

Children from ‘every tribe, Tongue, people and nation’...

This is what Zania Clark-Roberts saw in her mind’s eye when she visited Chapel Hill Farm for the first time. there were children and young people from all ethnic backgrounds and creeds covering the hillside of this picturesque but run-down farm set in eight and a half acres of beautiful Cornish countryside. The picture left a lasting impression on Zania, and having spent months scouring the local area for a suitable property to buy, she and her husband Peter knew they had found the home they had been searching for.

As the name implies, there has been a longstanding religious association with the farm. Located just above the farmhouse is an example of one of the earliest Wesleyan Chapels built in Cornwall. When Peter and Zania Bought the farm in 1993 the chapel was Derelict, but they nevertheless embraced the God-given vision to create a quality holiday/respite facility for families, foster carers, children with special needs and disabilities, as well as agencies and youth groups, and it has now been transformed into luxury accommodation that finally opened its doors for bookings this summer.

In case you were wondering, Caring hasn’t changed into a holiday brochure (though Peter and Zania would undoubtedly welcome any enquiries). Rather, this is the ‘extraordinary’ story promised in the last edition of Caring that follows the lives of two dedicated foster-carers who linked up with Family Matters Fostering through an article about the agency that appeared in this magazine in 2000.

The fact that Peter and Zania were actually able to purchase Chapel Hill Farm is a miracle in itself. The vendor dropped the asking price by £25,000 and there were many touch-and-go moments when they nearly bought a

different property, and when the purchase of the farm nearly fell through. However, in 1993 they moved in and were accepted as foster carers by the local authority two years later. Since 1995 Peter and Zania have fostered many children for varying amounts of time but since starting they estimate that over fifty-eight children have passed through their doors.

Although grateful for the experience with the local authority, Peter and Zania’s real desire was to set up a local Christian-based foster agency, so when they read the article about Family Matters in Caring magazine (Winter 2000) they felt very strongly that this was an answer to her prayer.

Eleanor Meade, joint Director of Family Matters with her husband Antony, was cautious at first and even tried to put them off, but the Clark-Roberts persistence was rewarded because when they eventually met Eleanor, there was an immediate and mutual connection between them. Having discussed where they should go with their ideas, Eleanor wisely decided not to make it too easy for Peter and Zania because, for the sake of the children they would foster, she wanted to be sure they were totally committed to the cause and that they were responding to God’s leading and direction. Eleanor’s parting words to Peter and Zania after their first meeting were, ‘I don’t know if this is right and so I’m giving you a

challenge'. Eleanor told them that if their plans were to go ahead they would ideally need to find a Christian Social Worker who shared their vision and would work for Family Matters part-time. This was a tall order and Peter was dubious at first. Zania however, knew almost instantaneously whom she would ask. She was not put off either when Audrey initially said 'no' to the request. So confident was she, which she told Audrey she would have no peace until she agreed to work for them! It wasn't long after this conversation that Audrey got back in touch with Zania saying that after losing a lot of sleep, she'd changed her mind! Audrey then even refused Cornwall Social Services' offer to double her salary if she stayed with them. It took approximately a year to set up this branch of Family Matters in the South West, and further financial problems arose because, with no suitable children to place, Peter and Zania received no income. Although Eleanor and Antony paid them a retainer because of their commitment to the vision, Peter and Zania were relieved when in the summer of 2002, they looked after four children as holiday placements. They have been fostering children regularly since.

As well as continuing as foster carers, Peter and Zania are now senior carers providing supervision and support for three other couples who foster under the Family Matters umbrella.

As far as Peter and Zania's own children are concerned, in general things have worked reasonably well, but there have been some adjustments and conflicts that Peter and Zania have had to work through. Some of these conflicts have arisen over, for example, one lad they fostered who was unsure about his sexuality and liked to cross-dress. Both Peter and Zania, and Eleanor acknowledge the sensitivity surrounding these kind of issues from a Christian perspective, but there was no doubt in their minds that on the basis of their Christian beliefs, the most important thing for this young man to experience was unconditional love and acceptance, something he had been deprived of throughout his childhood. They also worked on the premise that any change would come about through

love and wisdom in the way they handled the situation. They didn't worry how he dressed around the house but encouraged him to dress in a less flamboyant way when he was out so that he wouldn't put himself at risk by attracting unwarranted attention. This involved shopping trips where Zania helped him choose clothes that satisfied his personal tastes but didn't provoke unwelcome from other people.

Peter and Zania are open about their Christian faith with those they look after and many decide of their own accord to accompany Peter and Zania to the Elim church they attend, who are very supportive and understanding of the work Peter and Zania do.

Peter is unequivocal in his belief that it is vitally important to recognise the potential in each child rather than focussing on their problems. Both Peter and Zania make it a priority to encourage the children they care for to set realistic goals and then help them to reach their potential whatever that might be. Zania quite pointedly said, 'We want these children to have a good experience of childhood because so many have been forced to grow up before their time'

From 1993 to this year the chapel remained derelict, not because Peter and Zania had abandoned their vision, but they thought they might have taken a wrong turn. In addition they had no money to finance the project and were sinking into ever-increasing debt. They had applied for a government grant but had been turned down. Eventually they felt they had no option but to put it on the market for sale. Zania says 'Eleanor and Anthony were horrified when they learned we were selling and letting 'the vision' die. They even offered to cash in their pension to buy the chapel so that the project could go ahead'. Peter and Zania took the chapel off the market but two years later, due to delays in Antony and Eleanor being able to redeem their pension monies, they were still in the same position, chapel unsold and debts mounting. Despite Antony and Eleanor's disappointment Peter and Zania decided to call a halt to their proposed purchase, but almost immediately the Cornwall Tourist Board contacted them to say they received a further grant from the EEC to fund diversity projects and they encouraged Peter and Zania to submit a business plan to renovate the chapel. To cut a long story short, they received the money and

the rest is history. Looking back, even though Eleanor and Antony's offer wasn't ultimately taken up, the sale of the chapel was halted, and at the right time, Peter and Zania were able to see their original vision set in motion. They would be the first to acknowledge that God's timing is perfect and many lessons have been learnt along the way, particularly concerning God's faithfulness and his ability to bring his Purposes to pass. The exciting thing is that this is only the beginning.