



Wahoo family opens heart, home

By Kristine Long
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It's 5 p.m. on a Friday at the Brandts' house.

Six-year-old Aaron sits in the living room and watches "Popeye" while he writes with his stencils.

In the basement family room, Cody, Tony and Terra play Mario Brothers on the Nintendo. Terra, a senior in high school, talks about a date she is dreading that night. Tony, a high school junior, is tired because he had basketball practice at 6 that morning. Cody, a high school freshman, concentrates on the video game.

Upstairs, 4-year-old Alex runs through the house exerting his abundant energy.

In the kitchen, Bob sips a glass of Diet Pepsi as he relaxes after a week of work as the principal at St. Wenceslaus grade school. Peg stands nearby, stirring the spaghetti noodles that are just beginning to boil on the stove.

Then the doorbell rings.

A social worker brings two more children to the already busy house.

Ashley, 9, and Zach, 7, have come to stay for the weekend. Their mother has been diagnosed with AIDS, and the Brandts have offered to adopt the children if their mother dies soon.

They are only two of the desperate children the Brandts have taken in.

Soon after the two children arrive, Bob announces that dinner is ready. Terra rushes upstairs to help her mother pour milk for the crowd.

Tony and Cody immediately turn off the Nintendo in the middle of a game and go upstairs. They both agree that a Nintendo game is not as important as supper with the family.

Just before everyone sits down for supper, another person, Donna, arrives. She is an 18-year-old Boys Town graduate who stays with the Brandts on weekends and during her vacations from work. She has no other family in the Midwest.

After Donna drags her luggage to the basement, everyone settles at the table.

The chairs and benches surrounding the wooden table are full. But more chairs could have been squeezed in had the rest of the family been there. Brenda, a freshman in high school, is still at basketball practice. Tasha, Tia and Teresa attend St. Benedictine College. Melyssa is in Lincoln learning to become a hairstylist, and Stephanie is at work.

But even with those six gone, the family is large enough.

After the food is served, the family bows their heads and prays in unison. Bob and Peg say their faith is what has kept them sane with so many children around.

"Some days I just ask, 'Why are we doing this?'" Peg says. But then she reads a prayer that reminds her of their mission.

"Lord, why did you tell us to love all our brothers? We have tried, but we came back to you frightened."

"Lord, we were so peaceful at home. We were so comfortably settled. It was well-furnished, and we felt cozy. We were alone. We were at peace. Sheltered from the wind and the rain, kept clean. We would have stayed unsullied in our Ivory tower."

That was how their life was 15 years ago — safe and sheltered.

Bob was a football coach at Wahoo Neumann High School. Peg stayed at home to care for their three young children, Tia, Tasha and Tony. They were comfortable living in their small home.

They lived a simple life. The only aspect that wasn't quite perfect was that Peg sometimes suffered from a bone disease she had developed in college. But she was receiving treatment and was doing much better than doctors had expected.

Then, slowly, their family started growing.

A senior at Neumann High School lived with the Brandts for a year in 1979. Then another student did the same the next year.

In 1983, Elizabeth, a foreign exchange student from Venezuela, stayed with the Brandts. Another Venezuelan girl ventured to the Brandt house the following year.

After their experience with the foreign exchange students, the Brandts considered being missionaries in Venezuela. But Bob and Peg wanted their three young children to attend school in the United States. So they decided to do their own missionary work from their home in Wahoo.

In 1987, they got their first chance.

The Brandts received a call from an adoption agency asking them to help a young girl in an orphanage in Korea who had developed thyroid cancer.

Bob flew to Korea four days later.

He brought 11-year-old Terra back to the United States to get treatment. Terra's mother had died of cancer, and therefore Terra and her sister, Teresa, were in the orphanage.

The family barely scraped together enough money to bring the girl home. But finances were the least of their worries.

"We've just honestly never worried much about money," Bob said. "There were times when we didn't have money at all."

But somehow, money always seemed to appear — sometimes out of nowhere.

Before Bob left for Korea, a friend stopped by his office and offered to give him money for the trip. Other money seemed to miraculously appear. Anonymous donors left cash on Bob's bus seat and in the Brandts' bank account. With the money taken care of, the Brandts concentrated on Terra's health.

Terra's treatment worked, and the Brandts adopted her. Soon after, Teresa flew to Wahoo to join the family.

That was just the beginning of the Brandts' mission of helping desperate children. Their prayer reminds them that many children need a family.



"But, Lord, you have discovered a breach in our defenses. You have forced us to open our door. Like a squall of rain in the face, the cry of children has awakened us; like a gale of wind, a friendship has shaken us; stealing in like a shaft of light, your grace has disturbed us."

"As soon as we started to open the door we saw them ... with outstretched hands, anxious eyes, longing hearts ... like beggars on church steps."

The prayer was becoming reality. The Brandt family added three more children to the clan in 1988 and 1989: Aaron, a 1-year-old black toddler whose mother needed relief from child rearing; Cody, an 11-year-old Korean boy who had lived in five previous homes before the Brandts' home; and Alex, a 2-month-old baby who had been addicted to cocaine since birth.

"Now they have come from all over in successive waves ... pushing one another, jostling one another. They have come from all over town, from all parts of the country, of the world ... numberless, inexhaustible. They don't come alone any longer but in groups, bound to another. They come bending under heavy loads ... loads of injustice, of resentment and hate, of suffering and sin. They drag the world behind them, with everything rusted, twisted, badly adjusted."

The children were indeed badly adjusted. Aaron needed secure role mod-



els, Cody had been abused in three of the previous homes in which he had lived, and Alex was the seventh child of a 24-year-old cocaine addict.

These children all found refuge with the Brandts. But it wasn't easy.

Because the Brandts had just added three children to their already large family, money was becoming scarce. They barely scraped together enough money to fly Alex to Nebraska from New Jersey.

Bob, who keeps his humor in any situation, said, "I called my banker and said, 'I need some money to buy a kid.'"

Eight children were beginning to crowd the Brandts' three-bedroom house.

But the Brandts did what they could with what they had. They added another bedroom, and Alex and Aaron slept in

cribs in the dining room.

But an accident that seemed devastating at the time turned out to help the family financially and proved that they could survive anything God handed them.

It was a snowy evening shortly after Christmas 1989. Peg, accompanied by five of the children, was forced off the road by an impatient driver. Their van and then crashed into a

The children escaped bruises and minor injuries, not so fortunate. Her injuries were already caused by a birth de-

Photos by Travis Heying