

House of Ruth

More than one thousand birth mothers and hundreds of adoptive couples have been served through House of Ruth, a ministry of CC Downey, CA. The organization is both an adoption service and a crisis pregnancy center.

Story by Debra Smith

Purple folders were spread across the table in front of 13-year-old Rebecca Richards. Having decided on a House of Ruth adoption for the child she was carrying, “I had come to pick out my baby’s parents,” Rebecca said. As she prayerfully reviewed families’ files, “God spoke, and I listened,” Rebecca continued. “Thanks to Him, it took me less than one hour to fall in love with one particular couple.” That week, Rebecca’s parents drove her to the couple’s home in Newport Beach, CA. “Meeting them was so bittersweet,” Rebecca recalled. “I knew they were God’s chosen parents for my baby, as did they.”

House of Ruth, which began more than three decades ago, has placed more than 800 children in Christian families. “Our focus is the

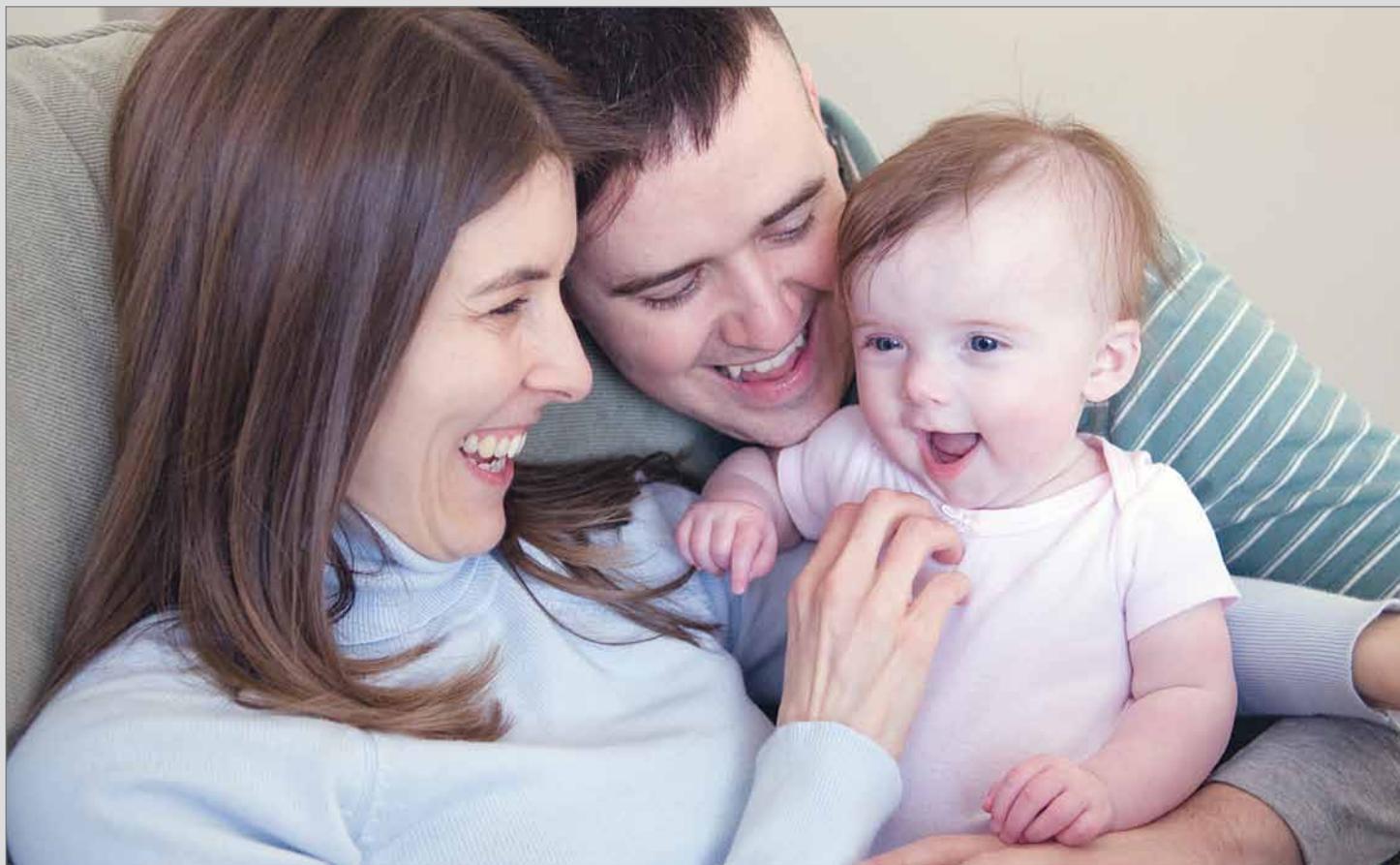
birth mothers,” explained Karyn Johnson, the organization’s founder and wife of Pastor Jeff Johnson of CC Downey. “Many agencies specialize in finding babies for couples wanting to adopt. Our primary goal is helping young women find satisfying situations for their babies.” The ministry, which also serves women who choose to parent, assists birth mothers and adoptive couples across the U.S.

