Overwhelming Love: The Starkweather Family Story

It has not always been an easy road for Cradle parents Amy and Toen Starkweather. Back in 2000, they were heartbroken when their youngest biological child, Ethan, was diagnosed at five weeks with a rare genetic disorder called Prader-Willi syndrome. Prader-Willi causes low muscle tone, developmental delays and, most vexingly, blocks the feeling of fullness from eating. Children with Prader-Willi spend their lives feeling perpetually hungry, and require lifelong care and monitoring to avoid literally eating themselves to death.

But the Starkweathers have also had times of profound joy, such as the cold January day in 2013 when they were at The Cradle adopting Audrey, another child with Prader-Willi. Audrey was placed with Amy and Toen through The Cradle’s Special Needs Adoption Program.

“I cannot imagine our lives without Audrey,” says Amy. “This little girl has just melted all of us – there are struggles but they are dwarfed by the joy.”

Adoption was something that Amy and Toen had always thought they would consider “one day.” But they were busy raising their three biological sons (Jared, now 20, Ryan, 18, and Ethan, now 14) and, after Ethan’s diagnosis, their lives changed dramatically. They put everything on hold to learn as much as they could about this rare condition and to adjust their lives to meet Ethan’s needs.

“Unless you are in this life, our house might seem crazy,” Amy says. “We have a pantry where all the food is kept, including the refrigerator, and it is locked at all times. Everything to do with food and mealtimes has to be very structured and routine, because Ethan would eat until he was sick if he could.”

Little did they know that all of this trial-and-error learning would prepare them for the family’s next life-changing event. In 2012, Ethan was 12 and doing well, Ryan was in high school and Jared was finishing his first semester at college. They were all in a good place, with a workable routine, and then they heard about a baby named Audrey.

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“I remember feeling this sense of relief, and joy, and overwhelming love,” Amy recalls. “I was so nervous at first – I was meeting my daughter – but it was great. Watching my husband and the boys was amazing – they all bonded with her so quickly.”

The Starkweathers were soon back home in Tulsa, ready to begin life as a family of six. Their experience with Ethan had prepared them for the rounds of physical therapy, occupational therapy and doctor visits that would once again fill their calendar. “Children with Prader-Willi have such low muscle tone that they have to be taught how to play, to crawl, to pull books off the shelf and make a mess,” Amy explains.

As she did with Ethan, Amy is working with Audrey to help her reach her potential. At 22 months, Audrey is already walking (due to their low muscle tone, many kids with Prader-Willi don’t walk until they are 4 or older), babbling, reaching for things and progressing beautifully. Amy is assisted by a team of therapists, the family’s service dog, Cotton, and her chief helper, Ethan.

“Ethan is Audrey’s constant companion, and she wants to do everything he does,” Amy says. “He talks to her, all the time: ‘I’ll help you, Audrey. I’ll explain things to you.’ He knows what she is going through, and he wants to be there for her. Their bond is unbelievable.”

Throughout their adoption process, the Starkweathers encountered a host of people who supported and nurtured them along the way: From Kathleen to Audrey’s foster mom, who opened up her home to Amy and Ethan while they waited for the legal approval to leave Illinois, to Meg Nemeth, an attorney and Cradle volunteer who helped the family finalize their adoption when it hit an unexpected bump months after they’d already been home. They are in regular contact with Audrey’s birth family, who made the difficult and agonizing decision of adoption.

“We added a lot of people to our family, which was something we didn’t anticipate,” Amy says. “Wonderful people who helped bring Audrey into our lives.”

To read more about special needs adoption at The Cradle, please see the article “A Place for Every Baby” on the next page or visit www.cradlefoundation.org/specialneeds.
Dear Friends,

Each baby entrusted to The Cradle is unique and special. Some babies, like Audrey, who is featured in our cover story, can’t come to our Nursery because of their medical needs. But we make sure that they are receiving excellent care – whether in the hospital or a foster home – until they are placed with a capable, nurturing family.

