

# At home with the Johnsens

New family adjusts two years after couple adopts foster daughter's kids

**At a glance**

Older couples urged to adopt  
Parents say kids keep them young

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Like many adolescents, 12-year-old Maria Johnsen has a lot on her mind — the ramifications of a haircut gone awry, for one thing.

"I was over at my new enemy's house. She used to be my best friend. We got into a big fight a couple days ago about stuff — about my hair actually," the Englewood seventh-grader says.

Her brother, 8-year-old Skylar, dashes about loudly — occasionally leaping over his sister's lap. Tomassy, the family's Yorkshire terrier, is keeping up with Skylar and scurries across Maria as six caged parakeets and a cockatiel fill whatever gaps are left in the soundtrack.

For her part, Maria stoically sits on the living room floor, waiting for traffic to pass, unfazed as she quietly relays a day in the life of a preteen. Her new short hair bespeaks tomboy, and she is one, she says — but the look was unintentional.

Wires got crossed when the Englewood Middle School student recently gave instructions to a hair stylist and

she wound up with this unwanted "pixie" look. The results would not affect the fates of nations, but have had no shortage of impact on the life of a 12-year-old girl.

"I get made fun of at school. My enemy is spreading rumors about me and stuff like that," she says of the social fall-out.

As if to confirm that this isn't Maria's day, Skylar suddenly and playfully throws a blanket on his older sister — and, by no coincidence, the attention she seems to be getting at the moment.

"Why did you do that?" someone asks.

"Just 'cause," the Maddox Elementary student retorts.

The "just cause" is that Skylar clearly wants a reaction from his parents, or maybe from the newspaper reporter in the room.

So be it.

"What do you want to be when you grow up, Skylar?"

"A fireman," the boy says before shifting back into the high gear of an emergency vehicle.

**A family affair**

This may be a typical evening at the Johnsens' home now — but just a few years ago, life was beginning to slow down for Gary and Jan Johnsen, who are ages 65

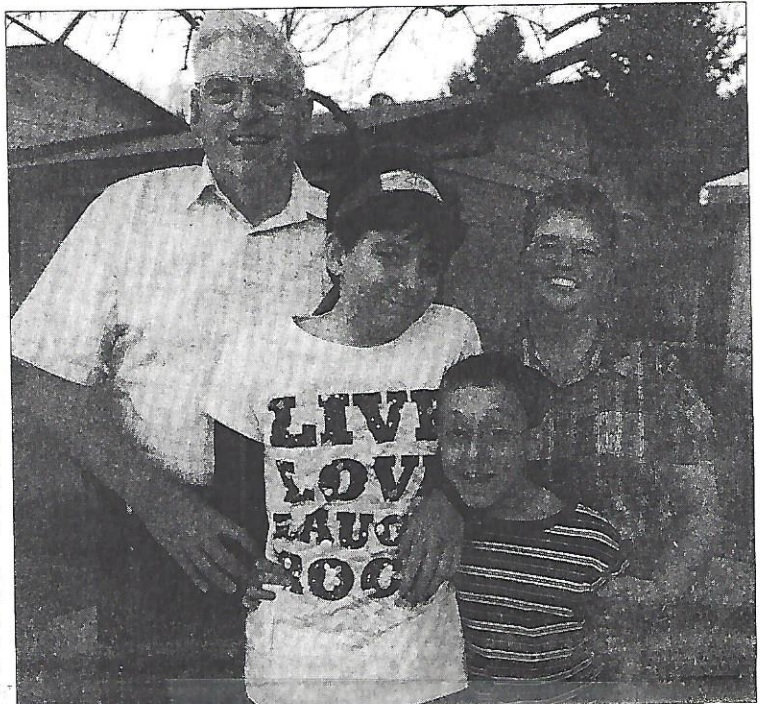


Above, Gary, Skylar, Jan and Maria Johnsen eat dinner together at their home in Englewood. The "normalcy" of family life has been a learning experience for the two siblings. At right, Gary and Jan Johnsen adopted their "foster grand children" Maria and Skylar in November 2006. Photos by Courtney Kuhlen | ckuhlen@ccnewspapers.com

and 61 respectively.

