

Talented teacher makes room for special child

By Marie Chestney
staff writer

It's been said that there's a special place in heaven for parents of handicapped children.

If so, then there must be an extra special spot in heaven for an unmarried woman who willingly chooses to adopt a severely handicapped baby, a baby whose future is totally unknown.

Meet Christine Kleimola.

If you have a trainable mentally impaired youngster attending Webster School, you probably already have met her. Since 1977, she's been a special education teacher in the Livonia Public Schools.

If you attended the Sept. 17 meeting of the Livonia Board of Education, you also met her. She was one of three Livonia teachers named by the trustees as Teacher of the Year for the 1990-91 school year.

KLEIMOLA WAS cited for being an "exceptional educator" for working with her students "above and beyond the call of duty," for being a "joy to work with," and for being "one of those rare persons you hope to meet in your lifetime."

As she stood before the trustees to receive her citation, those in the audience couldn't help but wonder about the baby in the baby carriage she had pushed into the boardroom.

Meet Rachael Kleimola, the pride and joy of her adopted mother, Christine. Seventeen months ago, Rachael was born in Michigan with a rare chromosome disorder, one suffered by only about 45 people in the United States.

Because she's missing part of a chromosome, Rachael has faced multiple medical problems since the day she was born.

The chromosome disorder affects

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each child differently, so only time will show just how Rachael will be affected.

"Her medical future is totally unknown," Kleimola said. "I've read the biographies of kids with the disorder. Some walk; some don't. Some can be toilet trained; some can't. Some chew; others can't. However, all of them are severely mentally impaired."

Before March 1990, Kleimola and Rachael had never met. But in August 1989, Kleimola had contacted an adoption agency, asking to adopt a handicapped child.

Her request was the fulfillment of goals she had set for herself as a child, when she often visited a handicapped child near her home.

She knew back in elementary school that one day she would also take care of — a love — a handicapped child she would adopt as her own.

She also knew that she wanted to spend her life teaching youngsters who had special needs.

KLEIMOLA PASSED the agency's investigation and then waited for the call.

At the same time, in another part of Michigan, a family struggled to take care of Rachael, who was born in May 1989, with her bladder out-

side her body. The family also had two other young children to take care of as well.

"Her parents love her but Rachael's needs are greater than they could give. The doctors told the birth mother, 'when you take her home, she will die.' Her mother tried, but Rachael literally was dying."

A couple came to Rachael's rescue, giving her the "round-the-clock" help she needed to survive.

The couple also helped Rachael's mother make the decision to give her child up for adoption.

In March 1990, Kleimola got the call for which she had been waiting. "They told me all about Rachael. I read her medical records. Then they asked, 'Do you want to meet this child?'"

"I met her at the couple's home, and went with her in April on all her doctor visits. Rachael went back-and-forth, between her guardian and me, for a month."

Then Kleimola said yes, she would adopt Rachael. "It just seemed like the right thing to do."

Rachael arrived in Kleimola's Ypsilanti condominium on May 1, her first birthday.

"That was her birthday present, getting a new mom."

FOR KLEIMOLA and Rachael, every day brings its own set of problems.

Sometimes Rachael has trouble swallowing other times, she has trouble breathing. There's also the very real possibility she will suffer kidney failure and seizures, but so far neither has happened.

"Her name means gentle lamb and that fits her personality. She's a peaceful, contented child. I can't help but love her. She has brought joy to lots of people, and her mother is happy that she is with me. Her mother has visited her."

After Rachael arrived, Kleimola took a leave of absence from her teaching job at Webster. This year, she is working part time on a one-year project to develop a new curriculum for the school.

She spends mornings with Rachael. Afternoons, she works on the project at Webster, and a babysitter takes care of Rachael.

"My job is flexible enough that if Rachael needs to go to the doctor's, I can change my hours."

For taking care of Rachael, Kleimola receives a subsidy from the federal government. The baby's medical bills are paid by Medicaid.

Kleimola admits it would be impossible to take care of Rachael without the help and emotional support of many others, including her parents and members of her church.

"It would be very hard if there was no relief. If you're going to adopt, you need this support or, as a single parent, you'd burn out."

"But if you can rely on lots of people, it isn't burdensome. I'm on the go a lot, and I take Rachael almost everywhere with me."



JIM JAGGELD/staff photographer

Christine Kleimola shares a special moment with daughter Rachael at home Monday morning.

Halloween magic show offered

A Halloween magic show will be part of Wonderland Mall's Halloween Haven Friday night.

The seasonal activities, including the magic show, will be 5:30-7 p.m. Friday at the mall at Plymouth and Middlebelt roads, Livonia.

Magicians William and Di will perform an illusion show for children of all ages. Between shows balloon characters will be created.

More than 100 mall merchants will welcome children 12 and younger to Trick-or-Treat 6-8 p.m. on Wednesday, Oct. 31. Children

must be in costume and accompanied by a parent.

Wonderland Mall, along with Livonia Parks and Recreation, is sponsoring a pumpkin painting contest for children ages 4-12. Pumpkins will be provided for the first 100 contestants.

Children must have parental supervision and bring all supplies, including wigs, hats, eyelashes, yarn. No carving is permitted; crayons and paints will be provided. For information, call 522-4100.

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