

Our Journey

Why a Couple in Their 50s Adopted a Teenager

In 2007, my wife Ronda and I, both in our 50s, took stock of our lives.

In our home life, we were wiser but also humbled by our years of real-world parenting. We had children who had navigated the teen years and were now young adults. Professionally, I had job security, and we had a measure of financial security. Yet we felt something was still missing. What were we doing with our hard-earned parenting experience?

We prayed, “Lord, what can we do at this stage of life to make a real difference in the world?” Soon after this prayer, I read an article about teenage orphans, most of whom are never adopted. In just one country, Ukraine, more than 70 percent of the orphans available for adoption are teenagers. Every year, thousands “age out” of orphanages and are thrust into society to sink or swim. Many sink. They spiral down into desperate, lonely lives often cut short. Many end up in prison or choose suicide. Many teen girls turn to prostitution just to survive.

The need was big, but our willingness was small. We argued with ourselves, “Yes, there are needy teenagers in the world but what about the risks, and what about the effect on our other children?” We rationalized. Maybe we should just send a donation to help out in an orphanage somewhere. But in our hearts, we kept coming back to one simple truth. To make

a real difference for someone, you need to take a real risk.

“Are you nuts?” Our friends let us know what they thought when we told them we were considering adopting a teenager. “What about the abuse he may have experienced?” “Who is going to help you if he turns defiant?” These were questions we had also wrestled with. However, as we read more about adopting teenagers, we came to understand that despite the negative stereotypes attributed to teenagers in general, most orphaned teens want a home. As adoption advocate Kristean Thompson says: “They want a family, and dinner at 6 p.m., a part-time job, trips to the mall with a mom, and fishing trips with a dad. They want to be part of a real family with chores, and homework, and Christmas dinner.”

We found an adoption agency seeking a home for a 15-year-old boy in an Ukrainian orphanage. We talked to a North Carolina family who had hosted this boy in their home for a month the previous year. We took a deep breath and plunged. Eight months and a 2-inch stack of paperwork later we flew to Ukraine, went to the orphanage, and met our soon-to-be son for the first time. It took us 40 more days in Ukraine to complete the adoption, and we flew home in October 2008.

He chose the American name “Ian” for himself. Ian had huge adjustments to make. One day he

was immersed in life at an orphanage, and a few days later he was on the other side of the world, living with brothers and sisters, trying to understand a strange language, adjust to strange food, and strange family rules.

Big adjustments take time. Ian had learned survival skills in the orphanage that didn’t work very well in our family. He had a very hard time doing household chores. He worked diligently to avoid working. He applied creativity to avoid schoolwork. There was some anger and some tears, especially during the first year, but Ian always stopped short of open defiance. He let us know he was committed to making things work, even though he thought many of our family rules were unjust, stupid, or both.

As Ian adjusted, so did we. We kept reminding ourselves that Ian had spent 16 years being raised by someone else, and we couldn’t magically mold him into someone just like our birth children. And then there were the unexpected joys. We liked his sly smile and his sense of humor – which quickly pierced the language barrier. We watched Ian’s English skills bloom, and we cheered him on at soccer games. It wasn’t long before we found ourselves falling in love with this boy.

Two years have passed since Ian came to our home. Ronda is trying to be the mother he never had, and I’m working to be the father he needs as he grows into



A 2008 snapshot at an Ukrainian orphanage captures the moment when Art King, a 1981 engineering graduate, and his wife, Ronda King, meet their adopted son for the first time. Ian has since earned his driver’s license, learned to snowboard, and was elected captain of his soccer team.

adulthood. I taught him to drive a stick-shift and cheered when he passed his driver’s test. Ronda taught him to make bread and provided rewards when he earned a good grade in English class.

We have only a few short years with Ian. He will soon launch himself into independent adulthood. In this brief window of time we can introduce him to Jesus. We can give him a stable base of family love, and pray that he makes good decisions.

Looking back, we are glad we didn’t let the risks and fears overwhelm us. We are happy that we took that deep breath and plunged. We are now in the midst of helping this new son of ours grow into adulthood. He is part of our family forever.

If you are in your 50s, your time window will soon close. Find a teenager to adopt. Take your own deep breath and go make a real lifelong difference for someone. ■