

WOMEN'S Times

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+ Author Susan Dworkin

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Photo by Michael Lavin Flower

A Fresh Perspective

Fresh Air Fund unites local families and city kids

Growing up in New York City, six-year-old Tyrell Thomas had always been afraid of the water. When his mother saw a photo of him jumping joyously into a pond, she was amazed. Another picture showed Tyrell, who'd never been comfortable around animals, kissing a frog.

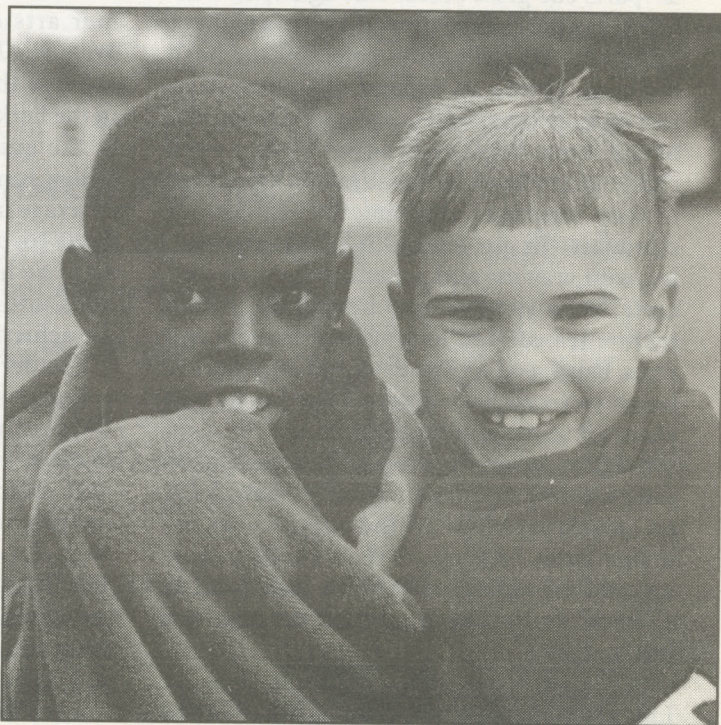
Two weeks in the country can really transform a kid.

This premise launched the Fresh Air Fund more than 125 years ago. Since that time, the not-for-profit agency has placed children from disadvantaged New York City communities with volunteer host families for free, two-week summer vacations. Through the "Friendly Town" program, close to 6,000 inner city kids each year find temporary homes in suburban or rural areas from Virginia to Maine, as well as Canada.

The bucolic landscape of Western Massachusetts has been a longtime destination of buses full of anxious children, some of whom have never stepped beyond city sidewalks. Last year, 112 kids arrived in the Berkshires and Pioneer Valley. For many, it's the first time away from their families. Some of the children are not much older than kindergarten age—six years old is the minimum—and feel the gnaw of homesickness even before the high-rises disappear from view.

Five years ago, when Tyrell boarded the bus for his first Fresh Air trip, he was three days shy of his sixth birthday. "It was scary at first," his mother, Ivy Thomas, admits. "Your child is going with a family you don't know." But Thomas, who was also raised in New York City, spent childhood summers in rural Mississippi and wanted her two boys to have the same enriching experience. If I am afraid, she told herself, my kids will never get that exposure. So, with "faith in God," she packed Tyrell's bag and sent him on the bus to meet the Barretts, his host family in Hancock, Mass., near the Williamstown border.

Liza Barrett grew up in Hancock, on an adjacent farm that is still owned by her par-



Tyrell Thomas (l) and Hank Barrett

ents. Moving back there with her own family sparked happy memories of her childhood, shared with five siblings and, each summer, a Fresh Air visitor. First Gloria, then Yvette came for several years. The visits, Barrett says, were "wonderful."

"My parents just said the girls lived in the city," she explains. "They never presented it as charity, because they had the wisdom to know we would gain as well."

Like many towns in Western Massachusetts then and now, Hancock and Williamstown were mostly white. "It was the first time in memory that a kid from a different race was in my home," Barrett says. She remembers fondly that Yvette tried to put her hair in cornrows, and that in the barn they formed a club called the "Haybale Kids." The visitors raced through the fields with bare feet, and though they were frightened at first at night while camping in tents with the Barrett children, they grew to love it just as much as Barrett and her siblings did.

"They blended right in," she recalls.

As an adult, she saw the two-way benefits of the Fresh Air program and convinced her own family to host a child. In July, 2000, Barrett, her husband Paul and their three children waited in a shopping plaza parking lot as children

stepped from the bus after the three-hour drive. "There were only two kids left on the bus," Barrett remembers. "This little boy got off and I almost melted. He's been a very important part of our family ever since."

