

THEY WANT A CHANCE TO CARE; Gay couple still hurts from decision that took away their foster children
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Patti Doten, Globe Staff

Disillusionment and hurt still color their voices when they talk about May 8, 1985. That was the day Donald Babets and David Jean's two foster children were removed from their home in Roxbury.

The removal by the Department of Social Services came hours after a story in The Boston Globe hit the streets - and the breakfast tables of members of the Dukakis administration. The story focused on the concern of several Highland Park neighbors that two young boys had been placed with Babets and Jean, an openly gay couple.

Devastated by the abrupt breakup of their family, the couple quickly filed a grievance with DSS, to no avail. Two weeks later, they watched as a new administrative policy was set in place - a policy that virtually banned homosexuals from becoming foster parents. They then brought a discrimination suit against Gov. Dukakis, human services secretary Philip Johnston and social services commissioner Marie Matava that was settled out of court last spring.

On a recent Sunday morning, Babets, now 41, and Jean, 37, finally consented to sit down with a reporter in their home south of Boston. Still smarting from the media blitz that put them in national headlines and on television five years ago, and wanting to retain their privacy, the couple insisted that the town in which they now live remain anonymous.

They also spoke carefully and edited each other's remarks during the interview so that nothing they might say would be misconstrued and hurt their chances of again becoming foster parents.

"We moved from Roxbury two years ago because that house had bad memories," said Babets, the more talkative and outwardly demonstrative of this couple. "We knew things weren't going to change. We knew it was not going to get any easier to live there. And we had talked about having a farm for a long time."

So they began spending weekends house-hunting and settled on a roomy, rustic house with a couple of acres out back. There were no barns or outbuildings on the property - only the rambling house. Babets and Jean built the animal pens, put up the fencing, dug the garden and began acquiring "foster" animals.

"We got our first animals from the MSPCA," said Jean, busy in the large, wood-paneled kitchen preparing a brunch of homemade breads, hash and blackberries freshly picked from the side yard. "They had been abused by their owners. So we called them our foster goats. We then got a foster horse."

Having shifted their energy from the political and church activities of their urban life, today they put that energy into their farm and the care of two dogs, two cats and four kittens, a flock of four geese, chickens, goats, a lamb and a veal calf. They are quick to emphasize that the chickens are range-fed, none of the animals are force-fed and the calf has a large pen and roams out back at will.

But they are thinking of moving to a more secluded and larger place with an existing barn and outbuildings. They want to raise more and different animals and have a larger garden. Although the farm is more of a hobby now, they eventually hope to be self-sustaining.

"The farm and garden have been my saving grace," said Jean, who had spent the previous day making jelly with his visiting parents. "It has kept my sanity intact. It's a challenge to figure out how to raise an animal. And I enjoy the garden and selling the produce we can't use."

And, no, they said to their visitor's question, they did not get involved with animals in order to give them the love and attention they were hoping to give to a child.

"We have a well of bottled-up parental feelings that go far deeper in our hearts and souls than the care we provide our animals," said Babets. "Those deeper feelings are just waiting to be released."

The animals, however, do make demands, especially the goats. Babets gets up at 5 each morning to milk the goats before taking a bus to Boston to his job as a fair housing specialist for the Boston Housing Authority.

Asked if he misses being involved politically and if he still has faith in a political system that walked through his front door and disrupted his family, Babets gave a one-word answer.

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"No," he said, emphatically.

But a day later he called to clarify his answer.

"My response was perhaps too rash given that I am employed in the system and always felt that we would prevail in the courts," said Babets. "I remain profoundly disappointed in the leadership of Mike Dukakis during the whole controversy. Much of what the United States electorate saw during the 1988 presidential campaign - his inability to defend the flag issue or confront the racism of the Willie Horton controversy - were indicative of his inability to lead.

"His secretary of human services," Babets continued, "unleashed a torrent of homophobia in announcing his foster placement policy, and then Dukakis tried to say, in private, that it wasn't discriminatory.

"That said," Babets concluded, "it leaves me with a sense of sadness that a politician I once admired as a leader in the civil rights field was, in fact, not a leader at all."

The placement policy that Babets referred to was the one making it nearly impossible for homosexuals to become foster parents. The policy required the state to ask the sexual preference of applicants and to try to place foster children in "traditional" families.

When Babets and Jean first inquired in 1984 about becoming foster parents, they were told that DSS had no specific prohibition regarding the placement of foster children with gay foster parents. So they began the long process of training sessions, in-depth home studies and interviews.

"We had been talking about becoming parents for several years before we approached DSS," said Babets. "Foster parenting was going to be a trial run before adopting a child."

Babets believed he could give something to a child in crisis because he had been abandoned as a child and then adopted.

"I know what it feels like to be abandoned," said Babets. "I know there are a lot of kids out there who are suffering from abuse, neglect and abandonment. I want to help heal that hurt. A hurt I experienced."

Jean, who came from a large and close-knit family, said that through the years he had encountered generous and giving persons who had listened to him and helped him to sort out his life.

"Those experiences left me with wanting to be a special person for someone someday," said Jean. "I want to provide a safe haven for someone in need, someone who feels that their life is out of control. Don and I think the situation we have created here, on the farm, would be a great experience for a child - learning about animals, about putting up vegetables, about some peace away from the conflict of a dysfunctional home."

