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Meet the Rosenows – all 18 of them

'We don't know how we were able to do this'

FAIRFIELD TWP. – Years ago, before life required three refrigerators, triple–bunk beds and four dozen eggs for breakfast, they were just Kathy and Scott.

He was her older brother's best friend, the quiet, funny guy who seemed to know everything. She was the beautiful younger sister with the dark hair and the great laugh. They clicked. They married a week after her 18th birthday and left Alabama for Maryland, where Scott served in the Navy and Kathy studied to be a dental assistant.

Within four years, the kids started to arrive, Kristen first, then Erin two years later, then Allan. Ryan rounded out the brood four years later.

He would have been the last.

But then Kathy got this wild idea, and Scott eventually gave in.

Both of them sat on their couch nine years ago and watched that first adopted baby roll on the floor, marveling at what lay hidden inside a discarded child, slowly discovering that something lay hidden within them, too.

It all started there.

Sixteen kids and counting

So here, today, are the Rosenows – 16 kids and counting.

Supper time has rolled around in their Fairfield Township home. A dining table that swallows most of the room is framed by children, crowded with plates and silverware.

In the middle sits a 26–quart pot of meat and beans, near a dish of rice so heavy it makes a person's arms shake to lift it.

Kathy's at one end of the small dining room. Scott's nine feet away at the other. Caelyn, 6, arrives late to the meal, surveys the crowded room and sets aside her crutches, lowering herself to the floor.

"See ya on the other side," Kathy calls out.

"See ya," Caelyn says, disappearing beneath the table before popping up across the way.

It's one thing to hear about a family of two parents, four biological children and 12 special–needs children adopted from China, Bolivia, Romania, Haiti and Guatemala – to wonder how they do it, and why, and just how often that washing machine is running.

It is quite another to actually behold the Rosenows:

Scott, 49. Kathy, 48. Kristen, 26. Erin, 24. Allan, 22. Ryan, 18. Meghan, 11. Nathan, 10. Robyn, 9. Colin, 9. Madlin, 9. Stephen, 7. Carlin, 7. Caelyn, 6. Ian, 5. Braeden, 4. Kathryn, 3. Ethan, 15 months.

The Rosenows are a jumble of names, a blur of long hair and short hair and chubby cheeks and skinny arms, each with a smile bigger than the next.

Portraits of the children run down the wall beside the staircase and pile up at the bottom. Stacks of diapers sit in giant bins beside the television.

The bumper sticker on the back of the van that can no longer hold everyone says:

"Yes, all sixteen are ours."

Years ago, Kathy was listening to the radio when she caught a program about Tim Burke, a professional baseball player who adopted special-needs children with his wife, Christine.

"This is exactly what I want to do," Kathy thought.

Adoptions from other countries ran as high as \$35,000 for travel, lodging, paperwork, attorney's fees – more than a family of six could afford on Scott's salary as an engineer.

"This isn't going to happen," Scott told her. He bought her Burke's book instead.

Taking in the unwanted

The girl in Bolivia changed everything. They heard about her through friends who were adopting Mexican children. At 9 months old, she'd been brutally raped by an orphanage employee and needed reconstructive surgery to repair the damage. For nearly 10 months, the agency tried to place her. No one wanted her.

Scott broke down. The money was God's problem, he said. They had to get the girl out of there.

He sent out a letter pleading for help, and that letter got copied and passed on, and within three months they'd raised all but \$7,000 of the \$35,000 needed for the girl's adoption. They'd borrow the rest. They sent their paperwork into the agency and got ready for their new daughter.

But adoptions are not often smooth, and rarely predictable. Without warning, the girl was gone, scooped up by a Swedish family.

Scott and Kathy were left with broken hearts, a pile of money and a question: What now?

That's how they ended up sitting on a couch in 1998, staring down in wonder at a smiley little 9-month-old. Nathan was also from Bolivia. He'd been born without a left foot, abandoned outside a La Paz orphanage, his umbilical cord still attached. The agency struggled to find him a home, too.

Kathy and Scott checked with their donors, asked everyone if they could use the money to adopt a different child. No one objected. A few weeks later, they headed to Bolivia to meet Nathan.

Kathy remembers traveling to see him and looking out onto the streets at the disabled people sleeping on the sidewalks, rejected by a poor society that regarded a birth defect as fatal, insurmountable. That would have been Nathan out there, another life lost.

Then, he was in Ohio, part of a family, thriving in a way she didn't expect.

"He just blossomed right before our eyes," she said. She'd stand at his crib and look at a child who was so different from the one they plucked from that orphanage, and it hit her: This is a person's life.

All along, there'd been a boy inside there. Nathan now had a chance.

"We knew we'd never be the same after we left that country," she said.

How about another one?

Really, how could they not do it again?

They got Meghan – her feet and hands deformed – from China in 1999.

Robyn came next. She'd been left on a street corner in northern China. She was 18 months old, had two extra toes and stood at that corner all day, sobbing, until someone finally called for help.