As reported by Colorado Community Newspapers in a front-page profile two years ago, the couple, who were unable to have biological children, legally adopted Maria and Skylar through Arapahoe County Human Services in November 2006. The children's birth mother had relinquished custody.

Bringing the two siblings into their home was akin to adopting grandchildren for the couple, and not just because of the Johnsens' ages. Maria and Skylar's mother



had been one of three foster children the couple had taken in over the years and the two have since effectively become grandparents to their former foster kid's offspring.

"We're closer to retirement than they are to their 18th birthday," Jan says.

It is a nontraditional situation in many ways, especially since the children's birth mother remains an occasional visitor to the household, and as Maria is quick to point out, most of her friends have parents much younger than the Johnsens.

"I kind of stay away from getting advice from them," Maria says, not altogether convincingly. "I get more ad-

vice from my best friend's mom. She understands more."

Gary smiles affably at the preteen's revelation.

"I remind her sometimes that I was 12 too," he says.

"I don't believe it. They were born this way," Maria rebuts with a sigh.

When Maria leaves the room, Jan adds her two cents.

"Maria says she goes and talks to her friends' moms. She talks to me a lot," the adoptive mother says.

For the most part, Maria and Skylar continue to call Gary and Jan "Grandpa" and "Grandma" — a constant reminder that while many of

the couple's contemporaries are sending their kids to college and welcoming in-laws, the Johnsens are dodging footballs, planning birthday parties and navigating the challenges of preteen drama.

"I would say the biggest difficulty is the fact that it's hard to keep up with them," Gary says calmly. "Skylar reminds me all the time that I'm an old guy."

Jan is quick to flip the age issue on its head.

"We always say they will either kill us or keep us young," she says. "I think they'll keep us young."

Lifestyle changes have come with the territory. Gary and Jan — a bank manager

and a nurse by trade — have had to limit their penchant for travel in recent years and it has been many months since Gary, once an avid fly fisherman, has cast his reel into a Colorado waterway.

"I wish we had grandparents," Jan says, noting that both hers and Gary's parents are no longer living. "Everyone else can say, hey mom, can you just take the kids for the day or for the weekend? We don't have grandparents to send them off to."

That is not to say the Johnsens have had any second thoughts about their decision to adopt children later in life.

"Having children as a 25-year-old, my perspective of parenting would certainly be much different than it is right now," Jan says. "At 25, I would also still be growing up."

### Modern maturity

The post-war baby boomers who came of age in the 1960s have frequently been known for defying convention. As boomers enter their 60s of another kind, no one is expecting the rebellious Pepsi Generation to approach aging and retirement quite the same way as their parents and grandparents.

What some have called the first generation to refuse to grow old has also birthed a kind of trickle-down effect as younger generations put off marriage and having children. One out of every five women worldwide is delaying having her first baby until the age of 35, a number that is rising steadily.

In the past, the upper age limits for adopting parents enforced by private agencies

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## Family

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was set by a 40-year rule of thumb. In other words, adopting parents could be no more than 40 years older than the child they wanted to adopt.

Today, that age limit is creeping up as boomers increasingly change societal perceptions about age, health, physical limitation, and life span. Many prospective older parents have been encouraged to adopt through the foster-care system and have been especially urged to consider older children or those with disabilities or past traumas.

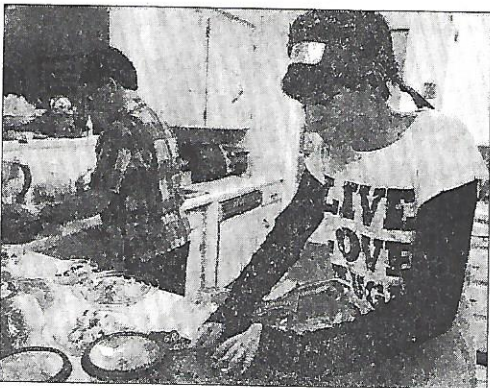
The trend is largely due to the likelihood that older parents will be able to offer emotional maturity, financial stability and stable values, not to mention more time and patience than a couple in their 20s.

