



**A**fter years in foster care, Jill\* clung to the hope that she would one day be adopted by a loving family.

for the occasion. As the couple prepared to leave, Jill ran to the board and removed her picture. "Here," she said, "so you won't forget me." And they did not forget. Today, Jill and an adopted sister continue to enjoy the family she met that day. No longer as strangers, or even

and handed out frozen fish from the back of a delivery truck. I was the treasurer and we made \$300. We used that money for over a year."

As they heard from other states interested in what they were doing, the organization took shape. "Our first

and envelopes were an extravagance.

Another move came in 1990, just half a mile up the road. Leasing space on the campus of a technical college was adequate for many years, but discussion began about the advantages

# Making Dreams

Like Jill, there are 118,000 children in the United States still lingering in foster care and ready to be adopted. While newborns and very young children receive permanent homes more quickly, many who enter the foster care system at an older age must live in suspended animation for years – always waiting for life to really begin and for a family to come and make things right.

That is how it was for Jill. Then The Adoption Exchange headquartered in Denver held one of its picnics that draws potential adoptive parents, couples who have already adopted children, and children who are available for adoption together to meet and mingle in a pleasant and comfortable environment. One couple caught Jill's eye. Introducing herself she asked, "What age child are you planning to adopt?" "Someone between four and eleven years old," they answered. Jill was quick to point out, "I'm eleven."

The agency created a picture board of potential adoptees

kind acquaintances, but as the mom and dad she dreamed about for so long.

The Adoption Exchange began as a committee of volunteers – adoption professionals – getting together for lunch once a month and sharing stories across agency lines. A person from one group would offer, "I have this child who is ready to be adopted." The description would prompt another to suggest a potential family. The exchange of resources and information, even informally and only once a month, dramatically increased the chance that children would find a new family.

The next step was obvious. The tiny group soon attracted like-minded adoption workers from around the state. Then three states were participating. "We knew we needed more training," says Dixie Davis, The Adoption Exchange's Executive Director and one of the early participants of the group. "If one of us was able to attend a seminar, that person brought the information back to the group and trained the rest of us. Our first fundraising venture was a fish sale. We took orders



office was donated space inside a deserted medical building. It was 1983 and the area of town was not the best, but it was a start. I was the first paid employee. I worked part-time and we hired two more part-time staff. With the small used school desks I purchased for our office, we might have looked like a pretend organization, but we saw 95 children adopted that year. The moment I plugged the phone into our new office it started ringing and it hasn't stopped ringing since."

The organization outgrew that space and in 1985 transferred just a few miles away. Volunteers moved everything themselves. They still questioned whether expenditures like letterhead

---

Faith is a sensitive, attractive Native American child who likes music, basketball, and enjoys hanging out with her friends...

---

*Faith now has a permanent "forever" family.*

---

of buying a building. The reasoning against it was that clients did not come to the agency. As a clearinghouse of information and services, maybe it would be better to lease. The discussion moved from theory to necessity when the college outgrew its campus space and asked The Adoption Exchange to check into other options.

"At this point we started looking for other office space to lease. For the amount of space we needed, it was going to be very expensive," Davis said. "The board compared the costs and the most economical option was to buy an existing building," said Director of Planned Giving and Capital Campaign,

Shelbi Perry. "We knew it was unusual to purchase a building and then create a campaign to finance the purchase, but these were unique circumstances. We had to move." "One foundation we approached about a grant asked if we had ever considered purchasing a building.



to children. They are so dedicated to their mission and that powerful message helps motivate donors to give. We met regularly and Dixie and Shelbi were tenacious about following up on everything we discussed. They kept focused on the priorities. They were great

# ns Come True

We were spending a lot in rent. This really got us thinking," added Davis.

After much study and consideration by the board, The Adoption Exchange purchased an oil company building for \$535,000, plus moving expenses and some remodeling. The agency was prepared to explain to donors why the building was the best financial decision, but the question never came up. Donors understood that the purchase was a responsible choice over renting.

Hartsook Companies, a national campaign consulting firm, was retained to conduct a feasibility study in 1999. The recommendation was \$1.3 million in outright gifts and \$200,000 in estate gifts. "I knew the numbers were going to be hair raising. However, the Junior board for the agency had recently set a fundraising goal of \$2500 in order to underwrite the cost of one adoption. They ended up raising over ten times that amount. Just before Hartsook Companies was scheduled to return with their recommendation, I said to the board, 'Look, I know the campaign numbers are

going to sound big, but if this Junior board can raise \$27,000, we can manage to raise whatever our fundraising counsel recommends!" stated Davis.

The original contract with Hartsook Companies' resident counsel, Arliss Swartzendruber, was for two years. The agency took the first three months of the campaign to speak with board members about their gifts. It was clear that foundations wanted to see 100% board participation, but The Adoption Exchange board exceeded all expectations. Said Perry, "Our board gave what amounted to almost 25% of the original goal."

By the end of 1999, they had raised \$1.6 million in outright gifts and pushed the goal to \$2.1 million. "Our two largest lead gifts were \$250,000 each – one from the McDonnell Family Foundation and another from an individual philanthropist. We were given a \$150,000 challenge grant from the Colorado-based Gates Family Foundation," said Perry.