For those who come to the Nursery and are fed, bathed, diapered, held and loved by our nurses, infant aides and volunteer Cuddlers, 24 hours a day, we get to know their personalities. We get to know which babies are fussy and which ones rarely cry. Who is a good eater and who needs a little coaxing. Every aspect of their care is thoroughly charted. We also grow attached to babies who spend extra time with us – babies like Marshall.

Marshall, who is pictured below, was born last Christmas Day and spent 3 ½ months in The Cradle Nursery while our counselors networked to find just the right family for him. He had experienced a prenatal brain injury, so in addition to crafting a specialized plan of care for Marshall, Nursery staff took him to our affiliated specialists for neurological and physical therapy evaluations. Despite his tough start, Marshall was very sweet-natured. He took his bottle feedings well, made good eye contact and began to smile. He was a favorite among our Cuddlers.

On April 24, Jamie and Matthew Morris came to The Cradle to welcome Marshall to their family. While his future is uncertain, they adore their son and are committed to doing everything they can to help him reach his potential.

Your support, whether through online donations, response to a mail appeal or attendance at an event such as our upcoming Cradle Ball, enables us to give babies like Audrey and Marshall – and every other Cradle baby – the best possible start in life.

With gratitude,

Julie S. Tye

A Place for Every Baby

Unlike adoption providers who will only work with healthy infants, The Cradle welcomes any baby referred to our care. Since January 1, 2013, The Cradle has found homes for seven infants with serious special needs, nearly twice as many as is typical, including Down syndrome, Spina Bifida, Prader-Willi syndrome and schizencephaly. While this is a staff and time-intensive part of The Cradle’s work, it is also an important part of our mission.

“Caring for babies who are medically fragile is a tremendous investment that goes beyond just the nursery care,” says Linda Hageman, Vice President of Professional Services. “We have one adoption caseworker who is dedicated to looking nationwide for the right family for each special needs child. And in many cases, these are planned pregnancies, where the birth parents intend to parent until they realize the child’s serious medical needs will require more than they are able to provide. So our counselors spend a lot of time helping these birth parents overcome their grief and guilt about making an adoption plan.”

The families who step forward to adopt special needs kids are often specifically committed to raising and nurturing these hard to place children. “I get to meet the most wonderful families, who are excited about the opportunity to help a child reach his or her full potential,” says Kathleen McShane, The Cradle’s Special Needs Adoption worker. “The joy is that these families are able to see past the scary diagnoses and just pour all their love into this child.”

Gifts from donors like you allow us to say “yes” to babies like Marshall and Audrey. To read updates on some of the other special needs babies The Cradle has placed in recent years, and to support The Cradle’s Special Needs Adoption work, please visit: www.cradlefoundation.org/specialneeds.
AN EVENTFUL SPRING

Cradle kids were cordially invited to join their parents at our ninth annual *Night of Promise* on May 3rd at Abt Electronics in Glenview. In addition to an array of tempting tastings from Chicago-area chefs and restaurateurs, guests were treated to live performances throughout the evening by the talented teen ensemble from Evanston’s Actors Gymnasium. The “Imagine” themed evening was co-chaired by Cradle parent and Board member, Penelope Boardman, and Cradle parents Mary and Matt Zagorski. This year’s *Night of Promise* generated $31,500 for The Cradle.

The *Night of Promise* planning committee (front row, from left): Rebecca Bennett, Denise Cortesi, Molly Isbell, Penelope Boardman, Max (9) and Zach (13) Zagorski, with their parents Mary and Matt behind them. Also in the back: Jane Cummins and her son Alex (15), and Dmitry Boardman (14).

Cradle baby Riley Hattendorf, Class of 2012, had a wonderful time at our 37th annual *Cradle Open House* on May 18. It was an absolutely beautiful spring Sunday – perfect for visiting the baby goats and sheep in the petting zoo, exploring a City of Evanston garbage truck (scrubbed clean, of course), and relaxing in The Cradle courtyard with other families.

Riley especially enjoyed her cool souvenir from the balloon magician and singing along with the guitarist who played children’s music in the courtyard. Her mom and dad, Jean and Tim, thought it was really fun, too!

