

‘This is a kid, not a cause’: Millersville parishioners host Colombian orphan

CROFTON – The home of Matt and Melanie Brady sported labels – in both English and Spanish – describing everyday objects.

The labels were placed by their children, Tanner, 12, Emma, 9, and Ryan, 6, ahead of the arrival of Esteban, a 13-year-old orphan from Colombia. (The family asked that the Catholic Review not use Esteban’s last name.)

The Bradys are the young orphan’s American hosts through the Kidsave Summer Miracles program, which places Colombian orphans ages 11-14 with host families in the United States who advocate for their adoption.

For five weeks, until Esteban’s departure Aug. 2, the family of five is operating as a family of six.

Leaning against the wall beside the family’s *mesa de comedor* (dining room table), a sign reads “Bienvenido Esteban,” a reminder for Melanie of the teenager’s arrival June 28, when host families greeted him and other children at Dulles International Airport.

“The whole room erupted in applause for them,” said Melanie, who recalled tearing up at that moment, when she pondered who the children were and what they had been through.

A similar welcome sign hangs at their parish, Our Lady of the Fields in Millersville.

Monsignor Jay O’Connor, pastor, told the Bradys that Esteban was not just their guest, but also a guest of the parish. He invited them to speak one weekend before Masses, when they introduced Esteban and spoke about Kidsave.

“The Bradys are a family that practices its faith in all dimensions,” Monsignor

O'Connor said. "This is a great work of missionary discipleship, hospitality and evangelization. It is one of many good works that Our Lady of the Fields parish encourages and supports.

"I also see it as a pro-life activity that lifts the parish's horizon beyond itself."

The children

According to Kidsave, its Summer Miracles program works exclusively with Colombia, because its government is dedicated to finding homes for the children. Of the more than 1,750 children who have come through the program, 80 percent have found adoptive families.

Kidsave sponsors other domestic and international initiatives, all focused on finding homes for older children.

"They're beyond the infant-toddler years," Matt said. "That is what, typically, (adoptive) families are looking for."

The Summer Miracles program is one of the children's last chances to find a family, he said.

For the summer of 2018, Kidsave has 50 children staying with host families throughout the country, including in Summer Miracles communities in and around Chicago; Des Moines, Iowa; Los Angeles; Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn.; San Francisco; the tri-state region of New Jersey, New York and Connecticut; and southern Florida.

Their DC Metro (Washington, D.C.; Maryland; and Virginia) community, which is hosting 12 children, meets weekly for events that included a hike, arts and crafts, pizza and cookie making and a scavenger hunt. The final event on July 28, held the final weekend the children are in the U.S., is themed "The Olympics."

The weekly gatherings provide a chance for the children to be with the other participants, and for the host families to do the same. They also serve as times for potential adoptive families to meet the children. Some, the Bradys said, have come specifically to see Esteban.

Prospective families contact host families of particular children to spend more time with them. The Bradys have lunched, bowled and explored Six Flags with potential adopters.

“How much would these kids just explode and thrive if they were able to be in a stable loving home environment?” Matt said. “Because they’re amazing *without* having that.”

Catholic Charities of Baltimore collaborates, pro bono, with Kidsave to prepare host families by providing an abbreviated version of a home study and questionnaire, and processing other requirements such as a brief medical history and a physical exam. This year, the Bradys were one of three families they assisted.

If a family decides to pursue an adoption, Catholic Charities may serve as the agency that aids in the process, if the prospective family lives in Maryland (corresponding international adoption fees apply).

“(The program) gives these children an opportunity to have a family,” said Cheryl Bruns, a program supervisor in international adoption with Catholic Charities of Baltimore who helped prepare the Bradys for hosting. “These kids get the opportunity to come to America and meet with many different families who are interested in adopting older children.”

Bruns said that a family’s interest in adopting an older child can be based on a variety of reasons, including the prospective parents’ ages, or the ages of their children.

“One thing that people need to recognize is that this is not a shortcut to adoption,” Matt said.

“They all leave on Aug. 2 no matter what,” Melanie said of the Colombian children. “There’s a two-week period where everybody just kind of relaxes and goes back to life. There’s no talk of anything.”

“After two weeks, families who are interested can submit a formal letter of intent and interest, and from that point Kidsave steps back and the (adoption) agency takes over.”

Hosting

Kidsave has helped the Brady children to get to know some of the people who are the recipients of their prayers.

“We’re constantly praying for those in need,” Melanie said. “But for them to come face-to-face with a group of kids that they really have grown to love, knowing that these are some of those people that we’ve talked about in the past ... I’m hoping it gives them more of a heart for serving people in need.”

Esteban has fostered a “big brother” role with the younger Brady children.

“Esteban can’t communicate with any of the kids,” Melanie said. “They don’t have conversations, because he’s all Spanish and they’re all English.”

She said that a lot of their communication relies on gesturing and play without words.

“But it’s amazing,” Matt added, “how they bridge that communication gap.”

Matt relies on Google Translate on his phone to have conversations with Esteban. Melanie is better equipped, as she taught Spanish at Archbishop Spalding High School in Severn for three years before Tanner was born.

“Having him (Esteban) here really brings it back,” said Melanie, who tries to incorporate Spanish into the homeschooling curriculum she follows with her three children. “What a great opportunity for us to be exposed to this language and culture.”

A kitchen calendar outlines the family’s schedule during Esteban’s time here.

“He’s done really well for coming from such a different environment in so many different ways,” Melanie said.

Esteban said the biggest adjustment to life in the United States is the food; his favorite is hamburgers.

He loved going to Six Flags, but shared that that he had to hold tight as he felt his

stomach drop on the big rollercoasters. He also enjoyed studying the different buildings, both small and large.

In addition to facilitating outings with potential adoptive families, the Bradys' main mission while Esteban is in the U.S. is to advocate for his adoption. They send email blasts, take photos, post on social media and write blogs for the Kidsave website.

As Esteban's departure date approached, Matt and Melanie deal with mixed emotions.

After Esteban returns to Colombia, the Bradys will have no contact with him. Melanie said that they would love to stay in touch with him, but they understand the Kidsave policy, which ensures that the children are not confused between their host family and a potential adoptive family.

"Our hope would be, in an ideal situation, that whoever does end up adopting him ... is local and would be open to allowing us to continue to be a part of his life," Matt said. "That would be really awesome."

Matt and Melanie said that this will not be their last time hosting a child through Kidsave.

"This has been a very cool experience in putting a face to a (charitable) cause," Matt said. "This is a kid, not a cause."

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