

Cradle Caring Angel Babies – a heavenly experience
By Kay Bjork

Ten years ago Debi Rolfing received a beaded cradle board from Kootenai elder Agnes Kenmille while Agnes was completing a blessing of Kootenai Lodge, Debi and her husband Mark’s Montana estate. Debi thought, “Isn’t that cute.” Because the beautifully crafted cradle board had a strong odor associated with tanned leather, she put it into storage to let it “age.”

Years later the cradle board surfaced.



Debi and Alia

That cradle board proved to be more than a decorative addition to the historic Kootenai Lodge, it became a prophecy of Debi’s role as a foster mother to newborn infants, she fondly calls “angel babies.”

While waiting for adoption, newborn infants begin life in the sweet embrace of Debi at her beloved lodge on the shores of Swan Lake, Montana and at her oceanfront home in Kapalua, Maui.

The timeless days she experiences while caring for a baby are a long way from the fast-paced, business-suit days she has spent as a real estate broker and developer in Maui for 25 years. After experiencing phenomenal success in her career, Debi came to a turning point, “I wanted a smaller life.”

She found that “smaller” life in a literal sense when she was introduced to the idea of serving as a foster mother to newborns through friend Dia Hollinger, Adoption Counselor for Lutheran Social Services in Kalispell, Montana and her longtime Maui friend and family law attorney, Rosalyn

Meyer whose sister Laurie Loomis is a private adoption attorney in Honolulu.

Nurturing was as natural as breathing for Debi, who could not only manage the details of huge, upscale real estate projects, but also the multitudes of people involved. Her life was filled to the brim with success, friends, and family but she found herself looking for something more – something she discovered in the simple, pure pleasure of caring for a baby in need.

The first “angel baby” as she called her, arrived in March 1999 and was in Debi’s care in her Montana home for nearly three weeks. She knew then, “It is what fills my heart.”



“Angel Baby”

Through this ministry known as cradle care, Debi felt she could provide a safe haven for newborns while difficult life decisions are made and adoption paper work is being completed. When everything is in place, babies are placed in the arms of their new adoptive parents.

Contracts and real estate listings were replaced with baby charts, video and photographs to help adoptive parents bridge the time missed by having a way to experience the first days of their baby’s lives.

Instead of lighting candles for her famous flawless real estate showings, Debi was lighting candles for beautiful placement ceremonies to create a positive memory for birth mother’s and adoptive parents on that bittersweet day. Debi observes, “It’s the saddest day of a birth mother’s life and also the happiest day in the life of the adoptive couple.”

After her first “Angel Baby” two more babies, “Patrick” and Will, found their way into her Montana home – and into her heart.

Will, a baby with Down Syndrome, came into Debi's care early in October. As Christmas neared he was still without a family. When Debi, attended mass one snowy December Sunday, the priest announced that Will needed a family.



Will and Debi

After mass the women swarmed around the baby. But it was a man named Kirk, standing patiently outside the group that caught Debi's attention. She turned to him, smiling and asked, "Do you want to adopt him?" Slowly, quietly, he responded, "Could be."

The "could be" turned into a definite "yes" when Kirk talked over the adoption with his wife Charlene and their two teenage daughters Alison and Jennifer. The family had recently committed themselves to reach out to a child through adoption.

Will was delivered to the family in time for Christmas. After 74 days in the Roling's care, the adoption closed a chapter in Debi and Mark's life as foster parents. It also opened a new chapter with the friendship that developed between their families. This magical story continued when the family adopted another of Debi and Mark's foster babies less than a year later.

Debi's commitment to foster care deepened. She became licensed with the state of Hawaii and became an active member of the Hawaii Foster Parent's Association.

Debi and Mark received their first Maui foster baby shortly afterwards.



Malia

New life came with the new millennium when a very special and fragile baby girl was placed in Debi and Mark's home Jan. 14, 2000. The couple called her "Malia," the Hawaiian name for Mary, after Mark's mother. Malia was delivered into her adoptive parents arms just four days later, with aloha spirit and a baby's breath haku head lei adorning her tiny head.



"Kimo"

Mother's Day took on new meaning for Debi when she and Mark flew to Honolulu to pick up a newborn baby boy needing their care. They spent the afternoon at Kapiolani Children's Hospital comforting his tearful birthmother. As they left to take him to their Maui home, Debi and Mark reassured her that her son would be in loving care until his adoption. This precious boy with sparkling dark eyes and a head of curls would be known as "Kimo," Hawaiian for James and named in honor of Mark's father, Jim Roling.



Alia

After a hot dry summer in Montana followed by a welcome stretch of rain, Indian Summer arrived at Kootenai Lodge along with newborn Alia, a baby girl with Sioux Indian heritage. This Native American baby fulfilled the prophecy of the cradle board presented to Debi by the Kootenai elder so many years ago. She would be the sixth baby to find her way into Debi's life.

