

## Standby Families: *Providing Stability in Times of Crisis*



**COBYS standby resource parents Joel and Andrea Metzler and their family are helping provide stability to children in times of crisis.**

by Lori Zimmerman

As standby resource parents for COBYS Family Services, Joel and Andrea Metzler and Matt and Carla Preston never know when or if they'll receive a life-changing phone call on their weekly watch, but they are trained and prepared for the unexpected. Their standby "on call" commitment requires them to go wherever they're needed, any hour of the day or night, to pick up and provide stability for a child whose life is being turned upside down.

COBYS entered into a standby agreement with the Lancaster County Children and Youth Agency (LCCYA) in 2014 to provide emergency short-term place-

ments for boys and girls ages 0-18. LCCYA assigns COBYS 20-23 weeks a year during which COBYS is responsible for any emergency placements that occur after hours or on weekends in Lancaster County. Standby families can volunteer to be "on duty" during one or more of these weeks throughout the year.

Together, the Metzlers and the Prestons currently are covering the majority of COBYS standby weeks. From opposite ends of the county, these two families are connected by their "servant hearts" and desire to provide a short-term safe haven for children who require immediate intervention during crisis situations. Since 2015, they have welcomed

54 children into their homes through the standby program.

COBYS Foster Care Supervisor Sharon Kingsley explains, "Having a standby family ready at a moment's notice to care for children alleviates the need for LCCYA to locate a resource family amidst the crisis that is causing the the child to be placed into foster care. This program eliminates the prospect of children sitting at the county office for hours, or even overnight while waiting for a resource family to be found for them."

The Metzlers, who have two biological children, received their first foster care placement in August 2014, welcoming Domingo into their home. They adopted him in March of this year. In late December 2014 they took in their first standby placement and have been on call usually one or two weeks per month since then.

"When we decided to become part of the emergency placements," explained Andrea, "we really felt that it would be a good fit. Throughout our prior fostering experience at COBYS we felt everyone was very responsive

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## Mission Statement

Motivated by Christian faith, COBYS Family Services educates, supports, and empowers children and adults to reach their full potential.

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**Fostering Hope** is the quarterly newsletter of COBYS Family Services, a Christian family service agency, affiliated with the Atlantic Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren.

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## Bunk Beds Don't Fit in Cars

A COBYS foster family was preparing to move to a new house. As they began to pack it became evident that one of the two little boys in their care was concerned about the impending move. Sensing the boy's unease, a COBYS caseworker asked what was worrying him. The boy replied, "Bunk beds don't fit in cars."

As the conversation continued the caseworker learned that in many of the boys' previous moves they were unable to bring larger items with them. History told them that each time they move, things get left behind. From their perspective, moving meant loss.

It took some convincing by the caseworker, but she was able to persuade the boys that a truck would be available to haul the big things (important things) like their bunk beds, dressers, and other large pieces of furniture. And then they felt better.



I heard another story about two sisters, ages seven and three, who were placed in the home of one of our resource families. When they arrived, the older sister methodically began to explore the kitchen. After some questioning from her caseworker, the seven-year-old explained that she needed to know where the food was kept. If she didn't, how was she going to make sure her little sister had something to eat? It was clear that before the sisters came into care, the older sister had been responsible for assuring that her little sister had food.

I have been at COBYS for more than 21 years, and I still struggle with some of the stories I hear. It never would have crossed my mind to think about moving without being able to take the things that are meaningful to me. It breaks my heart that a seven-year-old girl needs to know her way around the kitchen so she can be sure her little sister has something to eat.

I am reminded regularly that the children we serve have different perspectives than mine. My guess is they may also have very different perspectives from yours. It is difficult for many of us to imagine what some children have endured and nearly impossible to fathom how negative experiences shape their worldview.

So if you have ever moved without any thought of leaving important things behind, if the children in your life don't have to worry about where their next meal is coming from, be thankful. Your reality isn't shared by some of the children we encounter.

We see some sad stories as we go about our work, but this time of year we are reminded of another story: the one about the God who sent his Son to walk with us in our challenging times and to ensure a brighter future. And that story empowers us to see the world in a different light.

