

A New Leaf: Telling Untold Stories, Mila's Story

Written by Karah Van Kammen
Friday, 03 February 2017 12:40 -



by Candy Thompson

Sometimes a family follows from a well-set plan. Find your soulmate, get married, decide together on the number of kids you will have, plan your expenses, pick out all your children's names in advance, and, perhaps even buy a home to raise them.

Trouble is most of us don't work that way. Mila Carrancho and her husband, Christopher, were just like the majority of Valley residents: their imagination of a family was quite different from the reality of their lives and circumstances. But what they substituted for a spreadsheet of milestones was total love, devotion and sense of purpose that resulted in their fostering twenty-six children during the last seven years, many of them through A New Leaf's foster care program.

"When Christopher and I married we planned on having two biological children and two adopted children," said Mila. "I saw the love in the lives of my cousins, many of whom were adopted. And I yearned to bring that same love into our own family."

Unable to have children herself, even when she tried fertility treatment, Mila began to immerse herself in learning about adoption services. She quickly learned that adopting a child internationally was very expensive and cost-prohibitive. "It's obscene how much it costs to adopt a child from another country," said Mila.

So she filed for a license to adopt locally. After a year of waiting, still there was no progress. The bedroom she and Christopher decorated for their new child was empty, and she began filling it with apprehension and fear of the unknown.

She could not wait any longer. So she gave up the thought of adoption for the time being and decided to apply for a license to take care of children within the custody of Arizona's Department of Child Safety, a temporary solution but one that could end up with the child leaving them to go back to the child's family of origin. She tried not to picture the future, but only think of today. So she filled out the paperwork, and within a week Mila and Christopher received two siblings for placement.

These young toddlers fit in perfectly. "We were beyond thrilled," exclaimed Mila. "It was such an exciting time for our family." But the children's grandmother was unhappy with the arrangement because Mila and her husband did not share the children's faith. The grandmother would not accept the placement, and soon their "bundles of joy" were pulled away to live with the grandmother.

"We were just devastated," said Mila. "But we decided we were not going to let ignorance keep us from our goals – and our happiness. Certainly, you can't blame the children for these situations."

So they were back to square one. But the needs of Arizona's Department of Child Safety are so great that within two days, they were given another child. Then, another five children came and left, each time a wrenching goodbye for the parents.

But their seventh placement proved to be their lucky break. Logan was a newborn with brightness in his eyes, affection, and curiosity about things," said Mila. Children who are in child protective services want so badly to hold on, she said. They want care and attention. "Sometimes they are so afraid and they struggle with accepting their newfound home." Their anticipation of loss is palpable, especially after being placed in multiple homes.

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But this was a story that would carry on – as Logan became eligible for adoption, and at 17 months became a part of the Carrancho's forever family. Then came Gigi who was placement number 14 and became their second adoption. Maya (their 17th placement) and her sibling Oliver completed their family. "Our children are our biggest cheerleaders, and they have each done their part in contributing to our home," said Mila. "We are so incredibly fortunate to have these wonderful children in our family."

The parents contemplated closing their license after Maya and Oliver but didn't feel their journey was over yet. Through the last seven years, dozens of children have come through the doors of the Carrancho family. Mila says they have stayed as little as four days and for up to two years, though when the children have become eligible for adoption the Carrancho's have celebrated with tears in their eyes and grateful hearts. Mila's and Christopher's devotion to every child who has entered their home has resulted in shared memories they will treasure throughout their lives.

"My husband has been a constant support. He gets up at 3:45 am to go to work, and that allows him to help in the afternoons and evenings. It really does take the entire family coming together to solve the daily issues," she said.

Mila says it is excruciatingly painful when a child leaves their home. "You will get attached, as you should. The kids need you to get attached. We spend countless nights awake worrying every time a child reunifies, but the joy of caring for the children, and the memories that no one can erase far outweigh the heartache of saying goodbye."

Mila and Christopher are both grateful to A New Leaf's foster care staff who have helped with the licensure, adoptions, daily support and resources. "A New Leaf is such a wonderful organization," said Mila. "They have shared our high points and low points. We know they always have our backs, and that means a great deal."

If you are interested in A New Leaf's foster care services, please go to our website at TurnaNewLeaf.org for more information. And if you want to donate to the foster care program, please consider making your heartfelt gift today. You can join the Carrancho family as one dedicated family who is bringing a brighter future to Arizona's children.

Arizona Foothills Magazine and Azfoothills.com have partnered with the comprehensive, non-profit, and human service agency, A New Leaf, for an incredibly special series; one that is very near and dear to our organization's heart. "**Telling Untold Stories**" will illustrate multi-dimensional and raw stories of real men, women, and families within our communities who have been dealt a tricky hand of cards. These stories are ones of despair - ones of defeat - and, ones of fear. However, these stories become ones of faith - ones of determination - and, ones of hope.

When someone is in an abusive relationship or homeless, they often find themselves struggling to find help, not aware of the community resources available to them. A New Leaf is one of those critical resources. The agency has been a beacon of hope, supporting women and men who experience domestic violence and homelessness.

The mission of A New Leaf is Helping Families...Changing Lives. A New Leaf inspires and supports individuals and families in their journey to lifelong independence. The agency operates Autumn House, a domestic violence facility in the East Valley, as well as Faith House, a domestic violence shelter and transitional housing resource in the West Valley as well as a number of homeless shelters for those in crisis.

Last year, A New Leaf served nearly 21,943 individuals with resources, from immediate shelter, transitional housing, basic needs, job assistance, counseling and after school programs. Victims of domestic violence are able to start a new life due to the care and support of A New Leaf's staff and volunteers. Founded in 1971, A New Leaf is dedicated to making lives better and fighting against domestic violence and homelessness in our state.

For more information about A New Leaf programs including tours and how you can help, please contact 480-464-4648 or visit us at www.TurnaNewLeaf.org.