



## With 14 children, Hillsboro family adopts a can-do spirit

By Andrew Theen, The Oregonian

on July 19, 2012 at 12:05 PM, updated July 19, 2012 at 1:04 PM



Enlarge

Michal Thompson, The Hillsboro Argus

Dinner time at the Sheppard house is always a family affair, and holding hands around the banquet-sized table for the blessing of their meal is a firm tradition.

**Ron and Linda Sheppard of Hillsboro fill their home and hearts with a big, diverse family** gallery (18 photos)

**HILLSBORO** -- Ron Sheppard searched for the perfect pew. Slender and even-keeled, he scouted a spot -- not too close to the pulpit, where the pews narrow, and not too far away -- before calling for his wife and their 14 children.

The simple Sunday morning ritual provides a window into the lives of Linda and Ron Sheppard: Days are carefully scripted, down to who showers when, but the couple also anticipate the unexpected and adapt when it comes their way.

Ron Sheppard, 43, and his wife, Linda, 40, have adopted a dozen children over the past 17 years, raising them along with their two biological children. Seven came to the Sheppards when initial adoption

placements didn't work out. Five are Haitian orphans. One, who has cerebral palsy, didn't walk until she was 4. Another was 7 years old when his birth mother placed him for adoption.

"Many of our children have experienced witnessing people die, have experienced abuse, have experienced starvation," said Linda, who works as a part-time adoption counselor.

"They've been told all kinds of things that haven't come true," she added.

Planning helps: Each item on the weekly schedule is a promise that this will happen. The jar in the kitchen saving up for another trip to Hawaii is a promise of good times to come.

The clan functions thanks to structure, selflessness, budgeting, devotion and loads of patience.

### The Sheppard family

**Ron**, 43, works in sales at Permapost Products

**Linda**, 40, self-employed part-time adoption counselor

**Joseph**, 20, biological son, taking online classes through Thomas Edison State College

**David**, 18, biological son, student at Portland State University

Ron, who works in sales for **Permapost Products**, says the formula is simple. "If you think about it, you could let it overwhelm you. If you just function instead of worry about it, it works."

### Humble beginnings

Ron and Linda grew up in Hillsboro. Both attended **Brookwood Elementary School**, but they didn't meet until they worked together at the old Hank's Thriftway in Cornelius. They married three years later, when Linda was 20.

Let's have one kid, they said. OK, a second to keep the first company.

But there was a sense of something more: a natural tug toward adoption.

Maliya, now 17, was first. Linda had traveled to China as a teenager and fell in love with the country. It was in her blood, too; her mother, the daughter of Christian missionaries, grew up there.

Linda and Ron first saw Maliya in a photograph, about a month before traveling to China in October 1995 to pick her up. Adopting the 8-month-old cost more than \$20,000, greater than the couple's annual income.

Somehow, it came together. They took out a home equity loan. Linda worked a second job. They plugged away. This became a theme.

"None of our adoptions, did we have the money when we started," Ron said. The other children would follow, from Vietnam, Haiti and Ecuador, as well as from around the United States.

Linda estimates she's been to Haiti more than 30 times. She traveled with **Mountain Top Ministries** and volunteered at the Bresma Orphanage in Port-au-Prince, where she met the five children who eventually joined their family.

In their first homes in the States, these children struggled and acted out, but with the Sheppards, they settled in. "They know each other, and they're comfortable in a large atmosphere because they grew up in an orphanage," she said.

Faith and a missionary spirit, Linda said, are the primary motivations for the extended family. "We really felt called by God to adopt."

**Kenneth**, 18, adopted at age 7 from California, attending Moody Bible School in the fall

**Maliya**, 17, daughter adopted from China at 8 months old, attending Pensacola Christian College in the fall

**Phuong**, 17, daughter adopted from Vietnam at age 9 (via disrupted adoption from Oregon)

**Julia**, 14, daughter adopted at birth in Oregon

**Christelle**, 12, daughter adopted from Haiti at age 10 (via disrupted adoption in Tennessee)

**Talitha**, 12, daughter adopted from Chicago at 1 month old

**Billy**, 10, son adopted from Haiti at age 6 (via disrupted adoption in Washington)

**Roseminique**, 9, daughter adopted from Haiti at age 6 (via disrupted adoption in Colorado)

**Melissa**, 8, daughter adopted from Haiti at age 4 (via disrupted adoption in Washington)

**Jordan**, 7, son, adopted from Ecuador last year (still pending, via disrupted adoption in Oregon)

**Steevenson**, 7, son adopted from Haiti at age 3 (via disrupted adoption in Washington)

**Naomi**, 2, adopted from Michigan before birth

## A family grows

With children ranging from 2 to 20 years old, the Sheppards have incentive to plan the day's events. Chores, classes, meals and trips are scripted. Special time with Mom is scheduled weekly. The younger ones like to go to McDonald's for an ice cream cone.