A Choice that Brought Peace

Rebecca Richards had been surprised, at age eight, to learn that a good friend had been adopted. “She seemed so right and natural with her parents,” Rebecca said. “They were a very close and loving family.” Rebecca was intrigued; “I asked her millions of ridiculous questions,” she continued. “I

didn’t know much about adoption, but I guess my thoughts about it had been negative. She changed all that. . . . She was happy and loved.” Then in 6th grade, Rebecca was delighted when her dad agreed to buy her *Choice Summer*, a fictional book she had discovered at her Christian school. In its pages, she encountered a pregnant teenager who agonized over her decision and eventually chose adoption over parenting or abortion. Despite generally hating reading, Rebecca said, “I loved the book. But I had no idea it would impact my future choices.”

In January of her 7th grade year, Rebecca met and secretly began dating a high school boy. “After 2½ weeks, I blew it,” she stated. Two months later, a doctor informed



Tessa and Shane Burpee of CC Bangor, ME, enjoy their daughter Nora. The couple adopted Nora in 2008 through House of Ruth.



Photo by Tessa Burpee

The day before giving birth to Nora, Blair was baptized in the Boise River by her pastor, Bob Caldwell of CC Boise, ID.



Photo by Tessa Burpee

Moments after delivery on August 25, 2008, Blair looks on while Shane holds Nora.



Photo by Genny Wilson

Adoptive parents Tessa and Shane learn to swaddle daughter Nora Blair Burpee just after she was born in Boise, ID. The couple gave Nora the middle name Blair after her birth mother, Blair Van Lunen. Blair asked Shane to have the honor of cutting the cord.

House of Ruth

Rebecca that she was eight weeks pregnant. “She said she could terminate the pregnancy without telling my parents,” Rebecca recalled. “I knew what that meant”—so instead, Rebecca told her believing mom and dad. “As heartbroken as they were,” she continued, “they went above and beyond forgiving me. They became my support system and encouragement team.”

Once Rebecca met her baby’s adoptive mom in 1998, “She was there for me throughout the remainder of my pregnancy,” Rebecca said. “She listened to my heartache, took me out to lunch, and prayed with me.” When the couple picked up the baby from the hospital 48 hours after his birth, “She even cried

with me,” Rebecca recalled. “She showed me so much love that day. I was so heartbroken and scared when I handed over my little boy to his new mommy. But as I placed him into her arms, Jesus gave me His arms of strength. Even in that heart-wrenching pain, Jesus gave me the peace He promised in John 14:27a: ‘Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you.’”

Twelve years later, “Nathaniel’s parents still send me sweet notes and beautiful pictures on Mother’s Day, his birthday, and ‘handover day,’” Rebecca said. “Not one day has passed that I don’t think of him and pray for him. But I have never regretted my decision. Adoption was God’s perfect solution

for the situation I faced.” After a season of rebelling against God in her teens, “I fell in love with my Maker, Jesus Christ,” Rebecca said. “Even without Nathaniel, He filled my void with Himself.” Then, Rebecca met her husband in 2001 at a CC Downey Bible study for young adults. “God gave us four precious children—in His timing,” Rebecca continued. “I am a very blessed woman.”

A Gift of Light

Birth mother Blair Van Lunen of CC Boise, ID, explained, “I don’t see myself as having given my baby up for adoption. No, I had a baby for someone else. I love Nora so much, and I wanted her to have the best. I could not give her that, but they could.”

