

And Then There Were Seven

Five siblings in search of a home find their way to a second chance

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DAN DAIGLE '74 AND MARY PAT ROWLAND '74

OUTSIDE THEIR HOME IN ROLLINSFORD, N.H.

On a rainy afternoon in late April, Mary Pat Rowland '74 is pulling a tray of pumpkin muffins out of the oven when Jack, 17, and Jacob, 13, come bursting through the door, followed a few minutes later by their younger brothers, Jeffery, 10, and Jarid, 8. The kitchen is suddenly a jumble of backpacks and unlaced sneakers, hockey jerseys and low-slung pants. Muffins are disappearing. A dog is being fed. The phone is ringing. School paperwork is being sorted on the counter. Jarid runs upstairs to visit his pet turtles, then returns to curl up on the couch with Sally, the English setter. Jacob cranks up the music in his room. Dan Daigle '74, Mary Pat's husband, double-checks the schedule—almost every day of the week he drives someone to basketball or hockey or baseball practice. Keeping it all straight can be a challenge. And then there's sister Jennifer, 14. She'll need to be picked up soon from her after-school job. It's just another afternoon at the Daigle-Rowland household—chaotic but happy—where life can seem, at moments like this, completely normal. But, in fact, until recently this new family—the only one in the state of New Hampshire with an adopted set of five siblings—did not even exist.

Not so long ago, Mary Pat and Dan were busy with their jobs—he as a teacher in the Somersworth, N.H., school system near Rollinsford, where they live, she as the managing editor of the local newspaper, Foster's Daily Democrat. Their two biological daughters, Emily and Ellie, 27 and 23 respectively, were both college graduates and working as registered nurses. "For years, we had been busy with their school activities and our jobs," says Mary Pat. "We didn't have time for anything else. I didn't even volunteer." She certainly never envisioned herself as a foster parent—never mind an adoptive one. "We didn't really have time to pay attention to anybody else and their problems," she says. Then, all of a sudden, the girls were gone. Mary Pat glances at Dan, who is sitting on the couch. They both voice the same idea at the same time. "We thought, 'Is this it? Is there anything else?'"

Plus, they couldn't stand the silence. "The house was way too quiet," says Dan. And so, in 2006, he decided to take a foster parenting course. During his 35 years of teaching physical education, Dan had been an informal mentor to troubled kids. He knew the territory, and he had a natural ability to connect. "After the class was over, we never heard anything, and we sort of forgot about it," says Dan, who was partially retired from teaching by then and focusing on his real estate business. But in November, a social worker called.

"I know you only wanted one child," she said, "but would you consider two?" Reluctant at first, Mary Pat and Dan finally agreed to a meeting. "We just ate a meal together at a Friendly's restaurant," says Mary Pat, "but I felt like I'd been hit by lightning. I loved them immediately." Dan wasn't so sure. The kids were older—Jack was 15 and Jennifer was 12. And they were hard to read. Jack talked a lot. Jennifer barely made eye contact. The two of them had been removed several times from their family home due to abuse and neglect. Each time, as they grew older, it became harder to place them in foster care. Nobody wants older kids. Mary Pat and Dan knew what these kids were facing. They agreed to another meeting.



AT HOME: THE FIVE YOUNGEST MEMBERS OF THE DAIGLE-ROWLAND FAMILY PAUSE

DURING A GAME OF CATCH OUTSIDE THEIR HOME IN ROLLINSFORD, N.H. FROM LEFT

ARE MARY PAT ROWLAND '74, JENNIFER, JARID, DAN DAIGLE '74, JEFFERY, JACOB

AND JACK.

A few weeks later, right around Christmas, Jack and Jennifer came to Mary Pat and Dan's house for supper and a movie. They ate pizza. They met the dogs. The tree was sparkling with ornaments. "When we invited them for an overnight, they were trying to be on their best behavior," says Mary Pat. "You could tell they were just dying to be here." By January 2007, Jack and Jennifer had moved in, and Mary Pat and Dan had become foster parents to two teenagers.

It was not an easy time. Just weeks after Jack and Jennifer arrived, Mary Pat and Dan had to get them out of school to tell them their father had died. Cause of death: alcoholism. He was 37, and in prison. "They knew he had severe addiction problems," says Mary Pat, "and he hadn't lived with the family full time in years, but there was still a strong emotional bond." And then there were the three other kids. Turns out, Jack and Jennifer were the oldest of five. The younger ones were living at the St. Charles Children's Home in nearby Rochester, waiting to see if they could someday be reunited with their mother, who was in jail for drug possession.

In the months following the funeral, social workers arranged regular supervised visits among the siblings. The older ones were considered too unpredictable to be left alone with the younger ones, but everyone agreed that keeping the family in touch was important. Often these visits took place at the Daigle-Rowland house, where they'd come for a meal or just to hang out. And each time it was harder to say good bye. Mary Pat recalls how when they would take the youngest children back, "they'd pretend to

ring the doorbell, and then rush back to the car saying no one was home. It would just break my heart."



JACK PLAYS A GAME ON TV.