Though hosts are motivated to participate for different reasons, they cite similar rewards. Lingering memories of childhood and a cultural connection prompted Maria Garcia of Florence, Mass., to become involved in the Fresh Air Fund as a host and volunteer coordinator for Hampshire County. Growing up in New York City, Garcia had childhood friends who participated in the program, but her parents didn't allow her to do the same. "I remember thinking the summer was endless," she says. "I was really bored."

When she moved to Florence as an adult, Garcia saw it as an opportunity for sharing a place she loved with a city child who might relish the change of scenery. "We live in such a beautiful area," she says. "I wanted to open that up to other kids."

Most of the Fresh Air kids are African American or Latino, and Garcia was also eager to have a friend of color for her daughter. As a Hispanic child living in a small New England town, her daughter did not have much

everyday exposure to children who weren't white.

For the past five years, Garcia and her family have hosted Cheyenne, a girl who lives in a part of the city where Garcia used to work. From the first moment of her arrival as a frightened eight-year-old, Cheyenne adapted astonishingly well. The Garcias are vegetarians, and although Cheyenne likes meat, she doesn't eat any during her two-week visits, and she never complains.

"Our experience has been so positive," Garcia says.

Like Garcia, Lora Sandhusen of Northampton, Mass., is a Fresh Air Fund volunteer coordinator for Hampshire County, as well as a former host. For seven summers, her family eagerly anticipated the arrival of Lisa, who was the same age as Sandhusen's daughter. "We rolled with it," Sandhusen explains. "It was a very good experience for my daughter to have an instant sibling, and to share things. She had somebody to goof off with. Sometimes they'd fight, but then they'd get over it."

Lisa developed a solid friendship with Sandhusen's daughter and a year-round relationship with the family. "When we went camping, the girls would sit in a tree and just yak away," Sandhusen says. "I had to wonder, what were they talking about?"

For each two-week visit, Sandhusen made it a point to alter her family's home routine so that it felt like a summer vacation for everyone. The girls would stay up late making cookies or doing art projects, and they'd have cookouts every day. "We didn't wash dishes the whole time," she laughs.

Sandhusen recognizes that young visitors can change the family dynamic. Sometimes host parents inadvertently create tension by treating the city kids as guests who can do no wrong, while insisting their own children abide by house rules. "Some families can't deal with it," she says.

Barrett, too, admits that hosting a Fresh Air child doesn't always produce "a match made in heaven," as it has for her family. Kids are kids, and they can bicker, cry and misbehave. Often host children are reluctant to share toys or their parents' attention.

"Families must go in with their eyes open," she advises. "It's important to be realistic."

She continues: "You absolutely must parent. Every kid has idiosyncrasies. You discipline, have conversations and teach."

For Tyrell and the Barretts, the past five summers have been marked by pond swims, bicycle outings, horseback rides and backyard sports events. The boy who was afraid of animals fell in love with the family's two dogs and the horses owned by Barrett's parents, whom Tyrell now calls Nana and Grampy.

For his sixth birthday—three days after his first arrival—Barrett baked Tyrell a basketball shaped-cake. But when she asked him what he'd like as a special dinner, she was stumped by one of his favorite foods: collard greens. She called his mother, who gladly shared her recipe. And Thomas later asked Barrett for a few recipes, like one for squash bread, that Tyrell requested at home.

The Thomases and the Barretts have fostered a close relationship that extends well

beyond an annual slice of July. Eager to meet her son's host family she'd heard so much about, Tyrell's mother and other son Derrick traveled to Hancock last year. "It was wonderful," says Thomas. "It was like we'd known each other for years and years." Tyrell joined the Barrett family this past winter, and—always the sports enthusiast—tried skiing and ice skating for the first time. And every summer, there's another basketball-shaped birthday cake.

Success stories abound; over 65% of children are invited back after their first visit. There is always a need, however, for new host families. (Participants are able to choose the age and gender of the child they invite.) A number of day camps across our region offer free tuition for Fresh Air kids if host parents pay for their own children, which helps address the lack, in many households, of an adult at home during the day.

Realities of race and class can come to the fore during visits. Sandhusen remembers how "Lisa's eyes opened" to racially aligned disparities in privilege the summer she was 12 years old. For children in rural and suburban areas, "the kids from New York serve as ambassadors" and vice versa, Sandhusen says. "Some [Fresh Air] kids have middle-class outlooks, and see this as enrichment. Some kids come right from shelters, with families in desperate straits."

Sandhusen is committed to the Fresh Air Fund because she believes it's a "can-do program" staffed with problem-solvers who are interested in creating opportunities for children that city youth might not otherwise have. To this end, the program works to accommodate the individual circumstances of city kids and host families alike.

"Whatever the Fresh Air Fund has been in the past, right now it's a child development program," Sandhusen says, noting that city kids who spend two weeks away from home deserve to feel a sense of accomplishment. "It's unfamiliar and scary to leave your comfort zone, and I always want to send [kids] back happy, with a new layer of confidence that they'll take to their next challenge."

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Tyrell Thomas and Barrett children