Blair’s daughter’s adoptive parents, Shane and Tessa Burpee, had been married for three years without conceiving when they hesitantly attended an adoption seminar at their church, CC Bangor, ME. Tessa recalled, “One speaker talked about how adoption is not ‘Plan B,’ but God’s ‘Plan A’ for some couples.” Impacted but uncertain, she opened her women’s study Bible one 2006 morning soon afterward and encountered an adoption study. *Lord, I don’t want to talk about this!* she prayed—and turned the page. Within days, though, “I was ready to consider it,” she said. Reading her Bible again one Saturday, “I knew this was God’s calling for us.”

Tessa found the adoption paperwork difficult and discouraging; but as they persevered, “The Lord worked in my heart regarding my desire to be pregnant,” she said. At a baby shower with several adoptive moms, “I realized adoption is special, unique, and beautiful,” she added. Once the Burpees booked plane tickets for House of Ruth’s annual conference in California, Tessa’s heart soared with thoughts of starting a family. “It was like being pregnant, except with no idea when the baby would be born!”

The October 2007 conference “was so powerful,” Tessa said. “I went through an entire box of tissues.” She and Shane heard testimonies from birth mothers and adoptive

parents; they learned about adoptions in the Bible, including those of Moses and Samuel. Later at their church’s monthly adoption ministry meeting, “Someone announced there was a new House of Ruth affiliate in Boise, ID,” Tessa said. “My heart leapt—I thought, The other potato state!” Having grown up on a potato farm in Maine, Tessa she felt a special affinity to the northwestern state famous for spuds.

In March 2008, Tessa received a voicemail: A new believer in Idaho had chosen the Burpees as potential parents for her baby. “I called Shane and didn’t reach him,” Tessa said. “I laughed, I cried, I danced around the house, I read my Bible.” When she called Blair, “It felt strange for the first 1½ minutes,” Tessa recalled. “Then we totally hit it off. We talked for 1½ hours.” That summer Blair flew to Maine. “Our visit was unreal,” Tessa said. “Instead of awkwardness, there was this amazing fellowship in Christ.” The Burpees took Blair to church, introduced her to friends, and took her on road trips to meet their parents. They spent days on the lake; “We took lots of goofy pictures,” Tessa said.

The Burpees prayerfully decided on the name Nora, with a middle name of Blair—after her birth mom. “Nora means light,” Tessa explained. “Blair often talked about how she felt she was growing a gift inside her. Then one morning through James 1:17, God connected this gift of a child with the concept of light.” Shortly afterward, Tessa opened a card from Blair. The note ended with James 1:17a: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights.”

Tessa and Shane flew to Idaho in August for Nora’s birth. Blair had previously declared, “I want to be baptized on Sunday and have the baby on Monday”—which is exactly what happened. Throughout the entire process, Tessa said, “I wanted to bless this young woman, but she blessed us so much more. The Lord used her so incredibly because she was so completely yielded to Him.”

Splendor from Pain

When Jeff and Karyn Johnson led a church trip to Israel in June 1979, the group visited Saint Anne’s Church in Jerusalem. Standing inside the ancient stone building, Karyn looked around and noticed



Karyn Johnson



Photo by Tessa Burpee

that a group member was crying. “I went over and asked what was wrong,” Karyn recalled. “She said her niece, who was staying at Saint Anne’s Maternity Home in Los Angeles, CA, was pregnant. She was eight months along and had chosen adoption—but the agency was going to place the baby with anyone they pleased. The woman was distressed because she wanted the child to be raised in a Christian home.” The similarity in names—both places being Saint Anne’s—had brought the woman’s grief to the surface.

Karyn knew a Christian couple wanting to adopt, so she promised she would connect them with the lady’s niece. “It took some effort, but it worked,” Karyn continued. The baby was born one month later, and Karyn’s friends—the CC Downey bookstore manager and her husband—adopted him. At the baby’s dedication, a pregnant girl approached Karyn and requested help finding Christian adoptive parents. Karyn placed some calls and found a family for that little

In Boise, Nora’s birth father Logan Potts and his mom Genny Wilson, holding Nora, enjoy the baby along with Blair, front, and Genny’s other granddaughter, Elliot.



