun work at

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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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A Lesson from a Long Walk

I recently took a vacation with my wife, Mari, and daughters, Aja and Alyssa. We visited Zion National Park, Bryce Canyon, the Grand Canyon, and the city of Phoenix.

We did a LOT of hiking at each stop. Mari, Aja, and Alyssa all are drawn to the “extreme” or “severe” hiking trails, rather than the “easy” or “moderate” trails that are made for 53-year-old, moderately overweight men. I was outnumbered. Not wanting to be the wet towel, I put up very little resistance.

The longest hike we took was at the Grand Canyon. Despite many warnings from signs and park rangers, we decided to hike the entire way to the bottom of the Grand Canyon and back out on the same day. (Interestingly enough, it was exactly the same distance on the way up as it was down. It only felt three times longer.)

At the trailhead, before we started the long walk down, I said a prayer. Part of my prayer was asking God to help us make good decisions on our hike, which elicited an audible chuckle from Alyssa. After I finished my prayer, I asked Alyssa why she laughed. She replied, “Dad, you are asking God to help us make good decisions as we are about go on a hike that all the signs and rangers are telling us not to take.”

She was right. What I really was asking for in my prayer was for God to bless the decision that we already had made, rather than asking God to help us make good decisions. That is a not very subtle difference. (Thankfully, we made it down and back safely.)

How many times do I (or you) make decisions and ask God to bless them, rather than asking God to help us make those decisions? Clearly, I still do this on a somewhat regular basis, but I am trying to do better.

As I drive to work each day I pray for COBYS. One thing I ask is that God will be with me and help me make the decisions that will need to be made that day. Some decisions are smaller, and some are bigger, but I want God to be a part of all of them. I realize COBYS could be in big trouble if I am left to my own devices.

I ask that you also pray for COBYS. Please pray that God will help all of us make the decisions that are going to be in the best interest of the kids and families we are serving. Pray that these kids and families will know that they are loved not only by us, but also by God.

On the walk with you,

Mark



The Cunninghams on their recent “hiking” vacation.

Murry Hill Center . . . Our New Digs with Room to Grow



Murry Hill Center, the new COBYS facility, is located at 444 Murry Hill Circle, Lancaster, and houses adoption, foster care, and family life education staff.

After many months of crowded quarters, COBYS Family Services has room to grow.

On January 12, COBYS purchased a 13,600-square-foot facility at 444 Murry Hill Circle, Lancaster, for \$1,136,100. Formerly occupied by the accounting firm Simon Lever, the new building, which is being called “Murry Hill Center,” is centrally-located between the COBYS main office north of Lancaster and two downtown facilities.

“The purchase of this building will give us room to breathe and allow us to grow at a location we think is really desirable,” said Executive Director Mark Cunningham.

After extensive renovations, 24 foster care and adoption staff moved from the main office into the new facility on February 22 and 23, and were joined by seven family life education staff

in late March. All told, COBYS has 123 employees, including about 50 full-time.

Administration and counseling staff remain at the main office at 1417 Oregon Road, Leola, with the counseling center scheduled to move up to the main floor in April. The lower level of the main office is available for lease. COBYS is not selling any of its existing buildings.

Prior to moving in, COBYS invested some \$250,000 in upgrades to the new building, including roofing and siding, replacement of more than 180 light fixtures with energy efficient LEDs, paint, carpet, and various repairs.

The renovation costs would have been much higher, if not for a strong volunteer response. About 60 volunteers provided more than 660 hours of labor over a six-week period.

“The large number of volunteers was really encouraging,” said Director of

Development Don Fitzkee. “We accomplished much more with volunteer labor than we thought would be possible. We had a few volunteers who came back again and again to keep the project moving along.”

The volunteer effort got off to a great start on the United Way Day of Service, held on the January 15 Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. More than 50 volunteers—including folks from churches, area businesses, and a contingent of Manheim Township High School football players—tore out carpet, removed light panels and switch covers, carried debris to the dumpster, and prepped and painted.



COBYS Family Services purchased Murry Hill Center on January 12. Shown: Board President Fred Keller and Secretary Suzanne Schaudel sign paperwork with COBYS Executive Director Mark Cunningham.

An open house at Murry Hill Center will be scheduled for later this spring or summer.

Hess Adoption

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“We feel like we love deeper,” adds Brent. “Love is more than just a fuzzy, fun word. It’s a commitment, a sacrifice. Sacrificial love is what it’s all about.

It’s easy to love someone who is lovely. But it is another thing to love someone who is not ‘loving,’ or is even hostile,” said Brent. “God gives us the capacity to do that.”

“Love is more than just a feeling, it’s action—and it’s a choice,” said Julie. “There are many times we had to make the choice to love.”

The Hesses had made their choice.