Mark Cunningham, Executive Director

*In this season of thankfulness and hope, we welcome your support as we serve many children and families who see things differently.*



## An ExtraOrdinary Day for COBYS!



*Development staff from COBYS and Brethren Village pose with Buddy the Elf who made special appearances at both the BV online giving station and (new this year) breakfast and supper events hosted by the Lampeter Cafe'.*

COBYS Family Services received \$66,295 in donations through The ExtraOrdinary Give 24-hour online giving campaign on November 17, placing COBYS 24th out of some 460 organizations in total dollars. This was an increase of exactly \$12,000 (22 percent!) from last year, when COBYS donors gave \$54,295.

"I'm not much for using superlatives," said Director of Development Don Fitzkee, "but it really was an extraordinary day for COBYS, and for all of the participating organizations. It's thrilling, and a little humbling, to see the donations come pouring in throughout the day."

Sponsored by the Lancaster County Community Foundation and Presenting Sponsors Rodgers and Associates and the S. Dale High Family Foundation, the event as a whole saw another huge surge, with total giving

to all organizations growing from \$7.1 million last year to \$8.6 million this year. Donations came in at a rate of \$100/second.

COBYS was the fourth of 10 organizations to earn a \$1,000 Early Bird prize for being among the first to reach 50 donations, receiving the 50th just seven minutes, 26 seconds after midnight.

The Foundation and other sponsors provided prizes and a stretch fund of at least \$500,000 that will be divided among participating organizations. While final figures are not yet available, once a match from the stretch fund is applied, the \$1,000 Early Bird prize added, and fees deducted, COBYS' total proceeds from the day are expected to exceed \$68,000, up from \$55,389 last year.

One of the event's chief benefits is its ability to attract new donors. Included in COBYS' total donations were \$3,880 from 41 first-time donors.

## Save the Dates

As 2017 winds down we have been penciling in some important dates on our 2018 calendars. Please save the dates for these COBYS events:

- **Informational/Fundraising Banquet.**

**Thursday, March 8** (weather date March 9), at Middle Creek Church of the Brethren. Noon and evening seatings. We'll be sure to let you know what the theme is just as soon as we know. We can tell you that we are excited to have the Yeater Sisters (from left: Joanna and Lois



Yeater, and Rachel Cassel) lined up as our musicians. Join us for an enjoyable evening.

- **23rd Annual Wenger Foundation Praise Dinner.**

**Thursday, April 10**, 6 p.m. at the Lebanon Expo Center. Features a scrumptious meal, music by the Talleys, and guest speaker Bob Kettering, all enjoyed with 800 or more friends of COBYS and three other ministries.

- **24th Annual Family Fun Walk. Sunday, May 6,**

4 p.m., Peter Becker Community, Harleysville. Join us for a three-mile walk to raise money for our ministries.

- **22nd Annual Bike & Hike.**

**Sunday, September 9,** 1:00 p.m., Lititz Church of the Brethren. Take a walk, ride a bike, go on a motorcycle ride at our signature fundraising event.

## Standby Foster Families *(Continued from Page 1)*

and answered all of our questions, so we knew we would have great support through this.”

As standby resource parents, they know what they signed up for—one week at a time on call. But they never really know what that week will bring. Will they be dealing with the overdose of a child’s parent or guardian, an incarceration? Will they be sent to pick up children at the county agency? The family’s home? The police station? Will they pick up one child? More than one?

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*“As standby resource parents, they know what they signed up for—one week at a time on call. But they never really know what that week will bring.”*

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Before that call comes they have thought through the scenarios, gathered supplies, readied bedrooms, and stock-piled clean clothing in a variety of sizes to accommodate the child or children they will bring home with them. The call may mean a trip to Walmart at 3 a.m. to pick up diapers for a child who only has the one they are wearing. It may mean a late night of laundering the clothes they are wearing because they have no others. It probably means giving them a hot shower and providing something to eat before going to bed. It may mean gathering school supplies so they can attend school the next day.

“I think the main thing with being a standby family is that you have to be flexible,” said Joel. “We try and be very conscientious—if

we are called, we try and pick them up in 20 minutes. Whenever they call you, you go. We might be out with friends, but if we are on call we take two cars just in case,” said Joel.

Andrea explained that flexibility is key. Although most of their standby weeks have been uneventful without any calls, they try to be prepared for whatever comes their way. This means keeping car seats in their vehicles, phones close by, and not planning any trips. They communicate with extended family about the potential for extra kids if their standby week falls on a holiday. And they pre-plan sleeping arrangements so if calls come in they are not scrambling to figure out who sleeps where.

Matt and Carla Preston also began their partnership with COBYS as foster parents. Growing up, they knew many people who fostered children, and they felt they had the flexibility and space in their



***The Prestons (Carla, Martina, and Matt) share their experiences as one of two COBYS standby foster families.***

home to do it.