Photo by Debbe Murray

Pastor Ken Graves of Calvary Chapel Bangor, ME, prays for Nora at her dedication in 2008. Ken and his wife Jeanette had also adopted through House of Ruth, two years prior.

boy. When, at his dedication, another young woman asked Karyn for the same assistance, “I could tell God was doing something very holy,” Karyn said. “Everything was happening so fast that Jeff and I didn’t really understand it. But we were amazed.” By December, Karyn was assisting six young women.

Karyn felt her own life had uniquely prepared her for this ministry. “When I was 16, I placed a baby for adoption,” she said. “Everything was different then. My pregnancy was hidden from the church and community; I had to move temporarily to an unwed mother’s home where we used fake names. My daughter went into a closed adoption, and I didn’t know where she went—or if she actually was adopted.” Karyn lived with heartache for more than a decade, concealing even from Jeff what she felt was a shameful secret. She covertly bought a birthday card each year and often baked her absent daughter a birthday cake, pretending toward her husband and other daughters that it was an

ordinary dessert. “I never stopped praying for my daughter,” Karyn added.

Through feeling the turbulence unwed mothers can face, she gained vision for serving them well. “When House of Ruth started,” Karyn continued, “I saw that God was taking me back to my place of deepest pain and redeeming it.” When Karyn’s daughter was 17—several years after House of Ruth’s founding—the two finally met. “God brought me full circle,” Karyn said. “But I had to be willing to return to that place of pain and expose it to His light. Now, He allows me to help other girls so they won’t have to endure what I did.”

A Son of Old Age

In their 40s and 50s when they adopted, Pastor Ken Graves of CC Bangor, ME, jokingly refers to his and Jeanette’s son Ben as “the son of our old age.” Prior to Ben’s adoption in 2006, “We had been through 12 years of miscarriages and failed adoptions,” Ken said.

Their only child, besides Jeanette’s grown son from a previous marriage, was a daughter born in 1994. Then the couple had lost two pregnancies and experienced two failed adoptions, one of a Kenyan orphan they had already met. “Loss is the chance you take when you love,” Ken said. “If you love, you’re bound to hurt; if you don’t hurt, it’s because you don’t love.” Having sadly concluded that they would have no more children, “Jeanette even got a lapdog,” Ken commented. “I was watching good mothering wasted on that canine.”

Alone one night in a hotel after speaking at a men’s conference on fathering, “I had a conversation with God,” Ken said. “I asked Him, ‘Out of all the guys on earth, why did You not give me a son? I’ve spoken to men all over the country about fathering sons. Why didn’t You give me one?’” he prayed. “What happened next,” continued Ken, “doesn’t happen to me every day. But in that moment, God spoke to me clearly.” Ken felt the Lord told him to ask Him for a son. “Really?” Ken responded. “Okay, I will. Will You give me a son?”

At CC Bangor six days later, a couple requested an appointment with Ken and Jeanette. “They are House of Ruth counselors,” Ken said. “All day my wife was guessing what they wanted to talk about”—he felt certain he knew. At the evening meeting,

the couple shared that a young lady they were counseling had prayerfully concluded the Graves should raise her son. Ken later stated, “If I had said yes, Jeanette would have submitted. That’s the kind of woman she is.” Choosing, however, to trust God to speak to her directly, Ken was noncommittal. On their drive home, Jeanette verbally processed the enormity of the request and the sacrifices involved. In her early 50s, she wasn’t sure she had the energy or the back strength for child rearing. But the next morning after Jeanette’s time with God, “She emerged and said yes,” Ken recalled. “She knew it was God.”

Their son Ben is now four. “This is a great season of life to be parenting,” Ken commented. “We’ve mellowed with age. The amazing thing is my wife—she’s been parenting for 34 years now. Her willingness to take this on joyfully is incredible. We’ve embraced the Deuteronomy 6:6-7 concept of teaching him along the way in everything we do. ... We can’t imagine life without him.”

A Child of Promise

Charlie Marquez was enthused when Greek and Hebrew scholar Justin Alfred guest-taught at CC Downey in 2002. “I learn so much from Justin,” Charlie later told his wife, Julie. “I wish I could be around him more.”