Disputes are hashed out during weekly family board meetings. Each child writes Linda a note outlining grievances; they're also expected to mention something they're thankful for.

### Hillsboro's Sheppard family

Ron and Linda Sheppard's family is large, diverse and rewarding. Kenneth, 18, described it as a lesson in humility, acceptance and hard-work. The family has 14 kids, 12 of whom were adopted

Birthdays are consolidated into quarterly events. At the summer party, Kenneth and David, both 18, manned the rented snow-cone machine in the backyard. Athletic Billy, 10, performed backflips on the

trampoline.

The family owns a transportation fleet: an old recreational vehicle, a shuttle van, a 15-passenger van and a couple of cars. The shuttle van, bought on the cheap a few years ago, has a TV -- "Tom & Jerry" is a popular choice among the young delegation -- and a cartoon figure of each Sheppard family member emblazoned on its side.

One worry the family doesn't have is getting the kids off to school each morning. The teacher comes to them.

Aimee Fessler, a former **Portland Public Schools** teacher, teaches the younger kids in an attic classroom in the big old home on Glencoe Road.

The Sheppards strive to send their children to **Portland Community College** when they reach 15 or 16. The kids graduate early, then apply for federal financial aid.

Twenty-year-old Joseph, the oldest, is attending an online college. David is going to **Portland State University** on grants and an academic scholarship.

Kenneth, who is headed to **Moody Bible College**, notes that the large family offers its own lessons. "You gain a lot of new perspectives on life, and you get experienced with conflict. It helps you better relationships with people, because you understand many situations and dilemmas."

### Indomitable spirit

With so many mouths to feed, bodies to clothe and minds to educate, how do they do it?

"We just budget," Linda said. "We don't spend a lot. We calculate all of our meals."

The Sheppards are not poor, they point out, though they make less than \$50,000 a year. They own their home and have rental property, but not many liquid assets.

They're resourceful.

One-dollar **movies at McMenamins Grand Lodge** in Forest Grove are a staple for a cheap night. The once-a-month Hometown Buffet trek is like a gift from on high. The monthly food budget is \$600, with the buffet trip accounting for \$150.

Faith sustains them as well. The family worships at Northeast Portland's **New Song Community Church**. They say a prayer before meals. At a recent quarterly birthday party, roughly 40 friends and family stood in a circle to give thanks for the meal.

Their pastor at New Song, Richard Probasco, described the Sheppards as incredible. He noted that Linda still finds time to remain active in the church's mission work and planning overseas.

Probasco, 66, who also has a multicultural family with adopted children, said the church had a number of families with diverse backgrounds. "We didn't put out a sign that this is what we do," he said. "They just somehow find us."

Although they do it alone, the Sheppards are not alone.

When Julia, 14, had a kidney removed and underwent chemotherapy, someone left \$1,200 in cash in the mailbox.

Clothes, bags of bread and other items often materialize, which helps stretch the grocery budget.

"People just do good things for us," Linda said.

Ron added: "It's great to see that. In our culture, everything seems to be so negative. It's not."

Linda said her children have a different perspective from many American families. They don't care about possessions -- they own one TV with no cable -- and they don't see differences as negative. "They know what it's like to be treated poorly," Linda said.

Life experiences become manifest in personality traits. Melissa, 8, didn't walk until she was 4. She has cerebral palsy and an indomitable spirit. "She survived in an orphanage in a country where most people starve to death," Ron said. "How did she manage that? She's a fighter."

Although Joseph has moved out, and three more Sheppards will leave this fall, Ron and Linda will never be empty nesters.

Phuong, 17, is developmentally disabled and will likely stay at home.

At the next Sheppard board meeting, the kids will get out their dry-erase boards and scribble down their concerns. Someone might have stolen a toy. One child might be mean to another. Button-pushing might be the issue of the day. They'll listen, and they'll learn, and at the dinner table, the family will hold hands, say a prayer and share a meal.

-- **Andrew Theen**

© 2014 OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.