“We weren’t necessarily looking to adopt, but fostering was some-

thing we both felt called to do,” said Carla, “and we aligned with COBYS as a Christian organization.”

When the Prestons first were approved as resource parents Matt was able to stay at home with their first foster child and their six-year old daughter, Martina. By the time the foster child returned to his family, both Carla and Matt were working and Martina had started school, changing the dynamics of their family. So the Prestons decided to look into short-term foster parenting.

“So, we did respites and basically all the short-term placements,” said Carla, “because we determined that, while my job is very flexible, it had to be within reason. I can turn my world upside down for a week, but I can’t do it for months on end. Same with Matt’s job. So, we sort of stumbled into emergency placement when that started up because it was really the perfect fit.”

Both families expressed that their own children help to make the standby program workable for them.

“We couldn’t do this without the flexibility of our jobs and our children,” said Joel. “It’s important for our children to be involved, but it’s also important for them to want us to be involved.”

The Metzlers have three children: Samantha, 17; Isabelle, 13; and Domingo, 7.

Andrea added, “This has been a great experience for our family—to be able to show your own family what it means to have a safe home where every person is loved and cared for no matter how long they stay and also be able to show a child who has been hurt that there is hope.”

Martina Preston discussed her

feelings about standby placements: “I like meeting new people and I like having other people share my room, kind of like sleepovers. I feel like a big and a little sister sometimes. I’m proud of my mom and dad . . . they are doing good things for people.”

Matt said that he has always been drawn to supporting people in need and described why his family wanted to be involved in the standby program: “These are children who can’t take care of themselves and we are capable of helping them. There’s an obligation there—Christ said, ‘Let them come to him, don’t stop them.’ They are our future. They are the ones I will be relying on someday, so I better invest. How could I not invest?”

Additionally, Matt feels that the program has helped him and his family see the world more completely through different eyes.

“By taking in these kids you will learn how to relate and listen,” he explained, “and just get your head around someone else’s reality. Getting a picture through another person’s lens can only help you with the next child. There are a lot of things I am able to relate to with other people now that I would never have been able to comprehend before the standby program.”

For the two standby families, sometimes it’s feast or famine. Some weeks, there may be no calls and other weeks they may have a full house. Andrea remembers one week when they were unable to take in all the children that needed to be placed, because the state places a limit of six children per home. When this occurs, the on-call caseworkers at COBYS and LCCYA work quickly to identify another family willing to care for the children. (See sidebar on this page.)

## Always on Call

In addition to covering emergency placements for Lancaster County, since August 2016 COBYS has employed two on-call caseworkers to assure all COBYS foster families can receive support whenever they need it.

Caseworkers Treva Bollinger and Georgie Staley provide emergency support to foster children and their families outside regular business hours.



*Treva Bollinger*



*Georgie Staley*

These on-call caseworkers rotate responsibilities bi-weekly, year-round, to handle a wide variety of situations. COBYS is required by law to provide this 24/7 emergency support.

“It does give our families peace of mind to know

they always have access to a COBYS social worker,” said Foster Care Supervisor Sharon Kingsley.

Often on-call caseworkers help resolve relatively minor issues that don’t require a lot of time.

Perhaps a foster family stuck in traffic realizes they will be late for a visit to a birth parent, and the caseworker makes a call to let the birth parent know. Other times a medical or mental health emergency may require greater emotional and practical support.

Whatever the situation, COBYS foster families can rest assured that even during off-hours professional and caring emergency support is available to them.

“When we have a very quiet week,” Carla reflected, “I am thankful. When we get called it normally means someone is having a very terrible week. I’d rather hear nothing than know someone is going through a terrible week.”

According to Matt, one of the hardest parts of standby fostering is the lack of closure. Children placed in their home spend a very limited time with them (typically a couple days at most) and they may never hear anything more about

them.

“Sometimes if the child is placed with another family from COBYS we may get to see their Chapter Two,” said Matt, “but usually it’s a magical mystery and we hope we did good. Sometimes you’ll just never know. For us, we hope to make them feel safe, secure, and loved.”

“People always ask you, ‘How do you just drop everything and go pick up kids?’” said Joel. “We say, ‘These are kids—how can you not?’”



