

Farm Wife Opens Heart to Those in Need

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MEYERSTOWN — "Let love shine through in everything you do," reads the script on a bright red Valentine heart decorating Grace Ziegler's kitchen refrigerator.

That message condenses in a nutshell the life of this Lebanon County dairy farm wife and mother, whose love has brightened the lives of countless friends and strangers in need of a helping hand.

As a teenager, growing up in a foster home after her father's death and mother's chronic illness, Grace felt her life being directed toward serving the church, perhaps as a foreign missionary.

Then, through the ecumenical Christian Endeavor youth program, she met Victor, son of an area dairy farm family. Thirty-one years ago, they married and became partners in the family farm.

"So, that door closed," says Grace.

Two years after their marriage, a plea went out from the Neffsville Church of the Brethren home for families to open their homes and hearts to foster children.

With the special empathy of having been a foster child herself, Grace felt a need to respond to the church's call. The first of numerous foster children that would join the Ziegler family over the years arrived.

Grace had found that the door to mission work opened into her own farmhouse. Eventually, paths from all directions of need would end there.

"I wasn't active as a young mother, outside of our home, but I was active here at home," emphasizes Grace, who steadfastly believes that, in as much as is possible, a mother should be close to her children when they are small.

Like so many farm families, the Ziegler brood milked, gathered and packed eggs, and took picnics to the hay field together. Always, the foster children blended right into the household, sharing the same fun and helping with the same chores.

Although occasionally she would momentarily wonder if she really needed one more person in the house, that biblical admonishment

to "love one another" would push aside any fleeting doubts.

"What would happen if I were the one in need?" Grace would ask herself.

The capacious 20 rooms of the farmhouse were more than the Ziegler family really needed for their own living space. Responding to a different kind of plea from the community, the Zieglers became the first family in the area to open their home to foster care for the elderly, through Cedar Haven, the county's facility for the aged.

For three years prior to the Ziegler's building their new farm home, eight women and one man joined the household. All were capable of caring for their own personal needs, but unable to handle heavier responsibilities of living alone, such as cleaning or laundry.

Two years after Grace and Victor moved into the new stone rancher home, in 1970, another new need came knocking at the door.

Ugandan Ruler Idi Amin, ousting Asians from his African country in a reign of terror, sent refugees seeking haven in safer parts of the world.

Young Samsudin Pabani, his father, mother and sister arrived in Lebanon County, the first of fifteen-to-date-refugee families that the Ziegler's have sponsored.

Pabani's father, originally from India, had been a wealthy merchant in Uganda. The family found haven in a house provided by the Zieglers, assisted by church friends who pitched in to help clean, provide furniture, and some extra funds to help the Pabanis start over in a new country.

After getting "Sam" and his family settled, Victor contacted the Richland Shoe Factory and located a job for the 17-year-old refugee. After Sam had worked only three days, the foreman called Victor, asking if he could find another six like his new hard-working employee.

"Sam's been like a son to us," says Grace of the young man who struggled with a new culture, a new job, then later lost both his parents, and at times felt very much alone.

But with the continued support, counseling and love of the Zieglers, Sam went on to study at Millersville, became a naturalized citizen, married and is now em-

ployed at the Wilbur Chocolate Factory. The Zieglers are still his "family" and he stops by and calls frequently.

At Christmas, the spacious farm home became a sort of world-wide community, with refugee families returning to share the season with their sponsors.

Nine of the 15 families lived in the Ziegler home when they first arrived in a beautifully-furnished apartment in the basement, decorated by Grace who enjoys dabbling in interior design. Most of the families still stay in close contact, although they've settled from Harrisburg to Easton, with one Cambodian family established in Virginia, living near friends from their homeland.

"Just because we sponsored them, we don't ever want them to feel tied here or forced to stay close. It's amazing how they locate other refugee friends who've settled in this country," Grace adds. Most of the families they've sponsored have fled Vietnam.

Currently living in the house nearby in Weavertown are Vietnam refugees Vu Ngoc Hai, his wife, Vu Thi Lahn, and their four children.

Hai and his two sons, now 9 and 11, fled Vietnam in 1981. He split the family, feeling that a group of six would never escape the country, and with the "boat people" was able to cross the pirate-infested waters to safety.

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"Let love shine through in all you do" is the message of the Valentine reminder on Grace Zeigler's kitchen refrigerator.

Homestead Notes



Eagerly picking up words in their new English language, Hoa and Ha spend some time while visiting the Zeiglers practicing with pen and paper.



Four-year-old Ha helps Grace rearrange a grapevine wreath she designed to decorate the farm home's door which has opened to so many, lonely and seeking freedom.



Vi Thi Lahn and her daughters Hao, left, and Ha, have reason to smile after escaping Vietnam in December to join the rest of their family in Lebanon County. They are making a new life under the sponsorship of the Richland Church of the Brethren, and committee chairman, farm wife Grace Zeigler.