



Agape Today

Expressing God's unconditional love to Georgia's children in need by providing Christian foster and adoptive homes.

November 2017

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Fostering HOPE / Changing LIVES



Safe Haven After Adoption

Kehli Higdon, LMSW, Assistant Director of Social Services

Georgia Agape is wholeheartedly invested in ensuring that families succeed. We are currently in the process of adding an additional service for our families. The Training in Adoption Competency (TAC) certification, which is an 18-month training offered in partnership with The Center for Support and Education and Georgia State University prepares social services professionals to support and work with birth parents, adoptive children and families during difficult times post adoption. Our goal is to offer this additional network of support to our families by the summer of 2018. The availability of this service will assist in improving the well-being of the birth parents, adopted children and their families.

Quality services are important to contribute to successful post adoption outcomes. The services are offered to enhance the adoption experience, prevent disruptions or dissolutions of the placement and to provide supportive services to the birth parent/s. Many adoptions are successful and are able to address their struggles without seeking any additional assistance, but there are also many adoptions that experience challenges and adjustment difficulties that would benefit from that extra support. This journey does not have to be faced alone. The accessibility of a network of support for families creates a safe haven and awareness that support is there throughout their journey. This network grants the opportunity for successful adoptive families to be a resource and support for new or struggling adoptive families and for previous birth parents to new birth parents just beginning their journey. Services will include counseling, trainings, support groups, peer support and adoption reunion. This ensures that Agape is in it for the long haul to assist families as they embark on this life-altering journey.



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GA GIVES
ON
#GIVINGTUESDAY



SHOW YOUR LOVE
NOVEMBER 28, 2017

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What We Are Thankful For: Celebration Banquet 2017

Racquelle Grant, MSW, Executive Director

What an amazing time had by all at our annual Celebration Banquet this year. On September 28th, nearly 200 people were in attendance to help celebrate the work of so many. Present that evening were many of our local congregations, our Board of Directors, Agape staff, current and former foster and adoptive families, our gracious donors, family and friends.

I cannot thank each of you enough for your time, commitment and support. It was such a joy spending the evening with all of you and getting to know some of you much better. So many people came together to make that evening possible.

Many of you donated financially to the event and we thank you. Members of the Agape team worked tirelessly for weeks organizing and planning. Special thanks to Ken Dowdy, Cheri Raines McLain, Kimberly Hardy-Johns, Sharon Stubbs, and Karen Anthony. I also have to thank Colin Atnip who volunteered his time and expertise capturing the memories of that night on film. A huge thank you also goes out to James Hutchenson who was the creator and producer behind the amazing video of Judge Mary Beth Priest, who was adopted from Agape when she was 3 weeks old. Last, but definitely not least, I want to thank Judge Priest for sharing her story of hope and family. I am forever humbled and honored to be a part of such a large network of supporters passionate about serving children and families.

During my speech that night, I shared a few disturbing and disappointing statistics on outcomes for children not connected to forever homes. I assure you, this was not to discourage our work but just the opposite. It was a reminder that there is still much to do. These numbers represent precious babies that need our help. Our desire to serve has purpose.

As we near the end of the year, we are thankful for how far we have come. We are thankful for all of you and for the families we were able to serve. We look forward to continued partnerships and even more growth.

Celebration Banquet 2017 Thanks to our Banquet Sponsors

The following is a partial listing of people and businesses who gave to help make this banquet possible.

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Special thanks to
Colin Atnip of
Atnip Photography
for taking pictures at
our event and to
James Hutcheson for
filming our
video presentation.

Anita Hale Receives our “Good Samaritan” Award

Anita Hale was certified in 2006. Since that time, she has fostered 13 children in her home. Anita has a place in her heart for children and has historically taken care of our infants and toddlers in care. Anita is described as a very loving foster mother and has bonded very well with the children in her home. She always has a “yes” when it comes to fostering children and works very well with our agency. Anita is a single woman and, at a time in her life when most would not think of fostering, has consistently been eager to make an impact in the life of a child. We thank Anita for her many years of service to Georgia’s children!



James and Anita Hutcheson Receive our “Good Samaritan” Award

James and Anita Hutcheson are relatively new foster parents. On the day they were officially certified, the Hutchesons took in two children in care who were in need of an adoptive home. They willingly said “yes” to these two children to foster and have also said “yes” to being these children’s forever family. They have completely committed themselves to finding additional resources to assist these boys through this transition. James and Anita have already proven themselves to be compassionate and patient. They are excited about expanding their family and are committed to making an impact on these young lives. Congratulations James and Anita!