Just when she thought there would be no more babies in this first year of the new millennium, a call came from Maui. Within 12 hours Debi was on a plane, island bound, to pick up two-day old twin girls.



“Leilani” and “Noelani”

Tagged “Baby A” and Baby B” at the hospital, Debi quickly named them “Leilani” and “Noelani” because of their Hawaiian descent. Any

apprehension about caring for twins quickly dissolved because the twin's easy dispositions and good health made double duty seem easy.

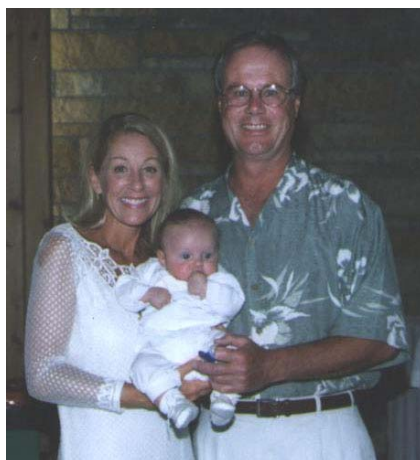
And then came another call. There was yet another "angel baby" who needed special care and the safe haven of Debi's and Mark's Maui home. Baby boy "Jack" arrived and the household brimmed with bottles, diapers, nannies – and love.



"Jack" and Debi

Babies were placed and bottles were packed away until another phone call came.

The next phone call came from Montana and brought another chapter to the storybook adoption of Will, the special needs baby who was placed with a local family in Montana.



Debi, Daniel and Mark

Daniel came to Kootenai Lodge when he was just one day old and scarcely six pounds. This Gerber baby boy had lots of curly hair and big blue eyes. After a month with Debi and Mark, he was adopted by the same family who had adopted Will less than a year before.

Debi and Mark became godparents to Daniel and joyfully continue their relationship with the family and the two babies who are now brothers.

The next two babies came during a painful time.

September 11, 2001 America was attacked by terrorists and over 3,000 American family members perished. Debi and Mark found themselves an ocean away from each other when Mark became stranded in Maui where he was working on his show *Golf Hawaii*.

But even in the darkest moment there is a point of light.

For Debi and the Kootenai Lodge family it was a baby girl born on this sad day. She quickly became known as “Faith” because her sweet presence helped everyone look ahead, beyond the despair and fear that shadowed the days after the attack.



“Faith”

Sleepy at first, it was not long before her perky personality showed through, making smiles break through tears during these difficult days.

During her month-long stay she touched the hearts of those at Kootenai Lodge and helped them “Keep the Faith.”

Then another baby girl briefly entered Debi’s life. “Hope” arrived and stayed one night while waiting for her foster mother to return from travels. Bright-eyed and cherub-faced her sunshine spirit helped everyone at Kootenai Lodge face each day with hopeful hearts.

The year 2002 opened a new year and a new chapter for a healing nation struggling to make sense of the 9-11 tragedy.

It was easier to discover the promise of better days in the innocent face of a babe.

The next baby arrived in May when just a few hours after they received the call for help, Debi and Mark flew to Honolulu to rescue this beautiful baby boy of African American and Japanese ancestry they called Kobe.



Debi and Kobe

While Kobe was in foster care Debi received an email from her friend Cathi Triplett, whom she had assisted in the adoption of a baby girl two years earlier. The message contained the prayer of St. Theresa and asked her to make a wish. As Debi gazed at the sleeping baby in her arms, she instantly knew her wish – that Kobe would find his forever family.

The wish sprouted wings and ten days later Kobe went home with the Triplett family. Cathi had prayed for a sign to guide her and her husband Kirk in completing their family.

Debi's wish and Cathi's prayer were answered.

The Triplett family recently established their own charitable foundation Fore Adoption, aptly named because of Kirk's status as a professional golfer. Triplett's have been supporters of the Dave Thomas Adoption Foundation, which provides and distributes funds to facilitate and promote adoption. The efforts of this generous family have touched Debi and Mark and their many friends on the PGA Tour.

Debi was honored by their request that she sit on the board of directors. Debi and Mark were also touched by a request more personal in nature – to be Kobe's godparents.

Debi and Mark will have the opportunity to enjoy their godson Kobe in January. Kirk Triplett's win at the Reno Tahoe Open qualified him for the

Mercedes Championships, which is held in Kapalua at the Plantation Course, which Debi and Mark co-developed.

In August curly-haired, chubby-cheeked “Marcus” with blended ancestry of Samoan/Japanese and African America was born. Patty Okimura, adoption paralegal for Laurie Loomis, delivered him to Maui into Debi and Mark’s care.



Debi and “Marcus”

“Marcus” became a part of Debi and Mark’s Maui and Montana families during two months in foster care and stayed long enough to reveal a zesty spirit, charming personality and an adorable face.



