

## Woman hopes book helps foster parents on journey

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**By Kelly Wilson**

Herald-Whig Staff Writer

Lori Thomas and her husband, Paul, already had five children — one of them with special needs — when they were "tricked by God" into taking a sixth child into their home.

Four-year-old Jonathon had endured severe neglect and abuse, had been shuffled from foster home to foster home and exhibited troubling behaviors.

"He kicks. He bites. He sets fires. Why would I want to do this?" Thomas remembers asking the child services worker.

That's when God's trick came into play.

The worker told Thomas that they had found a willing adoptive family, but they just needed someone to take Jonathon for four weeks.

"I said, 'Sure, bring him over,' " Thomas said.

Four weeks went by. Six weeks. A year. That's when they realized that, while the road ahead would be rocky, it was worthwhile to give this child a chance.

"We fell in love pretty quickly with this little kid," she said, but emphasized the challenges that were involved when parenting a child like Jonathon who has reactive attachment disorder.

Thomas, of Virginia, has recorded her experiences in the book "The Jonathon Letters," co-authored with Michael Trout. She was in Quincy Wednesday to talk to foster parents and Chaddock staff.

Chaddock specializes in treating children with reactive attachment disorder.

These children nearly always have

experienced a profound level of chronic neglect, physical or sexual abuse, some separation from or loss of the primary attachment figure (a mother, for example), and some sort of trauma mixed with the abuse, neglect or loss.

As a result, these children are unable to bond with others and exhibit troubling behaviors. Among them:

- \* Deficit in the capacity to give or receive affection;
- \* Self-destructiveness;
- \* A smoldering rage;
- \* Aversion to eye contact;
- \* Chronic lying;
- \* Crazy lying;
- \* Tendency to steal and hoard food;
- \* Deficits in the ability to experience empathy for others; and
- \* A high interest in fire, blood and gore.

In Jonathon's case, his birth mother left him in the crib for hours at a time as an infant and later started to hurt him. At 2 1/2 years old, the mother was afraid she would kill the child, and Jonathon was taken away and placed in foster care.

"We were his eighth home," Thomas said. In the latest foster home, Jonathon had been abused mentally, physically and sexually.

"These kids come to us really troubled. It makes perfect sense that they behave the way they do. They're going to take control and make sure they are calling the shots," Thomas said.

Jonathon was a violent child. Thomas remembers one day when she was scrapbooking and heard the boy in the next room say, "I guess doggie's whiskers don't catch on fire."

She found Jonathon with the family's Labrador retriever.

"Labs are so sweet and loyal, they'll let you do anything," Thomas said. "(Jonathon) had the child-proof lighter and was holding it up to doggie's whiskers trying to set her on fire."

The boy broke many items in the home and would fight sleep, kicking and screaming until midnight. He would tell "crazy" lies, have fits in the grocery store and urinate in public.

The family understood the seeds of Jonathon's defiance and rage. But at the same time, he was tearing the family apart.

That's when Thomas began corresponding with Trout, director of the Infant-Parent Institute in Champaign. Thomas says Trout offered profound advice, stories from other parents and, most of all, hope.

Their correspondence became the basis for "The Jonathon Letters," published in 2005.

"The change was so huge," Thomas said. "It was not huge in my son right away, but it was huge in me. We started to have hope."

She says parents who have children with reactive attachment disorder need to be armed with information and they need to gather all the resources — external and internal — they can. A supportive, persistent family also is a key, not to mention a strong faith in God.

Despite multiple hardships and frustrations, families must remain committed to their children with reactive attachment disorder.

"They are capable of serious, serious trouble if they don't get help," Thomas said. "We can make a difference."

She and her husband are in the planning stages of building an inter-generational foster/adoption community for children with reactive attachment disorder and their families called Hope Village. Part of the reason she visited Chaddock was to get some ideas for the facility.

The couple already was thinking about creating Hope Village when Jonathon came into their lives. Their dream was put on hold, but that turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

"We did not have the knowledge of these kids," Thomas said. "By giving us this little gift (Jonathon), God gave us a training opportunity that was vital."

Now 10 years old, Jonathon still goes to therapy, but he and the family — which now numbers seven children and three grandchildren — have made tremendous progress.

"He's just come so, so far," Thomas said. "He sits with his nieces and nephews and plays with them. He's just a compassionate little guy."

The boy who used to harm animals now has empathy for them. The boy whose eyes used to resemble a serial killer now makes warm eye contact with his parents.

There are still some issues. "He still cringes when a hand is raised near him," Thomas said.

But she sees a bright future for Jonathon.

"I see a young man who is going to be a Godly example," she said. "I see a young man who is going to grow up and give us lots of grandchildren. I see a young man who is going to make a difference in this world."

**On the Web: [www.hopevillage.com](http://www.hopevillage.com); [www.chaddock.org](http://www.chaddock.org)**

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