Charles Hampton Receives the Dot Landers Service Award

The **Dot Landers Service Award** is the highest award given by Agape to honor those who have significantly contributed to forwarding the agency’s mission. Those who receive the award have demonstrated a tremendous commitment to the Agency’s mission and values while being an example of faith and service to the community. Honorees are selected from Agape’s base of strong supporters, volunteers, staff and foster families.



At this year’s Celebration Banquet, Charles Hampton was awarded this prestigious honor. Charles has served Agape faithfully and well for over 20 years. He proved to be a trusted advisor, sounding board and counselor. Charles vigorously lead the foster program team and was responsible for the good annual audits and quality with which the foster care program operated.

Charles was very active with Agape’s member associations: Network 1:27 (formerly CCSFA), Together GA and GALAA. He attended leadership meetings and showed his strength as implementor for the organization by spearheading the update of manuals, policies and procedures with changes in state foster care rules and practices and participating in the completion of our accreditation process with COA. Charles is very much respected by the community, staff, and Board of Directors. His leadership is beyond reproach and Georgia Agape is a better organization because of him.



Are you interested in receiving our newsletter electronically? If you have Adobe Acrobat Reader, you can download and print a .pdf version or read directly from your desktop or mobile device.

Please send an email to: admin@georgiaagape.org

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Dana Stanley

Sharon Stubbs
Ken Dowdy
Karen Anthony
Kehli Higdon

Lynnette Chupp
John McLain
LaQuisha White
Racquelle Grant

Kimberly Hardy-Johns
Missing:
Erica Williams
Kim Tang



Ray and Andria have been foster parents since 2007! They live in Gwinnett County with their daughter and currently have 4 children in foster care in their home.

1. What first inspired you to become foster parents?

We were living in Florida and a minister from another church came and talked about foster care and the need for foster parents. We were told that since we had a 4 bedroom house, just the two of us and we could do so much with that home. There was so much we could do to help children since we had such a big house. We began with foster care for children who had special medical needs. We loved it. We were attending Sun Coast Church of Christ at the time.

2. What do you think is the most rewarding aspect of being a foster parent?

We love to see the kids grow, even if it is only one step or change. When they learn something new it is so exciting. It was more apparent with medical foster care.

3. What do you think is the most challenging aspect of being a foster parent?

Sometimes children aren't always truthful about certain things. When they visit with their families, they may tell untruths that affect the home. It's difficult when the family encourages the child to not be truthful and this can be hurtful to the foster parents and others in the home.

4. A funny story or highlight that you've experienced as foster parents?

On a trip to Cumberland Island the older child currently in our home, went into the ranger station for a demonstration for children. The demonstration was to teach the children about the island. This child told the ranger he had seen or experienced everything the ranger introduced. He told them he had seen a live horseshoe crab, a deer, a wild horse, a sea turtle and seen all the other wonders they told them about. The rangers were amazed at all he had experienced, however, he had not experienced any of the wonders and he had only seen a deer & wild horse at a distance and the horseshoe crab was dead. This child was adamant that he knew all about everything and the amazement of the staff was funny. Another highlight was going to Don Carter State Park in Gainesville. There is a large mushroom that children can play on. We all played on the mushroom and watching everyone play on it was funny.

5. What advice would you give to someone who was on the fence about becoming a foster parent?

It's really rewarding, you won't regret it. If you love kids, you will get a lot of satisfaction from fostering. There will be days that are hard, but it's worth it.



CELEBRATION!?!

John McLain, LMFT, Director of Counseling

Much of this newsletter is about celebrating the accomplishments of the last year. We recently held our Celebration Banquet to honor those who have fostered children and worked with Agape throughout the year. It is a good and appropriate thing to take these times to celebrate and/or even have a party. We all need to have these instances to help balance when we have times that are not so good or happy.

For some, celebrations, parties, or positive events, like weddings, can cause anxiety or grief. Do people get stressed out or anxious about events? Absolutely! The question is: how does one deal with the frustrations or the negative emotions that can come with these celebrations?