Grace

Baby Grace joined the household before Marcus’s departure. Weighing in at 4 pounds 6 ½ ounces she was truly “small and mighty” with her vigor and ability to thrive. Her bright dark eyes seemed to pull in the world around her for her careful and joyful inspection. Grace became a local girl when her auntie on Maui adopted her.



“Nalani”

February of 2003 brought sweet “Nalani” to Debi and Mark. A petite baby girl with a mellow Hawaiian spirit, she won the hearts of all who met her. Her biggest fans arrived when her “forever” parents traveled from New York City to receive this little package of hope and joy. She helped heal the hearts of the couple who were battered emotionally when they lost friends, family and over 300 fellow employees in the September 11 attack of the Twin Towers.

Next came a call from Montana. A baby needed a safe haven for three days until he could be reunified with his birth mother. Braydon, a quiet gentle baby seemed to drift into Montana spring on an angel cloud.



Sebastian

On Easter Sunday, just four days after the baby's reunification, the Montana Child and Family Services called with a special request. A medically fragile three month-old boy needed to be placed in a safe home. Having only provided foster care to newborns, Debi and Mark welcomed the challenge. Sebastian blessed their Easter celebration and the weeks that followed.



Matthew

Her most recent foster baby and his family touched her in a deep and special way.

Deeply rooted to their heritage the family rallied together to help in the decision for baby Matthew's future. With their help and support the birth mother made the choice to parent her baby boy which involved juggling her senior year of high school with motherhood. The young mother said, "I am choosing my child over my childhood."

Debi was so impressed with the maturity and selflessness of this young woman. She knows that this baby and his mother will remain in her heart and her life.

This baby was recently placed in his mother's arms – with the mother's knowledge that Debi is always just a phone call away.



“Joy”

The nursery remained busy with visits from Matthew and a “bit of Joy.” Wee little baby “Joy” came into Debi’s home for just one night but the pretty, peaceful baby left her tiny footprint on the legacy of Debi’s foster care.

Happily, “Joy’s” placement went quickly without a hitch so her adoptive parents scarcely missed a minute of her life, which unfolds so magically in newborns, like butterfly wings.

The couple has fostered 20 babies to date. All of these babies have found their “forever” homes and a forever place in the hearts of Debi and Mark.

True to her nature, Debi has dedicated herself more fully each year to her role as foster parent. She pores over books about babies and foster parenting. She attends foster parent classes and conferences, and offers respite care to adoptive and foster parents who have babies in their homes.

This ministry led Debi and Mark to a desire to simplify their life and a decision to offer their Kootenai Lodge for sale. The magnificent lodge in the forest and along Swan Lake in Montana includes 20 buildings and 40 acres. Their dream is to build a home in the area, which will of course; include a heavenly nursery for cradle care.



Meanwhile Debi's main projects are the sale of Kootenai Lodge and fostering babies.

Debi originally planned to return to Maui October 1, for the Hawaii Foster Parent Association 8th Annual Foster Care Conference, at the Sheraton Waikiki in Honolulu.



Matthew

Her plans expanded and adjusted a little when she got a call from Patty Okimura – a call that is becoming familiar in her life, “Can you help with a baby?” The baby boy has Native American heritage, a sentimental footnote to the story of the cradle board.

Debi left Montana the very next morning and arrived in Maui almost a week ahead of schedule.

“It’s all in God’s time – and in the baby’s time,” Debi said with a smile.

It was “baby time” except for the hours she spent attending the two-day conference with the theme of “Reaching for Tomorrow, Building Our Children’s Future Today” October 3 and 4. The conference included a wide range of topics for foster parents and professionals, addressing the needs and issues of foster children from birth through adolescence.

“E Pulama Na Keiki” (Cherish the Children) headed their recent newsletter, a thought that Debi likes. She enjoyed learning with others who share this feeling and her passion for foster care.

Fostering a baby sometimes means also cherishing and embracing birth and adoptive family members into her life.

Many of the adoptive parents send current baby pictures and news and a few others actually visit on a regular basis. She sees her first baby, “Angel Baby” on an annual basis. She also has developed close relationships with a few of the birth mothers. Her most recent foster baby and his family touched her in a deep and special way.

After a baby is placed Debi packs away the diapers, the bottles and the tiny clothes, fondly remembering the precious time she spent with this life unfolding.

The last bottle is packed and she heads to a place where she can quietly process her feelings, memories and thoughts. She grabs a towel, pats a hat on her head and heads toward the quiet murmur of the ocean.

She cherishes floating in the gentle ocean surf at Kapalua Beach, and the pleasures and spirit of Hawaii – the velvety caress of an ocean breeze, the misty kiss of the afternoon rains, and the warm and tender hand of sunlight on her head.

And there is something else. In her heart she knows the beauty of island life – the beauty felt in all of living – becomes even sweeter in the presence of a babe.

That is what she cherishes most.