Jack and Jennifer and their three younger brothers, Jacob, Jeffery and Jarid, had never had what most people would call a normal home life. They drifted from apartment to apartment. Drugs and alcohol were a constant presence. Everyone—children and adults—slept on a couple of mattresses on the living room floor. No one paid attention to whether the kids went to school. Their mother would sometimes disappear for days on end. Worst of all, she allowed a drifter, who was a registered sex offender and convicted pedophile, to live in her apartment.

But love never lets go, Mary Pat and Dan discovered—even in the worst of circumstances—and the children were their mother's staunchest defenders. "They were always reassuring us that she was trying to get her act together," says Dan. And she was. She was trying to stay sober. She wanted her kids back. Mary Pat and Dan were supportive of her visits, arranged by the state. "But the kids were always worse afterwards," says Dan. "It was like trying to heal a wound. It would scab over and start to heal. Then, every visit was like ripping the scab off again."

"It's easy to judge," says Mary Pat, who met the children's mother many times during this period and knew something of her childhood. "But she herself was the victim of incredible cruelty. She didn't know anything different." Mary Pat, meanwhile, was discovering one of the hardest truths of foster parenting. "I had to learn not to want to be their mother," she says. "I just wanted to nurture them and take care of them. But I had to learn my role. These kids loved their parents very much—no matter what happened." Finally, in July 2007, the social worker called a family meeting. When the children arrived, they sat in a circle and listened as their mother told them that she couldn't care for them anymore. She couldn't stop drinking. She was too sick with AIDS. She had to give them up. She was letting them go. And then she turned to Dan and Mary Pat, sobbing, and begged them to take all five.



FAMILY MEMBERS AND

FRIENDS PLAY CARDS.

"For weeks afterwards, I kept trying to imagine it," says Mary Pat. "Could we do it, I wondered?" She turned it over and over in her head. Could they make it work? There were huge financial implications, never mind the enormous emotional challenges. But it seemed like a decision they would never have to make. The state was firmly against it, as were others, including psychologists and social workers. The two older children were considered so damaged that they would be bad influences on the younger ones. "We felt this wasn't true," says Mary Pat, "but we realized nobody thought it was a good idea. So we focused on the two children we had."

The transition, even with two, was rough. "We had a lot of holes in our walls for a while," says Dan, recalling the fits of rage and frustration that came over the kids early on. Jennifer, especially, had difficulty controlling her anger. "At one point, she was really getting out of control," he recalls. "I had to restrain her." When she called the police to report that Dan had been abusing her, the police took her away for questioning. Finally she admitted the truth, but not before police had to open an investigation that put Dan's job in jeopardy. During this period, when she returned under police supervision to pick up some of her things, Dan sneaked in a quick word with her. "When you come back," he said, "we've made a few changes in your room." Jennifer was stunned. "That was the turning point," says Dan. "She thought we were going to throw her out. But now she knew, for the first time, that she was safe. She was in a place where people wanted her."

In one of her newspaper columns, Mary Pat wrote about how her home had expanded to include two new children. She told about a boy who loved her meatloaf and romped happily in the yard with the two dogs, who was smart and handsome, but who had trouble focusing on anything for more than an hour or so. She told about a girl who craved moose tracks ice cream, who had an eye for photography and who was desperately in need of self-confidence. "I have no idea if we will have them long enough to nurture their talents or make a difference in their lives," Rowland wrote. "I can't think about that right now." Instead, she wrote with a mother's eye--sensitive to the strengths as well as the weaknesses in each child, but dwelling mostly on the fact that she and Dan, for at least a short time, could try to give these children some of what they so

desperately needed: good meals and clean laundry, along with rules to follow and the assurance that, for the first time in their lives, someone would be able to nurture their potential.

As the weeks went on, Mary Pat and Dan continued to focus on their two teens. But they didn't forget the younger ones. "Every time we'd go to the store, we'd say, 'Let's buy this for Jarid,' or we'd think of something for Jacob." Meanwhile, they were getting pressure from Jack and Jennifer. "We'll do better," they'd say. "We'll help you," they promised. They were desperate to stay together. But the state was intent on placing the three younger children in other homes—two together, one by himself. Nobody wanted three kids at once.



JARID DISPLAYS HIS PET TURTLE.

And then, in October 2007, everything changed. "I think it finally became clear that we were the best option," says Mary Pat. And so the state asked Mary Pat and Dan to take the kids. The prospect was daunting. The financial considerations alone kept them awake at night, and they spent weeks negotiating with the state, finally arriving at an agreement on adoption subsidies that might allow them to make ends meet. If they were going to take five troubled kids into their home, they couldn't be working nonstop just to put food on the table. "It was such a hard decision," admits Mary Pat, "but I couldn't live with the notion of breaking these guys up. I just couldn't do it."

On Jan. 1, 2008, Mary Pat and Dan announced their plan to proceed with the adoption. The kids were ecstatic. But the saga continued. First of all, there was the matter of how everyone was going to fit into their little Cape-style house. In February, thanks to volunteers from a Lutheran church, a huge renovation project got underway, transforming the basement into bedrooms for the oldest children. Mary Pat and Dan raided their retirement savings to cover the cost of materials.