At Agape, I got to see a little bit more of what it takes to put together an event like the Celebration Banquet or other events that we've held. Everyone involved in planning our banquet worked diligently to make the event a success. They truly did an amazing job. I was able to witness firsthand the stress and anxiety that can arise from planning, making phone calls, generating guest lists, deciding the menu, and many other tasks. I was also able to witness the joy and happiness we all felt when we honored our foster and adoptive parents, staff, board and supporters, in general. It was evident that even a stressful situation can bring forth joy, in the same manner that a joyful situation can bring forth stress.

At times, it is possible to get overwhelmed by a wonderful event. Some may not be able deal with the day to day events of life as well as those unexpected or time-consuming events that take place. Some may even get to the point of shutting down or experiencing high levels of anxiety or even depression. This is when the seemingly simple tasks just don't get done. Ideally, a person is able to reach out to their support system and ask for help or someone in their support system may reach out to help at this point. When there is a stable support system of friends, family, counseling professionals, etc, it can be possible to weather the storm.

Georgia Agape may be the answer for someone reaching out for assistance. We are here to lighten the load and help bear your burden. So, even when the good things of life cause difficulty for you, we can help you along the way. Give us a call at (770) 452-9995 to help you continue on your journey.



Loving The Most Vulnerable

LaQuisha White, M.S., LPC, CPCS, Director of Social Services

When you think of the concept of Agape love, most would say that it means “selfless,” “unconditional” love. It is the love of the Bible, the love spoken of in John 13:34, which says “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” This commandment from Jesus implies that he loves us unconditionally and we, in turn, must love others the same way. We must show care and compassion to others, even when it’s difficult, because this is what Christ does for us.

For some, it may be “easy” to love their friends, family, even strangers. For others, love is contingent upon its reciprocity: you give love as long as you receive love. But what happens when one is called to love someone who may not have received love before? Such is the calling of foster and adoptive parents. This is not to say that children who come into foster care or who are placed for adoption have never been loved, but the majority of these children have experienced abuse, neglect and trauma.

In recent years, the Division of Family and Children’s Services (DFCS) has worked to bring light to the concept of *Trauma Informed Care*. This concept implies that there is a level of vulnerability to children who are placed in foster care and that foster care, in itself, can be deemed a traumatic experience. These children have been removed from their homes, sometimes the only homes they have ever known, and are placed with well-meaning families who are strangers. These children are, in this state, their most vulnerable. They are experiencing new homes, new families, new communities, new schools, new friends and more. It is at this time that love needs to be evident the most.

Trauma informed care means that the care we provide takes into account the trauma that these children have experienced. Trauma informed care means that we, as a community of social service providers, foster and adoptive parents and stakeholders, must understand that a child with trauma history will not *tell* you their feelings; they will *show* you. Children who come into care often have behavioral issues that must be addressed. The way that we as a community view and respond to these behaviors is crucial to building trust and love in this relationship. We must understand how trauma affects brain development and how a child’s *chronological* age may be very different from their *developmental* age. Their behaviors may seem frustrating to us at times (quite often to be exact), but it is our duty as those with a heart for children to understand that these children are products of their trauma history.

I write these words because you are a part of our community. You are family, friends, church members and stakeholders. Some of you may even have regular contact with our foster parents. When you see a child that may struggle with behaviors or have difficulties with limit-setting, think about how this experience may be, overall, different for them. Perhaps no one has set limits for them before. Perhaps no one has provided structure. Perhaps no one in their life has shown consistency and reliability. Our foster parents are amazing people who strive to provide all of these things for our children in care. It doesn’t mean that this is easy. At times, because of the nature of trauma a child has experienced, they may reject this structure, care, love and reliability. They may rebuff positive emotions and experiences because this is different from the negative emotions and experiences they have faced before. The next time you interact with our foster parents and children in care, take the time to remember these words. Take time to appreciate those parents and those children who are living life the only way they know how, until someone shows them differently.

I express again that I am amazed at our foster and adoptive parents who put self aside and opened their hearts and homes to children. I John 4:8 states “Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” It is our job as a community to work to understand our part in showing Agape love to the most vulnerable.



Georgia Agape will host the **Empowered to Connect Conference** via simulcast on **April 13-14, 2018**. This is a live stream that will be viewed at locations around the world! This conference provides parents everywhere with access to practical tools that help bring hope and healing to any child who has experienced trauma or the loss of parental care. Location and registration information coming soon!

