



## The Patriot-News

### Families help us overcome anything

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**BY ANNE MCGRAW REEVES**

**For The Patriot-News**

Sitting around the "adult" table at Thanksgiving dinner last week, my family conducted an annual ritual of saying what we were most thankful for and why.

I can't remember when the tradition started, but I think it began as an effort to keep the compulsive cleaners seated for a few more minutes before they disappeared to attack those massive mounds of dishes.

Thanksgiving is one of the few times my large family can get together. This year four of my five siblings came with their families; we had 18 people from Phoenix, New York City, York and Richmond, Va.

As with many families, 2008 hasn't been easy for us. We've experienced job loss, divorce and illness. The "most thankful" conversation was much shorter than usual. Mix the personal misfortunes with a steady stream of bad national and international news, and you have a recipe for indigestion fueled by more than just too much turkey and taters.

But despite the sadness and fear, I know each of us was feeling thankful we were together, side by side. We knew that whatever happened, we would always have each other.

I believe it all comes down to family. If you have family, anything is bearable, anything is possible.

Our family is so very lucky. But sadly, many others are not. Families are broken or breaking; thousands of children are left without the parents and siblings who make their lives whole.

The Porch Light Project is hoping to change that. An initiative of the Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, where I am a volunteer board member, the project aims to help children removed from their families after reports of abuse, neglect or abandonment.

At any given time, 20,000 children are living in Pennsylvania's foster-care system. Almost half are teens.

According to Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, the median length of time children remain in the state's foster care system is 16 months. On average, it takes 31 months for a child to be adopted in Pennsylvania; only 2,000 were adopted in the last year.

More than 30 percent of children who spend between 12 and 24 months in foster care live in three or more different homes. Additionally, 30 percent of children who return home will re-enter foster care within a year.

The statistics are sobering. The human implications are wrenching. Imagine what a child must feel, being the kid without a family. Imagine their thoughts as they go to bed at night, in a home that feels like a strange place -- knowing they might be moved again at a moment's notice.

On one hand, it's a blessing that displaced children have a place to go at all. Foster parents provide a life-saving service. But it's heartbreaking to see kids spending so much of their young lives without any kind of permanence.

I can't imagine constantly living with that feeling of limbo, instability, insecurity. And I'm sure that no matter how wonderful foster families are, all children wish for "real" families of their own.

The challenge is massive. Reform will involve local and state agencies, the courts and the Legislature. And

it should start even before children are yanked from their homes.

We need to help strengthen families with counseling, substance-abuse treatment and housing assistance. The trickle-down effect from the lack of family support services is drowning our kids.

The Porch Light Project seeks to assure a "forever family for every child, a home where the porch light is always left on to guide and welcome a child home." I realize the lousy economy has tightened the budgets of every state program. But it's important we work to preserve our families. Without a strong family, everything else crumbles. Without family, nothing else matters.

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#### **FAMILY LIFE**

The Porch Light Project aims to help children removed from their families after reports of abuse, neglect or abandonment. On the Web: [papartnerships.org/porchlight2](http://papartnerships.org/porchlight2)

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