## Rethinking Community Connections: *It's About Poverty and Relationships*



A COBYS program that helps churches help people in need has undergone some rethinking in recent months. Since 2011 through Community Connections COBYS has partnered with churches to support families with complex needs—needs that can drain financial resources and sap the energy of those involved.

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*“We want individuals to feel that they are partners, rather than clients...we want them to feel empowered and feel they have value.”*

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Helping to spur a rethinking of the program was a conference COBYS staff Matt Stoltzfus, Direc-

tor of Placement Services Mary Sourber, and Adoption Supervisor Jen McDowell attended in Dallas, Texas, last summer. Led by authors Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, the event focused on concepts from their book, *When Healing Hurts*. A key idea is that poverty “is not simply about lack of resources, but can be much more aptly measured by broken relationships—broken relationships with God, others, and their community.”

So while COBYS still partners with churches (and now also schools and community organizations) to help individuals or families to address financial, mental health, relational, and other needs, Community Connections’ starting point now is with relationships.

“We want individuals to feel

like they are partners, rather than clients,” explains COBYS Navigator Matt Stoltzfus. “We’re not getting involved to ‘fix them;’ we want them to be empowered and feel they have value. It’s a team approach, and we believe that the relationships within that team have the potential to produce lasting change.”

Matt’s new title is part of the rethinking. “We were called case-workers in the past,” he explains, “but we now identify as navigators. We’ve changed that to reflect a more mutual approach.”

Other members of the team include the Partner Organization and Organizational Contact Person who reach out to COBYS and manage the process, an Ally from within the Partner Organization who works closely to support the Participant, and the Participant receiving support. A Participant can be an individual or family unit.

Drawing upon available community resources, the Community Connections team helps participants develop short-term, achievable goals that promote greater independence. Services may include finding housing, transportation, and employment; addressing legal issues; obtaining family counseling; creating a budget; and much more. Nearly always, poverty is an underlying cause of their issues. And poverty is tied to broken relationships.

To explore whether Community Connections might be a good match for your church or organization, contact COBYS at 717-656-6580 or [connections@cobys.org](mailto:connections@cobys.org).

## Still Time to Give

If you have yet to make a year-end donation, there's still time to support COBYS ministries. Donations should be postmarked no later than December 31 to count as 2017 giving. Or give online at [www.cobys.org](http://www.cobys.org) anytime between now and New Year's Eve.

Another way to give is through a distribution from an Individual Retirement Account (IRA). Donors age 70½ or older can transfer up to \$100,000 directly from an IRA to charity each year. An IRA rollover is a tax-exempt distribution from the IRA. The amount transferred



can be used to meet the donor's required minimum distribution.

For example, 75-year-old Earl is required to withdraw \$10,000 from his IRA this year, even though he doesn't need the money for living expenses. Instead of withdrawing the money and paying income taxes on it, Earl can direct a \$10,000 transfer to COBYS and reduce his federal income tax liability.

To learn more about this provision, or other ways to give (such as charitable gift annuities and remembering COBYS in your will) contact Director of Development Don Fitzkee at 717-656-6580 or [don@cobys.org](mailto:don@cobys.org). Please consult your own financial advisor to discuss how specific provisions affect you.

## Any Volunteers?

In addition to financial support, COBYS is seeking individuals and groups to volunteer early in the New Year to help renovate a building. COBYS is in the process of purchasing additional office space north of Lancaster to make room for expansion. While details are not yet finalized, we anticipate needing volunteers in late January and February to help with tasks including removing carpet, preparing and painting office walls, tree and shrub removal, cleaning, and, depending on the skill level of volunteers, more. We anticipate scheduling groups for Saturdays and also having some daytime and evening weekday time slots. Contact Don Fitzkee at 717-656-6580 or [don@cobys.org](mailto:don@cobys.org) to learn more.



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## Juggling the Holidays

Continuing in its long-standing holiday tradition, Florin Church of the Brethren served up their annual Christmas dinner to COBYS resource parents, children, board members, and staff on December 4.

After dinner, Executive Director Mark Cunningham and son, Jordan, juggled and balanced some pretty impressive items during their captivating performance as "Catch This!" Foster care caseworker Keri Miller was a good sport when plucked from the audience to assist in the act.

Following the performance, Florin member Bob Price and wife Marcy posed as Santa and Mrs. Claus, giving small gifts from the church to each child. COBYS staff also greeted children with smiles and gifts—handing out the book *Brave Sister* (the story of Moses' sister, Miriam) and wrapped presents containing gingerbread house kits. The event was planned by Terrie Stauffer.