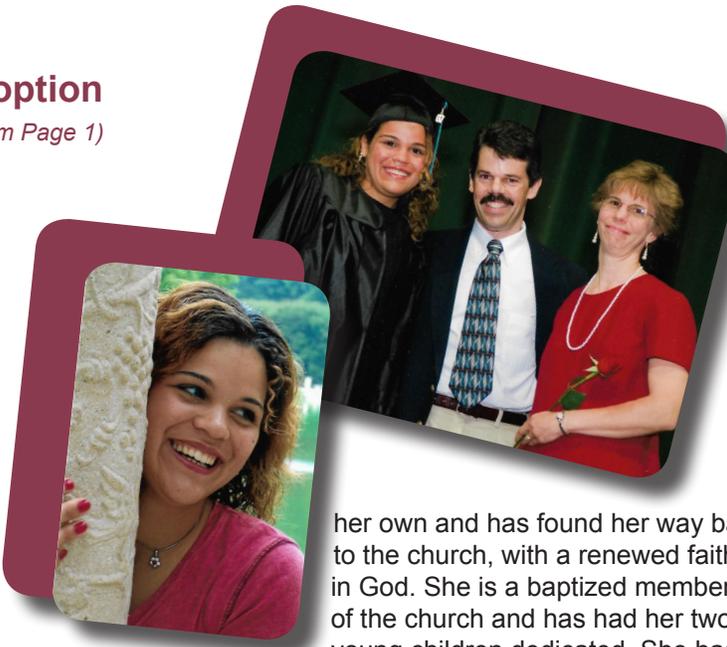
Jerraca was adopted into the Hess family on October 22, 1998.

Jerraca remembers her adoption day as the highlight of her life. She wore a beautiful dress and her hair was fixed all pretty. Though really nervous to go to court, she remembers Judge Grimm turning to her and asking, “Do you want the Hesses to be your parents forever?”

Jerraca said she responded with a resounding, “Yes! Yes, I want them to be my parents, FOREVER!”

Jerraca’s teen years would be challenging and often daunting. As the daughter of a pastor, she accompanied the Hesses to church each week. But when she was old enough to decide for herself, she opted not to go. These were tumultuous years for Jerraca and her parents—years of testing.

Now 30, Jerraca has two children of



her own and has found her way back to the church, with a renewed faith in God. She is a baptized member of the church and has had her two young children dedicated. She has also recently graduated with highest honors from HACC and is employed in the health care field. She says she feels a sense of self-purpose and is grateful—grateful to Brent and Julie for their unconditional love, to their supportive extended family, and to God for second chances.

“All these years, God was chasing me relentlessly, and I am so grateful for that,” said Jerraca.

For Jerraca and so many other children who have faced unfathomable family adversity, their adoptive families have afforded them stable, loving, life-changing outcomes.

“My life with the Hesses has been so much better than it would have been had I not been adopted,” said Jerraca.

“I just want to say thank you to my parents.

... I want to thank you for sticking with me through it all. I love you very, very, very much, and I am so thankful to be part of this family.”

“We are so thankful and grateful for Jerraca and for the support we received from COBYS through our journey,” Brent shared at the COBYS banquet. “We had excellent case-workers and counselors. It’s been a pleasure to have been affiliated with this organization.”

View an interview with Jerraca and the Hesses’ live banquet presentation by visiting www.cobys.org and clicking on YouTube (see Page 6).



Jerraca’s Adoption Day with Judge Grimm and her parents, Julie and Brent Hess.

24th Annual Family Fun Walk Set for May 6

COBYS Family Services will host the 24th Annual Family Fun Walk on Sunday, May 6, at Peter Becker Community, 800 Maple Ave., Harleysville. The walk begins at 4 p.m., with registration beginning at 3:30 p.m.

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. Despite cool, dreary weather, last year's walk attracted 90 participants and raised \$11,569 to support COBYS ministries. This year, we are looking to attract 100 walkers and establish a new giving record.

The top two fundraisers receive grand prizes and can select either two tickets for Sight and Sound Theatre's new show: *Jesus*, or pick their favorite door prize. 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, or contact Anne Stokes at 717-656-6580 or anne@cobys.org.

Sponsored by:



Adoption 20th Anniversary

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COBYS as a foster care case-worker in 1995.

In September 1997, after much research, many meetings, and the completion of extensive paperwork, COBYS received licensure by the state to provide adoption services as an affiliate of the Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN). (Jen became the first Adoption Supervisor, and then after a decade or so away to raise her family, returned in Fall 2015 to again lead the program.)

Since that first adoption in 1998, the program has facilitated 498 adoptions (with six more to be finalized in the next few months) and has grown from one staff member to the current team of 10 full-time staff and 15 part-time workers. All COBYS resource parents now are trained to offer both foster care and adoption services, and families frequently make a seamless transition from providing foster care for children to becoming a permanent adoptive home.

