

Making the Best of It . . .

A House Full of Kids

By Sarah H. Voss

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BARBARA WEBB chuckled, a deep, hearty sound that seemed to fit her solid build. "There are times here," she said, "when we think, 'Oh, boy, we did it, so let's make the best of it.' I think that's when we get the report cards."

Barbara and her husband, Jarrett, live in a pleasant blue and white ranch home just outside of the unincorporated village of Nashville, Neb., northwest of Omaha, and what they "did" was simple — or at least it started out that way.

They had two children of their own, found out "they couldn't have any more, and so, when their girls were teenagers, they took in a couple of foster children. Eventually one left, but the other stayed — permanently. Then, about the

time they adopted Wally, Mrs. Webb discovered she was pregnant.

"I thought I had the flu, of course," she laughed.

Unfortunately, Cristen, the Webbs' bonus baby, was born with Down's syndrome. Reluctant to give her up, Mrs. Webb immediately took classes for the handicapped so she could raise Cristen "in the proper way."

To their delight, the couple found that working with the disadvantaged was highly rewarding. They decided that "later on through the years we would try to help with handicapped children."

The Webbs, who are black, became particularly attached to two severely handicapped white children. One of the youngsters, Mrs. Webb recalled, "had to be carried everywhere, and the other could kind of crawl around on the floor." The couple had nearly agreed to take them in for foster care when they learned about three black sisters who badly needed a new home. They had to make a choice.

The older Webb girls, Glynis and Annette, had a solution — take all five. But Barbara and Jarrett Webb were more realistic. "We're going to have the two, or the three," Barbara told them.

The decision was not easy.

"I knew I could handle the handicapped children," Mrs. Webb said. "Theirs was a routine — a pattern that you have to follow. But I needed that challenge of three girls who had come from, well, from really, really terrible backgrounds."

SO TASHA, LISA AND Tracey joined the Webb family, and Mrs. Webb got her challenge. The children arrived with garbage sacks for suitcases and clothes "so bad you couldn't even give them to the Goodwill."

They had never eaten turkey, and they couldn't distinguish between an orange and a peach because they hadn't had enough fruit to know the difference. Two of them had learning disabilities, the baby had drug withdrawal symptoms, and all three were uncertain and rebellious.

"The oldest one said to me, 'You're not my mother, and you never will be,'" said Mrs. Webb. "That was her attitude. I said, 'Well, we'll work on that,' and I added, 'How about us sharing respect for one another?' Today her nickname is 'grandmother' — she's so loving, so caring. She's my right hand."

The littlest of them proved to be the biggest handful. Separated from her natural mother at childbirth, she had spent her first 2½ years with foster parents.

"Tasha did not want to be here," said her adoptive mother.

"She was raised by white parents, and she considered us, well, we were called all kinds of names. That was a challenge — to let her know that she was a black child, and that she was being raised by black parents, and that we were going to adopt her.

"I have never seen a child that fought it so every step of the way. She was very cruel to Cristen. She would not accept Cristen for over a year."

Patience, the Webbs tried everything they could to help their new little daughter. It took "quite a while," Mrs. Webb acknowledged, adding that it was 2½ years before Tasha would even let her hold her.

"Oh, I could pick her up, but she wasn't affectionate. But now, she's just loving."

MRS. WEBB, THE product of a broken home herself, and her two brothers were raised by her grandparents. Today, she models herself largely after her grandmother.

"I'm doing what she did," she said. "The only difference is my grandmother had a large, 17-room house, and she had the first boys' home here for black children."

Like Barbara, the grandparents started out caring for just a few foster children. Then another child needed a home, and another, and another. Soon the grandparents outgrew their tiny home in Omaha, and, after searching and failing to find an appropriate home site in Pennsylvania, they finally bought a farm in Washington County north of Omaha.



At left, Barbara and Jarrett Webb and their kids, clockwise from lower left: Cristen, 9; Tracey, 11; Wally, 14; Robert, 11; Tasha, 7½; and Lisa, 13.