Through the months of renovation chaos, Mary Pat and Dan juggled the lives of five foster kids (the youngest three moved into the house in March), shuffling them to sports events, arranging therapy sessions and orchestrating a series of surgeries, including

two to correct years of dental neglect. There was also an emergency appendectomy and a tonsillectomy somewhere in the mix. The weeks rolled along, full of anticipation, and then, in October 2008, in the midst of a deepening recession and financial woes, the state backtracked on the agreed-upon subsidy.



BACKYARD DRIVER'S ED: JENNIFER TAKES HER YOUNGER BROTHERS, JARID, LEFT, AND JEFFERY FOR A SPIN IN A GOLF CART.

The adoption was looming. The kids were counting on it. "You don't tell them you're going to be a 'forever family'—and then change your mind," says Mary Pat. "There was a reason we never had five kids," she says. "We couldn't afford five kids. And now we had five children with lots of problems. Just taking care of them emotionally and physically was hard enough. The financial worry on top of it was just too much."

A fundraiser organized by their friends Chuck and Betsy Cowell Cressy '89, owners of Durham Marketplace in Durham, brought in \$19,000, which the Daigles have stored away to draw on as sparingly as possible. The Cressys also provided a year's worth of free groceries. The Bagelry contributed a monthly bagel supply and Philbrick's Sports provided sports equipment for the boys. The community outreach helped Mary Pat and Dan move ahead, worried but determined.

Finally, on April 2, 2009, all the adoptions were complete. It was official. Their dream had become a reality: they were no longer a foster family—they were a "forever family." As they celebrated the moment together at a local restaurant, it was clear already how far they had come. Early on, whenever Mary Pat and Dan had tried to take the kids out to dinner as a group, it was a disaster. "There was inappropriate language and rough behavior. They didn't know how to conduct themselves. Sometimes we'd have to get up and leave," says Mary Pat. "Now we can go anywhere together."

There are other signs of progress, too. The two youngest, with steady pushing from their new parents, have become hooked on sports. "It will be their salvation, I hope," says Dan, remembering a call from Jarid's gym teacher. The second-grader had just broken the school record in the mile—a record usually held by a sixth-grader. Jarid also plays baseball and hockey. Jeff, who's in fourth grade, was the high scorer on the basketball team and a top pitcher. He shines in football, too. "At first they weren't too

keen on participating," Dan recalls. "Now they're always pestering me about when their next game is."



DAN DAIGLE, JEFFERY AND MARY PAT ROWLAND CHECK OUT JEFFERY'S NEW CLEATS.

Jennifer, meanwhile, has blossomed in her job at a child care center; she's also babysitting a lot, earning her own money. Her natural parenting abilities are being encouraged by adults who are providing role models she's never had before. "She's finally realizing that the life she knew is not how people live," says Mary Pat. "She's learning another way." She has also quit smoking, a habit she picked up when she was only 10.

Jacob is playing hockey and lacrosse, making friends and working hard to catch up on math. He spends hours tinkering with his sports equipment. "Our tools are always disappearing," says Mary Pat. "We call him Mr. Fix-It." Jack, who is determined to finish high school even though he's behind, is now the proud owner of a car, given to him by Dan and Mary Pat as a surprise on his 18th birthday. The gift was transformative. "It's old, but it runs and it's his," says Mary Pat, who calls Jack's progress a miracle. He has managed to get a job--and is earning the money he needs to maintain the car. He has also begun to overcome many of his fears. He goes out more. He has a girlfriend. He feels needed. Those are his words. That's what he tells Dan and Mary Pat he loves most about his new job: "I feel needed."

There's still a long road ahead. All the kids are being tutored in school to make up for lost time. There are ongoing health and behavioral issues to deal with. And the emotional landscape remains treacherous. Jarid, the youngest, asks questions constantly. "Was my mother bad?" he wants to know. Mary Pat reassures him again and again. "She wanted the best for you," she answers. "She thinks of you every day. She just couldn't do it." But the questions, the pain, the craving for the mother you want, but cannot have, never goes away.



JACOB PERFORMS STUNTS ON HIS BIKE.

"I worry about all of them," says Mary Pat. But she has hope that the kids can conquer their past. She still sounds surprised by the whole turn of events, by the instant second family she's found herself nurturing. "I never knew they were there," she muses. "Here I was all this time, living a pretty insulated life—I just never knew they were right there." Now she can't imagine it any other way. "I take my strength from them," she says. "They light up my life."

Even Dan and Mary Pat's two older daughters have overcome their skepticism at suddenly being part of an expanded family. "It took some getting used to," says Mary Pat. "I think the girls thought I was going to retire and garden or something!" Instead, she and Dan are busier than they've ever been.

Come to think of it, though, she is gardening, tending to five transplanted kids she and Dan helped rescue from a cracked and forlorn corner of the world, cultivating a new plot of earth where there's plenty of room to grow, all the while having faith that something good will take root and flourish. ~

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