Fulltime and Respite Foster Parents Needed!

We need families who can serve as fulltime and “respite” foster parents. Fulltime foster parents are the primary care givers of the children. Respite foster parents are those who help out our fulltime foster parents by serving children for short periods of time when there is a need for a break. For information, call LaQuisha White at Agape, (770) 452-9995.

Quality and Affordable Counseling Services Available

Georgia Agape is offering quality professional counseling services to help those struggling with life’s issues in our supporting congregations and our community at-large. We offer a sliding scale fee for those who need help paying for the counseling. Our fees range from \$30 to \$125 per session. John McLain, LMFT is our Director of Counseling offering **Marriage, Family, Individual** and **Pre-marital counseling**. He is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and an Approved Supervisor through AAMFT. Call our office for more information, (770) 452-9995.



The Appeal of Astonished Gratitude

Ken Dowdy, Director of Development

“When we learn to read the story of Jesus and see it as the story of the love of God, doing for us what we could not

do for ourselves—that insight produces, again and again, the sense of **astonished gratitude** which is very near the heart of authentic Christian experience.” N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*.

Astonished gratitude! A fitting thought as we approach Thanksgiving.

This is the time of year we promote Georgia Agape’s Thanksgiving Appeal, our most significant fundraiser each year.

Your partnership allows both the children and the families we serve an opportunity to have a genuine Christian-family experience. Many of our children have never lived this experience before. They have unfortunately been removed from their living environment for their own protection and placed in a home, usually with complete strangers. Only during the early dawn of this ex-

perience with a new, loving Christian family can they begin to see where there may be hope for a brighter tomorrow.

By graciously giving during our Thanksgiving Appeal you literally make a difference in the reality of a better day, each day, for each child.

“Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer. And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good.” Maya Angelou, *Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer*.

Will you help us to overcome powerful obstacles and welcome good in the lives of the children and families we serve?

In 1974 Amy Bessire wrote a song many of you sing at your church (based on a passage from Lamentations 3:24): “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘Therefore I will hope in Him.’”

We are hard at work ultimately to provide a connection for each child to what is Holy—a life that is “new every morning,” an experience rich in grace and mercy centered on Christ, full of “astonished gratitude” for renewed life.

Come walk with us on this Holy journey where lives are changed and children are learning to walk with the Master. Please consider how much you can give during this year’s Thanksgiving Appeal.



Thanksgiving Appeal 2017

We Need Your Support!

Consider a donation during our Thanksgiving Appeal 2017! You can use the enclosed return envelope or go online at www.GeorgiaAgape.org. Feel free to call the Agape office if you need help or information, (770) 452-9995. Thank you!

Thanks for caring and sharing!

Attention Federal Employees!

Remember Agape in the Combined Federal Campaign

The 2017 Combined Federal Campaign is about to begin. Contributions can be designated to Georgia Agape by using our agency number, **64733**, on the form. Tell your friends and co-workers about Agape and the tremendous service we provide to the community!

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The enclosed gift of \$ _____ is given:

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Our Mission

To provide professional social services as a compassionate Christian outreach to children, families and individuals in order to enhance their prospects for a better and brighter future.



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November is National Adoption Month!

Kim Tang, Maternity and Adoption Counselor

In 2016, more than 4,600 children were adopted by their forever families during the 16th annual National Adoption Day celebration in cities across the country. This year's National Adoption Day will be on November 18, 2017. This is a special day to recognize the importance of adoption in the lives of children and families. Adoption plans are being made all year long, not just in November, which is National Adoption Month. Private Child Placing Agencies, like Georgia Agape, are very useful in facilitating the many steps of the adoption process. An advantage of working with a private agency like Georgia Agape is that there is a support person working with the adoptive parents and the birthparents considering adoption for their infants. This means that each party has someone who can spend time with them, answering their questions and making the process easier to understand. We also help the adoptive parents *connect* with the birthparents considering adoption for their infants. It is typical for people to have questions about how the adoption process works. At Georgia Agape we want to help alleviate some of the worries for both adoptive parents and those considering adoption for their infants. National Adoption Day and the entire month of November is a designated time for all of us to reflect on the important process of bringing families together. To start your adoption journey, contact me at (770) 452-9995 or at Kim@GeorgiaAgape.org.