It was another fine day for our 14th annual *Cradle Classic* golf tournament on June 9 at Knollwood Club in Lake Forest. Chris Dekker (in the green shirt), father to Cradle kids Matthew, 13, and Jennifer, 10, organized a foursome including, from left, Dave Rammelt, Mike Ascher and Joe Turner.

“There is a terrific opportunity to enjoy a round of golf and fellowship with friends while supporting a great cause,” Chris said. “As always, the venue was first rate and The Cradle team did a terrific job organizing the competition, food, drink, prizes and auction – thank you. They even arranged for spectacular weather!”

Sponsored by The Northridge Group, the event raised $49,000.

To see more photos from these and other past Cradle events, visit [www.cradlefoundation.org/events](http://www.cradlefoundation.org/events).
AN ENDURING LEGACY

"Folks need to be reminded over and over again about including The Cradle in their wills," said Tom Spencer, Cradle dad. "It's one of those things we need to remember when we meet with our attorney. The Cradle helped us complete our family, so it’s logical that it be included in our estate plans."

Tom and Judy Spencer adopted their daughter Kate in 1975 and son Will in 1980. They fondly recall their trips to The Cradle and bringing each of their children home. "We both had worked with children in our careers," Judy said. "In fact, we’re both former teachers. We knew we wanted to be parents, and The Cradle made that possible for us." Today, they are reveling in their role as grandparents to Will’s toddler son.

The Spencers are proud of their relationship with The Cradle and have been generous donors for many years. They also recognize the importance of sustaining the organization for future generations of children and families.

Bequest gifts are a lasting way for families to ensure The Cradle’s mission remains strong. "We are proud to be a cornerstone in the building of families all over the United States," said Brooke Voss, President of The Cradle Foundation. "We are so grateful when those families in turn give back so that others may be formed."

Have your remembered The Cradle in your will? If so, have you let The Cradle know? If not, you can find suggested language for various forms of bequests on the Foundation’s website at www.cradlefoundation.org/planned giving.

Holiday Happiness

Even though it is only September, we are already planning for our year-end Holiday Gift Drive for the children of Cradle birth parents. The majority of women who make an adoption plan through The Cradle are already parenting older children. Many are financially stressed, and the holidays add pressures as they try to provide for their kids. Last year, Cradle families, churches, local companies and other supporters provided holiday gifts for 107 children and their families through this program. If you would like to sponsor a child for the holidays, please contact Maureen Kelly at 847.733.3230 or mkelly@cradle.org. You can also make a gift at www.cradlefoundation.org/holidays and we will use your funds to purchase Walmart or Target gift cards that will benefit the entire family. Thank you for helping to make the holidays brighter for our birth parent families!

Speaking of the holidays... be sure to save the morning of Saturday, December 6 for our annual Cradle Holiday Party!

Join The Cradle Online – and you could win $100!

Are you receiving e-news and other timely updates on Cradle events and educational offerings? If not, please join us!

Every new e-mail registrant who joins The Cradle online at www.cradlefoundation.org/contest will be entered in a drawing for a $100 gift card from amazon.com. Other benefits:

- Read stories of Cradle families available only online
- Receive invitations to Cradle Connections events that are only sent electronically
- Get important reminders of upcoming workshops and webinars
- Be a part of our informative online Cradle community

Don’t wait! The drawing will take place on September 30, 2014 and the winner will be notified by e-mail. Again, go to www.cradlefoundation.org/contest and thanks for joining us!
FOUNDATION BRIEFS

Children. Families. Imagine. The 20th Annual Cradle Ball

The theme of this year’s Cradle Ball invites guests to imagine a place where dreams of becoming a family come true; where expectant parents are empowered to make informed decisions; and where every child finds a loving home. Our premier annual black-tie gala, The Cradle Ball has raised nearly $3.9 million since 1995 to help such imaginings become reality.

