

Rosemarie Landry's labor of love

All children have special needs, but this Chicoan's kids are really special

By MARY NUGENT
Staff Writer

Rosemarie Landry has 12 children who all have serious disabilities. All considered "unadoptable," they have received from Landry a refuge from such a label and life.

Her adopted children's disabilities range from Downe's syndrome to fetal alcohol syndrome, and include autism, paranoid schizophrenia, Golden Hars syndrome, elephantiasis, and being deaf. Some have been physically abused. Accompanying their disabilities are behavioral problems.

They range in age from 7 to 24. Besides this group, there have been others. All told, Landry has adopted 39 children with disabilities over the years.

It's overwhelming to imagine, but Landry is confident in her life raising her children. "This is the most wonderful adventure anybody could ever have," she said. "I can sing and I can act; I could be in Europe. But I love these children."

Born in England, Landry has lived in the U.S. all her adult life. She does not seek recognition or support. She moved her family to Chico a few years ago to escape the Bay Area, where she found it difficult to access services for the disabled. She also discovered more friendly and tolerant attitudes in Chico toward children with disabilities.

In Chico, the soft-spoken Landry found a house with a big yard and high fences. She feels safe and accepted.

Once married, Landry and her husband had three children, now grown. But he could not adjust to her desire to adopt children with disabilities. The marriage ended, but her family with "unadoptable" children



Fred Arn/Enterprise-Record

Rosemarie Landry (left) spends time at her Chico home after school with her children, Ekaterina (center), Nikolai (rear) and Chele (right).

"You can't be fake with special needs children. They'll see right through you. They have taught me so much. Special needs children will not trust you at first. You can't force yourself on them. Just let them figure it out on their own."

Rosemarie Landry

thrives.

Three of them, now 8, 9 and 11, came from Russian orphanages. It took her three years to make the arrangements to get them and they arrived as toddlers. Because they were never held as babies and malnourished, they reacted to life in a home with aggression and violence.

"They scratched each other's faces and broke things," she recalled. "I think they broke

seven cribs. I never even figured out how they did it. They could not stand to be held. They were skittish - like feral cats."

She has worked with them daily on behavior and socialization, and they attend special education classes. "Even now there is still a wildness about them. There is a tough core in them, but they are socialized. They have changed a lot; they can negotiate," she said.

In a nutshell

Name: Rosemarie Landry

Occupation: adoptive mother of more than 30 children with special needs.

Quote: "This is the most wonderful adventure anybody could ever have," she said. "I can sing and I can act; I could be in Europe. But I love these children."

Negotiation was a skill she fine-tuned with the Russian children, she said. "With children like this, you can't use power. I never use power on them. I never really do that anyway, but they taught me to negotiate."

The third child from Russia, a girl, has Golden Hars syndrome. Born with one eye and one ear and mentally retarded, she has had surgery in the U.S. to rebuild her face and she, too, attends special education classes.

Another child has mental disabilities because his parents abused drugs, she said.

One of her teen-agers is deaf, and Landry said he receives excellent education at Chico High School, along with two of her other teens. The elementary-aged children attend different schools.

Every day's success is the result of Landry's team work with her only paid assistant, David Garcia, who moved to Chico with her from San Jose. Chico State University students volunteer to help, and she receives assistance from Far Northern Regional Center.

"We've got the whole world right here," said Garcia. Besides Russian and American, the

children's nationalities include Chinese, Korean, Peruvian, Mexican and Filipino.

How does a single woman support a household of so many children - disabled or otherwise? "I receive Aid to Adoptive Parents. The children get Medicare and Social Security," she explained.

Garcia is quick to point out Landry does not receive vacation pay, sick days, medical insurance or any retirement. "She's not making any money. A lot of families live like this, day by day, month by month," he said. "She has to be her own lawyer, accountant, file clerk - a true domestic engineer."

He is a true supporter of Landry and her endeavor. "You find out who you are if you spend two months with a special needs child. They'll point out your faults."

Landry finds ways to save money. "We go to the Gleaners for food and we eat a lot of rice with meat and vegetables. We

eat well"

Only one thing about her big family is daunting for Landry, "I do not find the children difficult, but there is a lot of red tape for every child. It took me three years to get my children from Russia ... Once I had to take one of my children to the Social Security office 'to prove she was still retarded.' " she said, shaking her head.

"The bureaucracy is really overwhelming," added Garcia. He and Landry talk about the foster care and adoption systems, and a lot about both make them angry. "So much of it is about making money. It's not about the kids ... there are 250,000 kids in the U.S. in foster care right now and they go from foster home to foster home," said Garcia.

"That is just not good for kids. I know a lot about the political arena, and we need to work on the Legislature," said Landry.

Landry has big plans for the

community of disabled adults in Chico. It is her goal to be the founder of "Dream Village," a community of 18 houses for disabled adults. There will be a lake for fishing, trails for biking and walking, and a hall for meetings and dances.

"I have a friend looking into grants for me right now," she said. "This would be a safe place for these consumers, who are often victims of rape and violence. This would be a place with rules and supervision."

Landry knows this kind of project takes time. She's got that, and the patience to work hard until it becomes reality.

Besides this big goal, she spends her days helping each child with his or her individual needs, at home and at school.

"This takes a lot, but I wouldn't change it. I do this because I love them."

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Rosemary Landry and her non-profit, ALL ONE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL is one of our favorite projects. We have known, helped and loved her for over five years. To the 9 wonderful kids living with her now, Ralph is "Dr. Soapy" and enjoys silly songs and stories with them.

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