

Foster care turned into life's calling

Parkville woman has cared for 150 children

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By Lauren Taylor

For Kira Sekulow, of Parkville, the path to foster parenthood began in the second grade.

"I have always wanted to be a foster parent. When I was in the second grade, we had to write what we wanted to be when we grew up, and I wrote 'foster parent,' " Sekulow said, adding that she really had no idea what a foster parent was then or what they did.

Not long after graduating college, she saw an article about how desperate the city was for foster parents.

"I thought there's no way I'd qualify. We didn't own a home, we weren't married," Sekulow said. "But I called, and it changed my life."

More than 150 babies have been cared for by Parkville resident Kira Sekulow, including the two young boys she and her husband adopted. She has a photograph of every baby she cared for, labeled with each one's name and date she had them.

But it was Nigel, who was born with Down syndrome and a heart defect, who tugged most at her heart.

"He had a pretty devastating heart defect that brought on other problems. He was 15 months old when he died," Sekulow said.

To honor Nigel's memory, Sekulow and her husband, Jim Keim, established a fund for young adults aging out of the foster care system at The Arc of Baltimore.

'A memorial to our baby'

"We wanted to do something as a memorial to our baby that died, and we wanted to do something to give back," Sekulow said.

At a special ceremony each of the past seven years, Sekulow and Keim have given each new "graduate" a certificate with Nigel's photo on it and \$100. Most of the money comes from friends and family who knew Nigel.

"They usually don't have family to help them get their own little things," Sekulow said.



A fund for children who age out of foster care was set up by Kira Sekulow in memory of Nigel Robinson, whose picture she is holding.

"These kids have their foster families, but sometimes they've been shuffled so much."

Once one of The Arc's foster children reaches 14, his or her school begins planning for the transition into the world of work and greater independence.

When the child reaches 19, The Arc looks at other agencies for them to move outside the foster care system.

Eight young adults aged out of the system this year, said Kate McGuire, director of advancement for The Arc of Baltimore.

Sekulow's gift has become a tradition. "It's something special and helps them mark the occasion," McGuire said.

"Nigel made a lasting mark on her, and he's now making a lasting mark on The Arc and having a legacy," she added.

Children with disabilities

The Arc of Baltimore's foster care program includes treatment and focuses on children with disabilities who need additional support, said Joseph Anastasio, assistant executive director for The Arc's Family and Children Division.

The Arc licenses and trains foster parents, who undergo reference and criminal background checks.

With an average of 100 children in its foster care program, "we're looking for people committed long term to children," Anastasio said.

Sekulow herself cares for medically fragile babies in emergency situations, where she may only care for them overnight.

She even switched from the city's foster care system to The Arc of Baltimore's foster care program so she could specialize.

"They always try to find a long-term placement, but if they can't find anybody who's available, they'll call me to keep the baby overnight or if they have to remove them overnight," Sekulow said.

When she picks up a baby at the hospital, Sekulow receives whatever medical training is needed, whether it involves an oxygen tank, feeding tube or heart monitor.

"The longer I had them, the harder it was" to give them up, Sekulow said.

One such baby brought big changes for Sekulow and Keim. After they cared for the baby through the summer and fall, someone adopted him.

"We had him for six months so that was really, really hard," Sekulow said of the boy, who's now 9.

Because of him, they decided to take in a baby long term with the aim of adopting him.

Corey, now 8, was the first they adopted. Then came Nigel.

"After Nigel, we didn't take in any. It took awhile to get over that," Sekulow said.

Since then, Sekulow and Keim have adopted Anthony, now 5, and recently have started taking in babies again, which the two boys love.

"They're always begging us to have more babies," Sekulow said.

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