The adoption program has grown to include several units of service, including child preparation to ease transi-

tions for children, child specific recruitment to help match children with families, and free post permanency services to support families after they adopt.

“We are seeing the need for adoption services continue to increase due to the number of children being placed into foster care,” said Jen. “While the focus of foster care is for children to be reunited with their birth families, the adoption department is here to meet the needs of those on their journey of adoption.”

BarberShop Banquet Is a Cut Above

Event Sees Major Growth in Income, Attendance

Evidently a lot of people were in need of a barber.

The March 8 COBYS BarberShop Banquet clearly was a cut above previous events, as evidenced by huge growth in attendance and giving. Total income exceeded \$72,000, up from the previous record of \$60,864, set last year. Total attendance for the noon and evening seatings ballooned from last year's record 598 to 732 this year.



"We were absolutely thrilled with the turnout and response," said Director of Development Don Fitzkee, the primary planner and butt of more than a few bald jokes. "I had no idea how much people enjoyed making fun of people with haircuts like mine."

Inspirational music was provided by the Yeater Sisters—Rachel Cassel, Joanna and Lois Yeater.



The program was set in a barbershop, where various patrons discussed COBYS-related topics but, much to the frustration of the barber, did not come to get their hair cut. Business Operations Manager Tim Strawser played the barber.

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The Hess family (above) and the MacFeat family (at left) share their journey of adoption with banquet attendees.

Banquet photos by Mark Myers

Among those stopping in were Permanency Unit Supervisor Krista Rankin, who told how COBYS came together to support a foster child whose mother died of a drug overdose; Director of Family Life Services Abby Keiser and Lancaster County Treatment Court Coordinator Karen Andreadis (via video) who spoke of how COBYS is partnering with the treatment courts through a program called Seeking Safety; and Adoption Supervisor Jen

McDowell, who highlighted the 20th anniversary of the COBYS adoption program.

McDowell introduced Brent & Julie Hess and their daughter, Jerraca Hernandez, who shared some of their journey since becoming COBYS' first adoptive family in 1998. Scott, Amanda, and 14-year-old Alex MacFeat talked about their more recent foster care and adoption experience.

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Along the way Executive Director Mark Cunningham and Controller Cindy Umberger told of organizational growth—much of it fueled by the opioid addiction crisis—and the recent purchase and renovation of a building north of Lancaster, and the subsequent relocation of foster care and adoption staff to the new facility (see Page 3).

In the end, the only patron who actually received a haircut was the one who didn't have any hair, as a barbershop quartet pointed out in their rendition of "Donny Boy" sung to a familiar Irish tune.

Barbershop quartet members (from left: John Zimmerman, Tim Strawser, Don Fitzkee, and Bob Hess) sing a lament to the loss of hair in their rendition of "Donny Boy."



Video of the entire program and of some individual segments is available at www.cobys.org by clicking on the

YouTube icon. A photo album can be viewed on the COBYS Facebook page.

Kettering and The Talleys to Headline April 10th Praise Dinner

You may still have time to register for the 23rd Annual Wenger Foundation Praise Dinner to be held Tuesday, April 10, at 6 p.m. at the Lebanon Expo Center. The event will feature speaker Bob Kettering with special entertainment provided by The Talleys. The event will benefit COBYS Family Services and three other ministries.

Kettering, an ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren, is an enthusiastic preacher, musician, and church leader. He retired as senior pastor of the Lititz Church of the Brethren in 2015 and currently serves as interim associate pastor at Lancaster Church of the Brethren.



The Talleys are a southern gospel trio composed of Roger and wife, Debra Talley, with their daughter

Lauren. They have performed their "message music" all over the world for more than 20 years. They have enjoyed 11 number one songs and have received numerous *Singing News* Fan Awards and Dove Award nominations.

The Praise Dinner will include a buffet meal catered by Country Home Catering. Other ministries benefiting 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, Gene Wenger's Meats & Fine Foods, Goods Disposal Service, Jim & JoAnne Speers, Kline, Kreider, Good Auctioneers, North Group Consultants, Roger & Carolyn North, Sight & Sound Ministries, Tom B. Morrissey TV & Appliance, Carl & Margaret Wenger, Wengers of Myerstown, and other anonymous contributors.

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 about 750 people and raised more than \$114,000, including \$27,061 for COBYS. Since 1999 COBYS has received more than \$383,000 through the Praise Dinner.

For more information about the event, please contact the Wenger Foundation at 717-866-2130 or rwalmer@wengers.com.



The Talleys will perform at the 23rd Annual Wenger Foundation Praise Dinner on April 10th.

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**COBYS Adoption Program Celebrates
20th Anniversary!**



Thanks for Your Help, Volunteers!

*Recently, more than 60 people donated over 660 hours to help us get Murry Hill Center ready for business.
(See Page 3 for full story.)*

