An Orange Socks Story – Christie: Adoption

Interview by: Gerald Nebeker

Gerald: Welcome to the Orange Socks Podcast, where we are inspiring life despite a diagnosis. I am your host, Dr. Gerald Nebeker. In this episode I speak with Christie, she and her husband, in addition to their biological children, adopted 35 kids, 26 of whom have developmental disabilities, many with significant medical issues. That's right, 37 children in all. Her husband died several years ago, but this wonderful woman carries on with some help from others. She has an infectious attitude and a dry wit, I know you're going to enjoy hearing her story.

Gerald: Christie, thank you so much for taking the time to do an Orange Socks interview, I'm really honored. You have 37 children, 35 of whom are adopted. And of those, 26 have developmental disabilities. So, tell me, why did you adopt so many children?

Christie: I have no idea. I think because sometimes our lives are guided by something we are not aware of. I always knew at an early age that intended to adopt, and when I met my husband and I told him I wanted to adopt and he said he did too. Little did he know that I was talking about 35, which I really wasn't at the time, it just happened.

Gerald: 26 with developmental disabilities. Will you tell me a little bit about that, why did you focus in that area?

Christie: We didn't focus in that area, I just said our lives have been led. I picked up a Dandy Dime about 35-40 years ago, and in there someone had advertised their Down syndrome child that they wanted someone to adopt it, and being the good person that I am, I read it, and a voice said, "You're supposed to contact these people." So being as good as I am, I folded it up and threw in the bottom of the garbage can because adopting a special needs child was frightening to me. So, my best friend called and said, "I just read this article, and it's all about you, it's for you to adopt a baby." And I thought, "Dog-gone, I couldn't hide it," and so I called and the family came and they decided to keep their child, but they thought it was cruel when they were told to take their child home when they were not prepared. He asked us if he could keep our name and address, and we said yes not knowing that he would write a letter to every single hospital in Phoenix and some of the outer areas saying that there was a family that would adopt a Down syndrome baby, and that's how we started, someone called us.

Gerald: Interesting.

Christie: From the hospital.

Gerald: And how many have Down syndrome?

Christie: We have 10

Gerald: 10 have Down syndrome.

Christie: 4 have passed

Gerald: 4 have passed, so what are the other types of disabilities of your other children?

Christie: We have spina bifida, Angelman syndrome, Soto syndrome, beaten, that were abused, drug addicted babies, just every kind that has been brought to us.

Gerald: Okay, what's been some of the challenges?

Christie: Well, when they are babies the challenge is that you fall in love with them instantly, and we only take medically fragile so we have lost several of our children. That's harder than anything.

Gerald: Sure.

Christie: But at each funeral, we play a Garth Brookes song called The Dance, and that's kind of how my husband and I feel about it. The pain is horrid, but we wouldn't have missed the time with our babies for anything.

Gerald: And your husband passed away how many years ago?

Christie: It's been 9 years now.

Gerald: 9 years, has that been a little more challenging then, to you, without him there?

Christie: Oh, no, I always think about this, how wonderful that if he had to leave, he left me with 11 children. I have a reason to get up, a reason to do things, I have someone to laugh with, I certainly have people to argue with. And so, it has been a wonderful experience, I just wish he could be here to enjoy it too.

Gerald: Yeah, indeed, what have been some of the joys?

Christie: Well every day's a joy, anybody that's ever had a child that's not involved physically or mentally, when that child takes its first step, or says its first word, instantly you call every relative in your sphere. It's, "Oh, mom, he said hello or bye." And for us its 10,000 more than that, it's a miracle you see a child that they say would never live, walk and talk. We had a doctor come in one time, and he was a neurologist and he came in, he was telling the students he said, “Oh, children with cleft brain, they don’t speak and they don’t walk and they can’t do anything. They are in a wheelchair.” He was there to see Nathan, and so Nathan walked right up to him and said, “Happy birthday to you,” because that’s the most obvious song that we sing every day and he said, “Oh, it’s a Jameson, forget everything I said.”

Gerald: Isn’t that interesting.

Christie: It’s wonderful, it’s wonderful to have them, it’s a miracle.

Gerald: Yeah, indeed. One of the things that we want to do as Orange Socks, is to help facilitate adoptions. People that feel that they cannot care for a child with a disability, or certainly some don’t have the greatest of care internationally or are often put in orphanages. What advice would you give to me, say, if I wanted to adopt a child with a disability?