Shortly after, they picked up Colin, a blind boy facing life in an institution in Bolivia. They held a garage sale to raise money for his adoption and a man who'd squirreled away \$2,000 for laser-eye surgery donated his entire savings.

His eyes are more important than mine, the man told them.

In 2000, Scott and Kathy began forming what would eventually become Shepherd's Crook Ministries, a nonprofit organization that has connected families with about 150 special-needs orphans around the world. Scott quit his engineering job and began working full time from home as the ministry's director. Kathy had her hands full with home-schooling and surgery schedules and doctor visits.

Still, they weren't done.

"You start doing it and you just can't stand to leave them behind," Kathy said. "No matter how fast we adopt, we are barely scratching the surface here."

Stephen arrived from China in August 2002. He had a cleft lip and palate.

Carlin, born with spina bifida, came out of Romania in 2002, just before Christmas.

Madlin came from Haiti in March 2003. She was the seventh.

Kathy hadn't always had the urge to take on special-needs kids. There was a time she would have dreaded it. She once worked for a dentist, and every six months a group of kids with disabilities would show up to have their teeth cleaned.

Kathy always came home depressed. God, she'd pray, please don't give me kids with special needs. I couldn't handle it.

Then, their second child, Erin, was born with developmental disabilities that, while slow to appear, meant she'd never drive or live on her own. Their youngest, Ryan, was born without a right hand and had to undergo multiple reconstructive surgeries in Louisville.

"You kind of mourn the loss of the child you were expecting," Kathy said, "and accept the child you've been given."

The medical care and a job prospect led the family to move to Fairfield in 1996.

Their children's differences steeled Scott and Kathy, pushed them to create a cocoon around their home, to make it a place where their children could feel unconditionally loved and accepted. Erin would sometimes come home from school crying. Ryan once refused to get back in a swimming pool after a kid made fun of his "pig-footed hand."

Those things would never happen inside the Rosenow house.

"We were determined that when they came home and came through that door, they would be safe," Scott said.

Taking a chance on Colin

Colin walks along the sidewalk, a red-tipped cane in his right hand. Tap, tap, tap. He's learning the difference between grass and asphalt, feeling where the sidewalk ends.

His therapist, Dede Ackerman, coaches him down his road.

"So the street is close?" he asks.

"The street is beside us the entire way," Ackerman says.

Kathy and Scott hesitated when they heard about Colin. They had no experience with a blind child.

Colin was angry, out of control. He had a long scar across his head no one could explain. He would have ended up deemed insane, doomed to live life in a chair, trapped inside an institution, locked inside his head.

Now, he's learning Braille and telling jokes.

'Remarkable,' judge says

Who knew life with 16 children could be so smooth? The kids all do chores. They help each other with schoolwork and fetch each other's diapers and medicine. They make movies together and bathe together and cry together when one of them is hurting. They respond to Kathy with a "yes ma'am" or "no ma'am" and thank her for their meal before leaving the table.

"It is remarkable," said Butler County Probate Judge Randy Rogers, who has handled some legal issues involving the Rosenow adoptions. "They're some of the best-behaved children I've ever seen."

Kathy and Scott don't do it all. They have help. People give them money, meals and clothes. A big group this year painted the house and replaced the floors. Someone else, trying to build them a bigger home, has even sent architects to study the family's needs.

The older kids – Kristen, who recently married, is the only one who no longer lives at home – help too, with everything from cooking to schooling. Erin is particularly invaluable at Kathy's side preparing meals, changing diapers and giving baths.

Something else helps the Rosenows. Something they can't quite put their fingers on.

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"We don't know how we were able to do this," Scott said.

There is faith. There is love. There is God, whom they firmly believe can do extraordinary work.

There is that intangible thing inside Scott and Kathy – which has helped them find what's hidden inside each of their children.

They found the spirit in Nathan, the intelligence in Colin, the smile in Stephen. They found Carlin's spunk and Madlin's love.

They found Robyn's voice, reduced to a whisper after she was abandoned on that street corner in China. It reappeared in the car one day as Kathy drove to a doctor's appointment. She was stunned.

In the back seat, Robyn was singing.

They've found the strength of family, too. They saw it when 6-year-old Caelyn sat and sobbed and told her siblings the procedure they'd hoped would get her out of diapers and into underwear failed. She'd been thrilled by her drawer full of panties, and they all knew it.

It was a rare time when a Rosenow child cried about her disability, and some of the children were inconsolable. Colin cried the hardest.

The cocoon squeezed tighter than ever. "This is what this family is all about," Kathy said.

One more on the way

One more child is coming to the Rosenows. She'll be the last, at least the last for this house and its 2½ bathrooms and single dishwasher and nine-foot dining table. She'll follow Caelyn and Kathryn and Braeden and Ian and Ethan, all adopted between July 2004 and September.

Her name is Shannen and she's in Guatemala. She should arrive early next year, not long after Scott hits a milestone.

"What most guys want for their 50th birthday – a 2-year-old," Kathy jokes.