"Several board members

made sacrificial gifts," offered Davis. "One board member made monthly payments that were truly a gift of love and a bit of a stretch. As we came down to the wire on the Gates challenge gift, this same board member came back and wrote another check for as much as she had already given. This gift made it possible for us to meet the Gates Foundation's challenge. It was very mov-



to work with and very proficient fundraisers."

"Arliss kept us on task. We met every other week and he was a tremendous help with strategy," said Perry. Before hiring counsel, Davis and Perry sought the advice of many colleagues. Often they were encouraged to "do it alone." They were told "you can do it without help and the expense. After all

---

Billy is a nurturing child who loves animals of all kinds...He dreams of becoming a great football player one day...

*Billy's dreams of having a "forever" family have been answered.*

---

ing to me that this little group that started out of the trunk of my car had friends that were so confident in the organization's mission."

Offered resident counsel Swartzendruber, "What stands out in my mind is this organization's commitment

you know your own constituents." Later both were glad that they had not taken this advice. "When we reached a plateau we needed help. It would have been very easy to let our time be used to do other pressing things when we weren't seeing results. We needed

to stay focused and Arliss made sure we did," stated Davis. Today the organization's budget is \$2.6 million annually. This means more adoptions, more trained social workers, more post-adoption services, and more post-adoption supporters for families. "Counsel gave the effort confidence, guidance, support and focus" affirmed Perry.

"This campaign doubles our budget. It creates wonderful new programs and adds technology that directly translates into more children being adopted. Our rent would have been \$78,000 a year. That equals the cost of 31 adoptions. Each year I say 'We can't expect to beat our numbers every year' and every year we do. Last year we were able to connect 319 children in an eight-state region with adoptive families. As the organization has grown, our cost per adoption has remained virtually the same. It is easy for people to understand that their dollars mean more children finding homes. Our values have remained the same as well – we collaborate with any individual or agency in order to be successful in moving the children into good families. Since 1983 we have helped 3,000 special needs children. With the average cost of keeping one child in foster care at around \$20,000 a year, this represents over \$1 billion in savings to taxpayers – not to mention the priceless savings of a child's emotional welfare. We believe that children are the

responsibility of the community and the community has shown that they want to help support this mission," said Dixie.

Adds Perry, "The campaign caused us to stretch. We had never sought major gifts before. The added result of the campaign was to bring us to a new level in our fundraising potential. We are entering our public phase with a challenge gift from Sharon Magness, a well-known philanthropist in our community."

"We expect to finish our new goal before the end of the year. A local Denver station, KCNC News4 will sponsor three months of public service announcements and we will end the campaign with a big donor recognition celebration. The station's General Manager is a co-chair of our campaign. We have partnered with this station for 25 years – one of the longest collaborations of this kind," said Perry.

Donors receive recognition on a wall in the reception area of the agency's building. In addition, two former "Wednesday's Children" created designs for ceramic platters. The special gifts come in two sizes. Donors giving \$250-1000 receive a 10" plate; gifts over \$1000 receive a 13" platter with their name painted underneath.

There was one major disappointment among the many major gifts. One foundation

had challenged The Adoption Exchange to raise its goal, but ultimately still turned the organization down for a grant. "That was such a let down. And then Dixie, who is an inspiration to all of us, said, 'Hey, everything we've done so far has been successful. Getting turned down by one foundation isn't the end of the world. We've just gotten spoiled.'"

One especially meaningful gift came from a co-chair of the campaign. His wife lost her sister during the course of the campaign. At 38 years old, she was stricken suddenly with an aneurysm and died. The family turned this tragedy into a legacy. They established an endowment memorial fund which is now worth more than \$121,000. Over 400 individuals have contributed to this memorial. Even a year after her passing, the fund is still receiving new gifts.

"We often hear adoptive parents say that they could not imagine life without the child they have adopted. 'We looked around the dinner table and felt someone was missing. We counted heads and everyone was there. But now that we have added this child, we know who was missing. This is the child we were always meant to have,'" said Dixie Davis.

Similarly, The Adoption Exchange can no longer imagine fulfilling its mission without the benefit of its new capital campaign. Even

though the agency is small compared to many nonprofits, the impact of its multi-million dollar campaign is enormous. No one would choose to back into a campaign in this unconventional manner – first buying a building, then finding the funding. However, with the right help from professional counsel, and when the cause is important, and staff and board members are committed to the project, it can be done. In fact, it has been done.

The Adoption Exchange swiftly exceeded its original goal and will soon complete a \$2.1 million campaign. As significant as that is, it is nothing compared to the extraordinary things the agency does every day to make the dreams of children come true.

\* Not her real name.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Denise Rhoades is a free-lance writer living in Newton, Kansas. Denise has worked on several projects for Hartsook Companies and regularly writes campaign case statements and articles for Hartsook clients.*

*For more information about Hartsook Companies call 316.630.9992 or visit [www.hartsookcompanies.com](http://www.hartsookcompanies.com)*