Christie: Well, I could tell you a story about a young lady that I met in a parking lot of a doctor’s clinic, and she was crying, and I said, “What’s the matter?” And she said, “Well, I have a daughter with Down syndrome.” And I said, “Oh, honey, don’t worry, everything is fine.” She says, “No, you don’t understand, they said that chances are almost nil that I’d be able to have another one.”

Gerald: Oh, for heavens sakes.

Christie: And I said, “I can get you one,” and I did.

Gerald: So, she was crying because she wanted another.

Christie: She wanted another special child, because once you’ve had the feeling and you’ve had them in your home, it truly is like a piece of heaven in your home. And so, once you have it, you want more.

Gerald: Isn’t that wonderful, so do you do this all by yourself?

Christie: Oh, no, I have people that help. Well, I did it by myself until we realized that my husband was terminal, and one of our children who was 12 at the time had synovial sarcoma with only a 30% chance of surviving. So, we knew that we would need additional help, so we moved up here so we’d have better hospital care because we lived in Nogales, Arizona right on the border. We then realized as he was getting sicker and sicker that I would need some assistance in bathing. We have six still in diapers, and we have had 8 G-tubes, and two of our babies at that time had G-tubes, and we had 10 on oxygen, and at that time 3 in wheelchairs. And so, I obviously needed help so we could actually get out and do things. So, our doctor recommended a nursing facility that comes into the home and does daily care. So, this wonderful young lady came into our home and she bathes now 6 in the morning and I do the other 5, and she curls their hair and brushes their teeth. My children may have difficulties, but we have no cavities, by the way, and we are very proud of that.

Gerald: I wish I could say that about me and my children.

Christie: Yes, I know, but not one has a cavity. So, she helps us and then her mother comes in three times a week for 2-4 hours at a time and she helps them because we do schooling all the time. Schooling, especially for children with Down syndrome, they have a tendency to start forgetting what they have learned, and so we are reinforcing it all the time. Out of our children, 6 of them read with Down syndrome, and they just do phenomenal things they spell better than I do.

Gerald: That's great, my youngest child has Down syndrome.

Christie: Oh really?

Gerald: And then I have a grandson with Down syndrome, so I get it. I understand that what a joy and blessing that they can be in your life. Anything else that you'd want to tell the world about your life and living with all these wonderful children that you've been able to raise? 37, my goodness, and so many with developmental disabilities. Anything else that you want to tell the world?

Christie: Well, I mean, I'm not going to tell you we don't have problems, or that people don't argue. Because a lot of our syndromes, we've had fetal alcohol syndrome, and that can be a very trying syndrome because its hardwired in the brain, and sometimes they can be very argumentative. And so, we work constantly to try and control their behavior so that they will be able to achieve as far as they can, but even counting that there is never a day that you don't get up and think, "I wonder what's going on today?" And we have something every day. Monday, Wednesday and Friday we go to the gym for an hour and take classes, three of the downs work out with the silver sneakers, and three play basketball. And on Tuesdays we serve a mission for our church for 2 hours at the Deseret Industries, and it even made on of our children who had stopped speaking 23 years ago, she now is speaking. And just before you came, she saw a picture of a puppy and she said, "Oh, cute," she has never voluntarily said anything. She would echolalic for us, but that was the first time. So, every day is like a miracle. I'm the coach of our own team for miracle league. They play softball every Saturday during the spring, and in the fall, and we go to movies and we go out to eat, and every day is truly a new day. It's fun to be able to know that you've made a difference that we've lost 13 to death, most of them were terminal at death, or because of decision-making skills that they were unable to facilitate in their own lives, they made mistakes that cost them being able to stay here on earth. It's just such a blessing to be around them, that's all I can say, they impact every moment of every day for me.

Gerald: Oh, wonderful, what an honor for me to meet you. Thank you for taking the time to do an Orange Socks interview, what an honor.

Christie: You're welcome.

Gerald: After the interview I was speaking with Christie about Orange Socks' effort to facilitate international adoptions of children with disabilities, she said she'd be willing to accept others into her home, especially those who are medically fragile, and I bet this admirable woman would do it.

Thanks for listening to this episode. Orange Socks is an initiative of Rise Incorporated, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting and advocating for people with disabilities. Follow Orange Socks on Facebook and Instagram, and visit our website orangesocks.org for more stories and to find national and local resources to help parents of children with disabilities.