"We welcome older families because sometimes they have the right experience," said Todd Hyman, a child-welfare administrator for Arapahoe County Human Services. "They're a little bit more mature. They know what to expect. An aging couple can be a good match because we have a lot of older kids who are needing homes."

Still, Hyman says, older couples need to be realistic when considering adoption of younger children.

"We want them to understand it's not as easy as it looks," he said. "If the kid is 2 years old, we say you're going to have them until they're at least 18 and maybe longer nowadays. We want to have some discussions about their health and things like that."

Arapahoe County, for example, requires older couples to have back-up plans in case the parents die or become unable to care for their underage adoptive children.



Maria helps her adoptive mother Jan Johnsen prepare dinner. Photo by Courtney Kuhlen | ckuhlen@ccnewspapers.com

through a county human-services program have generally suffered abuse or neglect and are going to be at least somewhat challenging to adoptive parents, even in a best-case scenario, according to Hyman.

"Our kids have been through a lot," he said. "They might have had instability and not a lot of modeling as far as what it's like to be in a family. Or maybe they have, and it wasn't a very functional family."

### Not the Cleavers

During brief lapses in his

energy level, Skylar answers questions in brisk three-syllable bursts.

"Grandpa nice," he quickly says when quizzed about life after adoption.

Asked how he has changed over the last two years, the 8-year-old again does not miss a beat.

"I don't hit," he says.

Skylar has a speech impediment that makes communication difficult. That, coupled with some early behavior problems, including hitting in place of verbal communication, has made raising the second-grader a

challenge, though the situation has recently improved.

"We're not nearly as stressed as we used to be," Jan says. "You call him now and he'll come. He's more adaptable to listening to what he did wrong and getting corrected that way. Before, you had to physically hold him."

Three years ago, Skylar had a 25-word vocabulary and even at that rate, it was difficult to understand what he was saying. Speech therapy and special education have helped dramatically.

"He certainly has a long way to go, but now he can carry on a conversation," Gary says.

Although Maria has fared far better than her brother developmentally, she suffers from mild dyslexia and has been in counseling to help work through issues related to being neglected by her birth mother.

In many ways, Maria looks to be the typical 12-year-old girl. She wears a T-shirt that reads, "Live, Love, Laugh, Rock" as she discusses a new babysitting business that she plans to open with a friend.

Maria considers herself something of an outcast at school and often struggles to find the courage to be herself.

"I'm still having difficulty with that," she says.

But stability has made a difference. In the two years since Maria has found a permanent loving home, she has often told Gary and Jan that she wants to keep the family's Englewood home forever.

"Now that she knows for sure that this house is hers, she's not going to let anybody else have it," Gary says.

Maria and Skylar's birth mother remains an occasional presence in the children's lives, but the inconsistency and unreliability of her planned visits have been frustrating for the entire household.

The siblings talk casually about their mother's past alcohol and drug abuse and the times when they were kept in their rooms during her binges and fights with her husband and boyfriends.

The children's early and negative associations with

alcohol have occasionally surfaced in unexpected ways since joining the Johnsen family.

"We were in a restaurant and had ordered wine," Jan says. "It was like panic on Maria's face that we were going to be drinking."

"She asked us if we were going to get drunk," Gary adds.

The last two years have clearly been a period of adjustment and growth for everyone in the Johnsen household. And while no one will mistake this family for the stuff of an idyllic 1950s sitcom, the children know they finally have a safe and loving home, complete with a huge front yard that will one day offer Skylar plenty of mowing opportunities.

As Maria sits on the floor in front of Jan's extensive collection of ceramic penguins, the preteen reflects soberly on family life after permanent adoption.

"Do you think you have a pretty normal life now, Maria?"

She barely pauses. "Nothing's ever normal," Maria says.