

Opening hearts to child creates instant family

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On paper, Marius and Rosemari Croeser seemed to have the perfect life.

Mr. Croeser was general manager of Avante, a North American technology company.

Born and raised in South Africa, his siblings were much older so he grew up as though he was an only child.

The Markham resident was born into a French Huguenots culture and was extremely driven to succeed.

He earned five university degrees in business, theology and philosophy.

Mrs. Croeser, also from South Africa, is a successful piano teacher.

They lived in a big house in Unionville and had no children. When they married, they had agreed they would not have biological offspring.

"We were living a wonderful life. We travelled where we wanted to, had a two-seater sports car, the freedom to travel," Mr. Croeser said.

But this life was about to change drastically, thanks to one of Mrs. Croeser's piano students.

Actually, thanks to a young girl who liked to tag along with one of her students.

The student's mother was a youth and child worker who had taken in a young blond girl, whose name the Croesers do not want to reveal to protect her identity.

The Croesers soon learned she was in trouble. There had been amber alerts issued in an attempt to find her family. She had no home.

Hers is a story of tremendous neglect and drug use by the people who were supposed to love and protect her.

This girl loved sports, which encouraged the couple to buy her a basketball net. They started spending more and more time with her in a transition stage they hoped would culminate in taking over her care. She ended up staying with them for about eight months.

They acted as her guardians, signing her up for school and they were there for her first day.

"It was very emotional, very moving," Mr. Croeser said.

The couple also threw her first birthday party.

Mr. Croeser remembers one particular evening, the first time she slept over at their house. She fell asleep while watching the movie *The Last Samurai* on DVD with them.

"She had this angelic face. You realize this is a vulnerable child. She snored," he said, in his calming, rolling tones.

Mr. Croeser had a startling revelation.

"I could love other people's children," he said.

He put a blanket over her and later, the couple put her to bed.

"There are those moments you never forget. These imprints that any parent would have with biological kids," he said.

They thought of adopting her. They contacted the social workers involved. Back then, they knew so little about children's services they didn't know what CAS (Children's Aid Society) stood for.

Mr. Croeser relates how red lights went off for both of them when they found out this girl would be going into foster care.

"This poor child. What is going to happen? We must keep her out of foster care; save her," he remembers thinking.

They began spending even more time with her, growing closer to this young girl with the spunky personality. But after eight months, distant relatives of the child stepped forward and she was placed with them.

"It was devastating," Mr. Croeser said.

The decision about the girl was made in court on a Thursday.

On Friday, they went to Cuba to try to recover from the trauma of losing a child they had fallen in love with. Mr. Croeser realized the girl had lit a spark that would continue burning long after she had left their lives.

"The lights went on for us," he said.

They made preparations to become foster parents, applying for the role and investing in training. Their first foster child was a teenager.

"It was a wonderful experience. Not that this child wasn't damaged or (didn't have) issues," he said.

Anyway, after this first child, they got another child and another. Their house quickly filled up with four children, the maximum allowed per home. From two people, they went to a family of six.

As is his way, Mr. Croeser quickly points out the positives of this major transition.

"There's really good training. There's no such thing as a bad child."

Their foster children put the couple way ahead of their peers, in some ways. Mr. Croeser is 37 and his friends typically have toddlers.

"They phone us for advice. We have skipped the years with smaller children, which is great for us. I hate changing diapers," he said.

They take in school-aged children and older.

"I love having so many people around," he said. "We're not baby people. The older kids are perfect for us," he said.

He was initially fearful of having a child. But once the children became a part of their lives and he got into the day-to-day routine of being a parent, that fear quickly dissipated.

Mr. Croeser leans back in his chair as he describes what the children are like when they first come to his home. They come in with few dreams or aspirations and often end up deciding they want to finish school, accumulating other goals along the way.

The Croesers have consciously changed their lifestyle so they can be flexible for their children. He now mostly takes positions with corporate boards or does consulting work.

"I've come from a run, run mentality. We (now) take things as they come," he said.

Mr. Croeser is vice-president of the York Region Foster Parents Association.

The association is hosting an evening of fine art and music at 7 p.m. April 3 to raise money for the York Region Foster Children's year-end holiday/Christmas party. This free event will feature a table with experienced foster parents and some who have adopted. It will be held at the Varley Art Gallery (216 Main St., Unionville). The child and youth program begins at 7 p.m. Presentations begin at 7:30 p.m., while the piano recital begins at 8 p.m. and the prize draw is at 9 p.m.

The York Region Foster Parents Association also hosts a week-long exhibit of Michelle Mouton's work at the McKay Art Centre, April 4 to 8, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day on Main Street, Unionville.

For more information or to make a donation for the year-end Christmas party, e-mail info@croeser.com