Charlie and Julie had been married for 12 years and had one son. One day while nap-



Ken and Jeanette care for their son Ben. Photo by Jacob Harman

House of Ruth



Five-year-old Zion Marquez and birth-grandfather Justin Alfred play with toy soldiers at the Alfreds' home in Murrieta, CA. Charlie and Julie Marquez, who adopted Zion in 2005, first met Bible scholar Justin when he taught at CC Downey in 2002.

Photo by Geraldine Wilkins



Justin tickles grandson Zion.

Photo by Geraldine Wilkins

four cancer three months prior, encouraged Julie to trust God in spite of her confusion. "Mom said, 'Julie, God spoke to you—hang on to that,'" Julie recalled. "The circumstances don't matter. Believe God, and you will see His glory."

House of Ruth

Four days later, Ashley told her parents God was directing her to let Charlie and Julie adopt the baby. Ashley called Julie, and the Marquezs picked up Zion that afternoon. Ashley's mom Janie remembered, "Ashley held up really well when they took him. But that night was indescribable—watching her in such pain without her baby. She said later that giving him up was the hardest thing she had ever done. But she did it for his good, in obedience to God. And it was best."

ping with 1-year-old Ethan, Julie woke up praying. "Lord, if you ever give me another son, I'll name him Zion," she said—then, *That's weird*, she thought. *Naming a child in your sleep?* When Charlie arrived home, Julie told him about the incident. Having obtained Ethan using infertility treatments and having lost his twin during the pregnancy, the couple wasn't sure they felt ready to try again. Puzzled, they committed the matter to prayer. For the next several months, Julie recalled, "Every time I opened Scripture, I saw the word Zion. Then one night, Karyn Johnson gave me a note. She said, 'Sorry, the card is random—it's all I had around.'" Julie opened the envelope and read, "May the LORD bless you from Zion" Psalm 128:5a.

Just over one year later, Ashley died. She was pushed out of a moving vehicle by the baby's birth father. When Ashley's two oldest sisters, who had never seen Zion, flew to California for the funeral, they spent much time with the Marquezs. Janie said, "Having Zion around during that time was an incredible solace for our family. To see Ashley's face in that little boy! Our families were joined at that point—it was like we were real family. We all felt it."

Today, 5-year-old Zion Marquez frequently sees his birth grandparents. The Alfreds and Marquezs spend most holidays with each other; in 2010, they celebrated Thanksgiving and both sons Ethan and Zion's birthdays together. "I can't describe how much that means," Janie said. "God gave us this couple who loves Jesus first, loves Zion as their own, and allows us to be part of their lives. That, amidst the heartbreak of losing Ashley, I view as God's redemptive blessing."

Julie's mom passed away one month after the adoption. "We were so close," Julie said. "She was my best friend. But it's amazing how God works—because now Janie is like a mom to me. Out of all that pain, God is victorious. Even in all of our despair, not knowing what was around the corner, He had this amazing plan. You see His fingerprints everywhere."

When a medical attempt at pregnancy failed in 2004, "We were confused," recalled Charlie. "But we were sure we had heard from the Lord. We knew He would come through." Karyn soon told Julie about a family with five daughters. The 17-year-old was pregnant, and her name was Ashley Alfred—daughter of Justin Alfred, the Bible scholar. "Would you and Charlie consider adopting Ashley's baby?" Karyn asked. Julie inquired whether it was a boy; Karyn didn't know. "But I knew," Julie said. When the families met, "I looked just like one of their daughters," Julie continued. "And Ashley and I totally clicked. We loved each other." Both families completed adoption paperwork.

When the baby was born in 2005, the birth father unexpectedly appeared at the hospital and used intimidation to persuade Ashley to keep the little boy. Julie and Charlie gently conceded, affirming that the decision was theirs. Julie remembered, "I held him, and we left without Zion." Days later Julie's mom, who had been diagnosed with stage



Charlie views Zion as a child of promise from God. Some say the two look alike.

Photo by Geraldine Wilkins



Julie Marquez, left, and Janie Alfred enjoy a close friendship.

Photo by Geraldine Wilkins



The Marquez family, including Charlie, center back, 10-year-old Ethan, center, and Zion, spend most holidays with Justin and wife Janie, left.

Photo by Geraldine Wilkins

House of Ruth
www.ccdowney.com
heart4baby@calvarydowney.org
 562-803-1477