If all goes as planned with Shannen, she'll be the 13th adopted Rosenow, bumping the clan up to a mind-boggling 19, a number they could never have predicted.

So far, Kathy says, all the adoptions cost \$230,000 to \$250,000.

"We're not trying to grow a family," Scott said. "We're trying to rescue a child from a desperate situation."

They haven't been able to rescue everyone, though. Although they've adopted 12, they've actually prepared 21 adoption dossiers.

One baby, a cherubic little 7-month-old named Lauren, died after heart surgery before they could get her out of Guatemala. They were there for the surgery, there when Lauren took a bad turn, there when she was buried inside a wall where deceased infants are laid to rest.

Her grave marker noted she was a Rosenow.

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To Kathy, the loss felt as a miscarriage might. The pain still lingers. They decided to transfer Lauren's paperwork to another child. What better way to honor her, they thought.

"That's Shannen," Kathy said.

So they will go after another child, on this improbable mission they've undertaken together. She'll admire his dedication to what she started, he'll delight in that laugh he's always loved.

After all, at the root of this, they're still Kathy and Scott. Just a bit more.

A world of love: Meet the adopted children of the Rosenow household

Meghan, 11

China

Adopted

October 1999

Nathan, 10

Bolivia

Adopted

June 1998

Robyn, 9

China

Adopted

October 2000

Colin, 9

Bolivia

Adopted

December '00

Madlin, 9

Haiti

Adopted

March 2003

Stephen, 7

China

Adopted

August '02

Carlin, 7

Romania

Adopted

December '02

Caelyn, 6

China

Adopted

August '04

Ian, 5

China

Adopted

June 2007

Braedan, 4

Guatemala

Adopted

May 2005

Kathryn, 3

Guatemala

Adopted

January 2005

Ethan, 15 mon.

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Guatemala

Adopted

September '07

Little of this, little of that really adds up

At the Rosenow house:

The family spends between \$1,500 and \$2,000 a month on groceries and paper goods.

Utility bills for water, gas and electric run from \$500 to \$600 a month.

The family spends between \$600 and \$700 a month for gas for its two cars.

The washer and dryer run six days a week. Monday is for clothes, Tuesday is for towels, Wednesday is for clothes again, Thursday is for sheets, Friday is for clothes, yet again, and Saturday is round two for towels. The machines get a break on Sunday. The total? About 30 loads a week.

The towels are color-coded. Each person gets two bath towels and four washcloths in his or her color. Those who fail to hang up their towels are easily identified and face fines as high as \$10. Such incidents, as can be expected, are rare.

Bathing is done in pairs, often in assembly-line fashion. Except for the adults.

The dishwasher runs three times a day, sometimes four. The big Sunday dinner is served on a disposable plate to keep Sundays low-key.

All appliances have extended warranties. The Maytag repairman is known by his name – Bruce.

The diaper count each month is about 700. A case of 400 wipes is wiped out in a week.

120 fingernails are trimmed each Sunday morning.

Battery-operated toothbrushes are replaced every six months, a \$45 cost.

A twice-yearly shoe-shopping trip for the essentials – a pair of tennis shoes and a pair of dress shoes – runs about \$350–\$400.

Recipes are multiplied – and multiplied again. Ten pounds of ground beef go into chili. Fifteen pounds into potato soup, a Rosenow favorite. Hot dogs are served in batches of 30. Turkeys weigh 25 pounds. Breakfast requires six times the recipe for homemade pancakes, or about four dozen eggs, or three loaves of bread for French toast.

By Lori Kurtzman

The Enquirer / Joseph Fuqua II

Scott and Kathy Rosenow give us a peek into their lives. Go to Cincinnati.com. Search: video

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See a short film by the Rosenow kids at www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBGr5drwATI

The Rosenow family poses for a photo in their Fairfield Township home. Front row (from left): Colin, 9; Nathan, 10; Ian, 5; Carlin, 7; and Madlin, 9. Back row: Meghan, 11; Braedan, 4; Ryan, 18; Erin, 24; Robyn, 9; Kathy; Ethan, 15 months; Scott; Kathryn, 3; Caelyn, 6; and Stephen, 7. Not pictured are Kristen, 26, and Allan, 22. A 17th child, Shannen, is coming next year.

Scott Rosenow and Caelyn, followed by Kristen and Kathryn (in stroller), enter Cincinnati Children's Fairfield for physical therapy. The Rosenows have adopted 12 children – with a 13th coming early next year – since June 1998. "We're not trying to grow a family," Scott says. "We're trying to rescue a child from a desperate situation."

Caelyn (left) and Madlin look over a photo album at their Fairfield Township home. Caelyn is from China; Madlin is from Haiti.

Kathryn gets help from physical therapist Sherrie Conner as she walks on the treadmill at Cincinnati Children's Fairfield.

Robyn (from left), Meghan and Madlin make their beds on sheet day at their Fairfield Township home. Sheets are washed each Thursday, and the family washing machine does about 30 loads per week.

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