

## Foster Children Find Hope, Love at Rainbow Valley



The comfortable, three story gray and white house sits on two acres in southeastern Boone County. In the side yard, a swing set and tree house tell of the presence of children. Likewise, an almost empty dog dish near the side door says a pet is in residence.

But there are no children or animals romping outside this morning. It is a rainy day.

Inside the clean, lived-in living room, a motherly, gray-haired woman sits holding a bottle for the babe in her arms. Five other children from two to ten years old play happily in the adjacent playroom created from an enclosed front porch. The tranquil sounds of children talking, a baby sucking and, in the distance, the hum of a washing machine, do not

intrude on the conversation of the woman and her visitor.

Suddenly cries erupt from the playroom and the woman rises to check the cause. The cause is a strong-willed two-year-old girl who is led to her room for the discipline of isolation.

Just another typical happy home! Not quite. Yes, the home is happy, and yes, it is typical in some ways. The man of the house has gone to work and the woman has settled in to the chores of caring for the six children. But, otherwise, it is far from typical. It is exceptional!

You see, the woman and her husband are old enough to be grandparents to the children. In fact, they have raised four children of their own who are all married and have given them ten grandchildren. But the children they care for now are not their grandchildren.

Carroll and Mary Willey provide a foster home for children sent to them by the Boone and Clinton county welfare departments, as well as occasional private placements. Presently the ages of the children they care for run from newborn to about 10 years old. The Willeys tried caring for teenagers, too, early in the ten years they have been foster parents, but found that the vast difference in ages was not really fair to the children.

April will mark the twelfth anniversary of Rainbow Valley, as they call their home. The name was chosen by Carroll Willey, his wife says, to signify that no matter how bad the situation is, there can be a rainbow.

The former nursery school operator and her husband knew they would be lost without any

children in their home when their four had left for college. They found the house and moved in 12 years ago this April, and spent the next four months adapting it to their needs.

The older children sleep in the four upstairs bedrooms, with the toddlers bedroom downstairs near the Willey's room where the newborns sleep.

"My husband shares my love for newborns," Mary Willey says. "We always want a baby in the house. I don't really mind the two o'clock feeding. In fact, I awake at two o'clock even if there is no baby here."

The children seem to thrive on a regular schedule, she says, despite the fact that most of them come from backgrounds without schedule. School age children make their own beds and they will help pick up toys. The family tries to share a Bible story each evening.

Since Rainbow Valley is in Eagle Township, the children attend school in Zionsville, and the Willeys hire a girl to come in two or three evenings each week during the school year to tutor them.

"We want to have a home situation," says Mary Willey, "not just an institution," so the children go on trips to Dairy Queen, to the Halloween Party at Boone Village, to visit a dairy farm, and they picnic in the park at Lebanon. Each Sunday, they attend New Hope Christian Church.

"I have a lady who has helped me with the work four days each week for the past nine years," Mary adds. Trips to the doctor or the clinic must be worked into the schedule, so a built-in sitter is an essential and she also helps with the piles of laundry and the cleaning.

The children are not with the Willeys long before they begin to call them Mommy and Daddy, and the affection developed is remembered by the boys and girls

who are older. In fact, in two separate incidents recently, two boys who had been with the Willeys, one as a ten-year-old and the other at the age of twelve, brought new brides back to meet them. The young men pointed out where they slept and where they sat at the table, and one exclaimed, "Oh, and do I remember those Sunday dinners!"

Carroll is the Sunday cook, his wife says, and they usually try to have an oven meal centered around a roast or a chicken. "One thing I don't have is picky eaters," laughs Mary. "They've just not had lots of homecooked food."

"The welfare people in both counties (Boone and Clinton) are just super," Mary says, but they don't have the money for frills. Church groups, sororities, and individuals have provided many extras, all the way from the outdoor equipment to disposable diapers for the babies. They supply Christmas gifts and Easter baskets, and sometimes plan picnics for the children.

It saddens Mary when someone comes up to her after she speaks to a church or sorority and says, "I could never do what you do. I just couldn't bear to see them leave," implying that partings are no problem for Mary.

"How," she asks, "could I nurse a boy through two heart surgeries - intensive care - without getting attached? We get used to cooking, laundry, etc., but we never get used to watching them leave."

Why, then, the parting visitor wonders, does this nice lady put herself through this traumatic experience, time after time, as well as all of the physical effort involved in caring for over 130 children in twelve years?

Just then two small arms reach over the gate separating the living room from the playroom. A little girl whispers, "I love you, Mommy," as she pulls Mary down to plant a kiss on her cheek.

The unspoken question is answered.

