

15 MINUTES

A family made from scratch

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Ruth Wilburn has been taking in children orphaned by age-old circumstances like starvation, death, and incarceration at the Tender Loving Care house in Cape Coral. Unlike the stereotypical “mean old nuns” who were merciless and used rulers only as weapons in the orphanages of our imaginations, Wilburn is gentle, kind, and appears to be loving life.

“If you really want to get down to it, we’re an orphanage,” she said. “But we don’t use those terms...The biggest thing is, we don’t want those children to feel different from any other child.”

Last Thursday she was taking Alex, a third grader at Skyline Elementary, from the four-bedroom, five-acre TLC ranch, to her home in Cape Coral, where she is cared for by one of the 10 “substitute families,” which volunteer to care for the children of TLC for periods of time ranging from a few months to years.

Alex, homework in hand, bounced into TLC’s big, purple van, known as “Mr. Gordy.”

“Tomorrow’s my birthday,” she said, grinning.

Alex lives with three other children, Isaac, Maria, and Tony at “Grandma” Patricia and “Randy” Randall’s house in Cape Coral (they preferred not to give out last names). It’s a big, pretty place with a pool designed so it seems to spill directly into one of the Cape’s many canals. Patricia is retired. She used to work at the World Bank in Washington D.C. Randy is a data modeler, she said, and is only home one or two weekends a month, sometimes to the surprise that she has taken in another child.

“I thought it would be fun, to have some kids in the house for Christmas,” Patricia said. “I realized, after a while, one, two, what’s the difference? And how I ended up with four I really don’t know.”

The kids seem really fun, really happy, all of them doing their thing; the wise looking Alex with her homework, just took the bus to school for the first time; and imperturbable Tony, a fourth grader, is working on writing a short biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.

“I just thought he was interesting,” Tony said.

Maria, a graceful fifth grader who may have a daredevil streak in her somewhere, takes dance.

Isaac is a curly haired baby who woke up from a nap winking, and gamely allowed his picture to be taken.

“Unlike the Department of Children and Families, where the state takes the children from the families, the parents voluntarily give the children to us,” Wilburn said. She said the ultimate goal is to restore the families; help the parents get into condition to be parents again; and during that time, keep the children together, as complete families, as much as possible.

On the fourth Sunday of every month, all the biological families, “substitute families,” staff, and “graduates” of TLC, show up at the ranch for a potluck meal. “Graduates” are children who were either adopted or went back to their biological families, which happens about half the time, Wilburn said.

TLC, which costs about \$15,000 a month to operate, currently has 14 children living on the ranch and many more living with their “substitute” families. It’s tough getting all the money needed, and Wilburn relies completely on donations and grants. She

does it all without the help of government.

“We put the word out, and it comes,” she said, explaining how TLC gets everything from beds, to plants for a new “Garden of Hope” to clothes. “If you ever question miracles, hang here for a week and your questions will stop...Many of these kids come to us with nothing, literally the clothes on their backs.”

Kids come for all kinds of reasons. For example, one is the son of an illegal immigrant. TLC is helping that man get his citizenship papers so the family can be reunited. Another mother is currently incarcerated, and pregnant. Her baby is due in February, and after it is born, TLC will become the caretaker. Last month, a family of four children, 2, 3, 8, and 9, came in because the parents couldn’t afford to feed them. The two-year-old has a terminal disease.

As Wilburn gave a tour of the TLC Children’s home in Cape Coral — warm and cozy, with a pink girl’s room and a blue boy’s room, and a room with all the stuff from a thrift store that used to be called “The Bizarre Boutique” — vice president of the Fort Myers Garden Council, Jerry Siebenaler, stopped by.

“I know they’ve gotta do everything here with donations,” he said. “The Garden Council had a yard sale last Saturday, and I knew we would have plants left over.”

Siebenaler said TLC will probably get



Ruth Wilburn and “family”.

PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

about 100 plants, of all varieties, including orchids. He had also brought his dog “Charley,” a “therapy dog,” he said. Alex got licked in the face by the ink-black cockerspaniel.

Wilburn said the plants will go mostly into TLC’s up and coming “Garden of Hope.” The garden will include a vegetable patch where kids can learn how to grow things like beans and tomatoes, and learn values like “the difference between what a want is, and what a need is.”

That’s something Wilburn, 45, the daughter of a Southern Pacific Railroad Executive and a mother to the Chef at the Magnolia Landings Country Club, and a sophomore at FGCU; an equestrian of sorts since the age of 6 (she said the TLC ranch would benefit from a few horses and goats), as well as a fervent Christian, has, one might guess, already learned a thing or two about.

“Having been with throwaway kids on the streets of Washington D.C., I expected the kids here to be insecure, scared, and angry; but the kids are happy, well adjusted, confident people,” she said. ■

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