Babets went on to say that their willingness to open their home to foster children "is based on some idealistic but nonetheless traditional American precepts - volunteerism, responding to a call for assistance from the government and contributing to the society in which we live."

After a year of DSS scrutiny, Babets' and Jean's application was finally approved by then assistant commissioner Joseph Collins.

"And then we waited," said Jean, a nutritionist who at the time was working for the Crittenton Hastings House & Clinic. "Then came the call that we were not getting one child but two. We were delighted and set to changing our whole routine, setting up day care, buying a second crib."

The first warning that trouble might be brewing came when Jean gave the wife of a local community activist a ride home one afternoon.

"I told her about us having these two kids," said Jean. "I was so happy about our good fortune. But her response perplexed me. She said that we should be careful. That there were some people that may have negative reactions to us taking care of children.

"When I asked her what she meant and who she was talking about," said Jean, "she said it was just a feeling she had."

Added Babets: "Little did we know, it was her husband who was trying to get things started in the neighborhood. He's the one that told the Globe reporter about us. We think he was trying to get some publicity because he was plan-

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ning on running for city council. This was a man we considered a friend. He had been to our house for dinner and David had given their daughter piano lessons."

In the immediate aftermath of the children's removal and the media attention, Babets said he was very "frayed." He decided he had to get away from Massachusetts and headed to the Grand Canyon that August.

"Looking out over that canyon," said Babets, "well, it put things into perspective. It was there that I started my own spiritual journey. After a crisis, you have to work at finding out who you really are."

Raised a Catholic in the Midwest, the oldest of five children, Babets said he always had trouble with the divinity of Christ. He was familiar with Eastern religions, having spent time in Thailand with the Civic Action Corps during his 7 1/2-year stint with the Army during the Vietnam War. After a lot of reading and talking with friends, he converted to Judaism in 1987.

"At the end of my spiritual search," said Babets, "I understood that God wasn't going to throw anything in my direction that I couldn't deal with."

Jean, a Massachusetts native who is the second oldest of six children, said that he had always been interested in professional cooking and made the decision to act on that interest in the aftermath of their ordeal. He attended Cambridge School of Culinary Arts at night for a year and is now working at the Navona restaurant in Hingham.

"I'm a baker at the restaurant," said Jean, "but I also wait on tables and am involved with a catering service they are starting up. They buy my vegetables, too. I can sincerely say I love what I'm doing."

Babets and David met on a blind date while Babets was still in the Army and stationed at Fort Devens. They met a year after Babets, a recovering alcoholic, had stopped drinking. They have been together for 13 1/2 years. Their relationship, they say, is stronger than ever today.

"We did seek counseling after we lost the foster kids," said Babets. "There was so much going on around us that we weren't dealing with the issues between us on the home front. Counseling helped."

Babets has also had to deal with preventing fatigue and stress since being diagnosed in April 1989 with multiple sclerosis.

"I take very good care of myself," said Babets. "I'm in bed by 9 and up at 5. Heat is my enemy. It is the main thing that can trigger flare-ups."

They are pleased with the new state policy that was hammered out two weeks before their lawsuit came to trial this past spring, because they believe it is in the best interest of the child. The new policy makes parenting experience, not sexual orientation or marital status, the key factor in assigning children to foster parents. (Joining Babets and Jean in the suit were the National Association of Social Workers and two women who say they illegally were asked their sexual preference when applying as foster parents.)

"Of course, it isn't as clean as a decision from the courts would be," said Babets, "but in the final analysis, children will be served. If only one child is given safe harbor from drugs, beatings, sexual abuse and the other horrors infecting families today, then this has all been worth it."

But he is disappointed that opponents of gay adoptions and gay foster parents have learned nothing over throng in their perceptions of our gay couples' lives, how can they be trusted to be correct on any other issue?" Babets said. "It's Mike Dukakis all over again . . . no leadership."

Both men vow that if the policy is changed in the future, they will return to court.

As a whole, however, Babets and Jean said they are not convinced that society necessarily believes that gay people should not be parents.

"The one and only poll taken on the issue of gay foster parenting (during the 1985-'86 race for the 8th Congressional seat) indicated a 54 percent approval rating to a 46 percent disapproval," said Babets. "We assume the negative rating emanates from the same place as the negative stereotypes used to define all foster parents - ignorance of the issues involved and/or the lifestyles of gay people, men in particular."

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"That lifestyle, very akin to the non-gay singles lifestyle portrayed in the movie 'Looking for Mr. Goodbar,' would quickly be revealed to a case worker assigned to do a home study. Besides, we doubt anyone involved in that kind of lifestyle, gay or otherwise, would have the time, energy or interest in being a parent in any form."

Although Babets and Jean remain approved as foster parents, they have little hope that they will see a child in their house anytime soon. There were children occupying the spacious bedrooms on the second floor, unused now except for guests, when periodically over the past two years the children of a Haitian couple who were going through difficult times lived with Babets and Jean.

"We are still approved for foster parenting," said Jean, "but it doesn't appear that we will be foster parents. We are approved, on paper, to take care of two kids. But we aren't holding our breath."

"We call periodically," said Babets, "and they tell us that when the placement is right, they will make a placement with us. We, of course, are constantly hearing about the children that need foster care. But what can we do?"

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JOHN TLUMACKI / Donald Babets, left, and David Jean feed their goats in the back yard of their home.

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