

# A Leap of Faith and Love

By: Lisbeth Tanz

It's a matter of perspective. For Colleen Riley, her life is ordinary and nothing special. But from an outsider's point-of-view, her life is anything but ordinary. Some might call it – and her – extraordinary. This is because Riley has chosen to adopt not one, but four special needs children, whom she's raising on her own.

Her path began when she was a child living with parents who believed in helping others by being foster parents. This left an indelible mark on Riley who, after moving from her parents' home, "couldn't handle the quietness." Many people would have opted to get a dog. Riley became a foster parent for 18 years. Her foster parent journey began with teenagers. Unfortunately, many of the girls brought babies with them, often with special needs including drug addiction. Eventually, she specialized in youngsters, often having five children less than one year old in her care at a time.

Whether she was fostering teenagers or babies, Riley always saw the positive. "I saw the changes these kids were making in their lives. They changed my life. I think I really learned to love at a different level," she said. Riley finally reached a place in life where she felt adopting would be the better option for her and some of the kids she was fostering. Being experienced with special needs, she chose children from her own foster pool that she felt might have the least chance of adoption elsewhere.

Her four children range in ages from 19 to 12 and each brings his or her own set of unique health challenges:

- One has a severely compromised immune system meaning any little germ can be a life or death battle.
- One has only a brain stem, no brain.
- One is bi-polar.
- One has a seizure disorder and heart problems.

What for others may appear daunting, Riley takes in stride. She has created a workable support system through friends and her church and gives her children as many "normal" experiences as possible, especially since three of the four have terminal illnesses or disabilities. "We've done a lot together, including camping," said Riley. "I want them to experience as much of life as they can. Just

because they have these disabilities doesn't mean they can live a full life."

Caring for their healthcare needs is only one facet of her days with her kids. She also home schools them. "I get up at 4 a.m. every day. My first priority is my 17-year-old son, the one who has the brain stem. Then I do therapies with all my kids in the morning and school work in the afternoon," Riley said.

She adds, "The biggest challenges are getting and keeping the systems in place to meet my children's needs. My kids aren't stressful. It's fighting the school district that won't provide therapies or the insurance company that won't authorize a lifesaving piece of equipment. Those are the things that stress me."

As a single parent, the financial burden falls entirely upon Riley, a cranial sacral therapist. "If I had a traditional job, there's no way I could have my kids. My schedule is so flexible I can meet the needs of my clients and my children. And I can move things around if I need to take care of something for my kids," Riley stated. She's also a sought-after teacher in her field, which gives her the opportunity to travel. When she does, the kids come along. "We travel well together. It gives me the chance to show them other parts of the country and do things they might not otherwise get to do. In fact, I would bet there are many children who haven't been to many of the fun places we've been to simply because I'm willing to do the work necessary to bring my kids along," said Riley. In fact, Riley can only remember two instances in which she traveled without her kids, "I am with my kids always."

Riley admits that her life isn't for everyone, and that it can sometimes feel overwhelming. "You always have thoughts like, 'Am I doing the right thing? Am I doing enough?'" But you can't focus on those questions because then it really does become overwhelming. Raising my kids is just something I do. I don't try to analyze it or question it," she stated.

When asked what advice she would give someone thinking of following in her path, Riley said, "Make sure you have the support systems in place. Financially, you have to be able to support yourself. Have a strong faith. And be absolutely sure you want to do this, because you're impacting a child's life."