Please join us on Saturday, October 18 at the elegant Ritz-Carlton Chicago for an evening of gourmet dining, dancing to Lynne Jordan and the Shivers, presentation of the 2014 Silver Cradle Awards, silent and live auctions and more. New this year is a Winner’s Choice Raffle for one of three luxury getaways – to Charleston, Napa Valley or New York City. The evening begins at 6 pm with a cocktail reception, followed by dinner at 7:15. Cradle parents and Board members John Luce (Aidan ’03) and Kim Simonton (Noah ’06) are co-chairing The Cradle Ball Committee. We are pleased to welcome guest emcee Kathy Hart, left, mom to Cradle baby Allan (Class of 2008) and co-host of the top-rated Eric & Kathy Morning Show on Chicago's 101.9fm THE MIX.

Tickets are $350 per person and can be purchased at cradlefoundation.org/ball.

Making Cradle Connections…in Southern California

On Saturday, August 2, a dozen Cradle family members and friends joined Cradle President Julie Tye and Cradle Foundation President Brooke Voss at the Bluewater Grill in Newport Beach, CA for lunch on the patio adjacent to the marina, mingling and a discussion of Cradle activities. Guests included Cradle “babies” ranging in age from 19 to 82 and a couple of their spouses, two sets of adoptive parents and a Cradle friend who lives in the area. We organized this get together after hearing from a number of California adoptees who expressed interest in meeting other Cradle “alums” who live in the state. Back in March we held a similar reception for Cradle family members and friends in Arizona.

Julie gave a general Cradle update and talked about the ongoing threats to ethical adoption from internet brokers who target vulnerable pregnant women and hopeful adoptive parents. She also talked about the unusually high number of special needs placements we’ve done so far this year. Afterward, the group assembled on the dock for this photo.

The 2013 Cradle Annual Report

Our recently published 2013 Annual Report highlights 90 years of Cradle history and innovations while also focusing on our 21st century work of Finding Families for Children in need, expanding post adoption resources and taking a stand on the absolute necessity of ethical adoption.

If you would like a copy, please contact Heidi Bloom at 847.733.3240 or hbloom@cradle.org. You can also view the report online at www.cradle.org/publications.
round 100 guests gathered on Thursday, July 17 at the newly opened River Roast gastropub in downtown Chicago to sample delicious hors d’oeuvres, sip wine and beer and dance the night away. Most importantly, they had come to this elegant riverside spot, on a beautiful summer evening, to support the important work of the Sayers Center for African American Adoption at The Cradle.

The second annual Sayers Summer Soirée was organized by a dedicated and enthusiastic volunteer committee made up of Sayers Center parents and Cradle Board members. One of those parents, Baron Clay, describes the event this way:

It was nice to see Sayers families new and old getting to meet and mingle. One of the partygoers had just taken her little one home three weeks earlier. It had the feeling of casualness and fun that we had hoped for – people let loose on the dance floor! – while also generating awareness and support for the Sayers Center.

This year’s Soirée raised $13,500 – a 64% increase over last year’s inaugural event. These funds will be used to help The Cradle find permanent, loving homes for black and biracial babies.
CRADLE Calendar

**FALL 2014**

**10/15** ALP WEBINAR
**Sexual Abuse Prior to Placement**
7 pm – 8:30 pm CT
adoptionlearningpartners.org

**10/18** THE CRADLE BALL
The Ritz-Carlton Chicago
6 pm – 11 pm

**11/01** PARENTING WORKSHOP/WEBINAR*
**When Racial Identity and Adopted Identity Combine**
The Cradle, Evanston
9:30 am – 11:30 am CT

**11/06** ALP WEBINAR
**Enjoying Family Mealtimes**
7 pm – 8:30 pm CT
adoptionlearningpartners.org

**12/02** PARENTING WORKSHOP/WEBINAR*
**Is it an Adoption Thing?**
The Cradle, Evanston
6:30 pm – 8:30 pm CT

**12/06** CRADLE HOLIDAY PARTY
The Cradle, Evanston
9 am – 12 noon

*For fee and registration info, go to www.cradle.org/adoption-workshops.