



Changed
lives

Meet The Gardner's

By MARY BRYAN

Child Bridge is a Flathead Valley faith-based nonprofit that launched in 2011 in the with a very simple and focused mission... "to find and support foster and adoptive families for Montana children in need. Across the state, there's a lack of trained and licensed families to care for these children who are victims of abuse or neglect. And with limited awareness of the need, children may be removed from their communities and everything familiar to them, bounced from place to place, or even languish in group homes. Child Bridge bridges the gap between churches, community and government to find the right families, and walk alongside them on what can be a difficult journey.

There are a record number of children coming into foster care and, over time, some of these children may be in need of permanent families. Even when children need permanent families, the journey begins by the family fostering the children first. Here, the simple mission of Child Bridge changes lives. The stories of transformation are powerful and inspiring. Let us introduce you to the Gardner's ...a wonderful Flathead family who were willing to embark on the foster care journey with committed hearts, but open hands.

Tell us about your family:

We're Joey and Debby Gardner and we have five great boys. Caleb is 20 and a junior at MSU Bozeman, majoring in Mechanical Engineering. Josiah, 18, is a freshman at FVCC majoring in Graphic Design.

Jonathan, 15, a freshman in high school where he plays soccer and participates in Speech and Debate; David, 11, is in 5th grade and enjoying his last year before entering middle school. Jeremiah, age 4, loves being a big kid in Pre-K three days a week.

A typical day in the life of our family of seven is full of busy schedules, hectic bedtimes, brotherly "love" (which tends to sound more like arguing and pestering each other), dinners around the table, lots of noise and silliness, and ministry with our church family of 17 years where Joey serves as Generations Pastor. Our hope is that in the midst of the craziness, we are learning to daily live out our faith together in an authentic and genuine way.

Where you live:
Kalispell, MT

What activities do you enjoy as a family?

We like to hike, camp and explore God's incredible creation. The trampoline and hot tub are family favorites, as well as board games and movies. We like snowshoeing and sledding and, when the snow allows, building giant snowmen, snow hills and forts.

What intrigued you about adding to your family with adoption?

Joey: We love kids and often felt we had lots of love to share and wanted to do something more permanent. We've also had many opportunities to have college-age kids live with us for short periods of time. We loved

the four kids God gave us and felt we could offer a stable and loving place for another child to grow up in.

Debby: Our good friends adopted a young girl from India 11 years ago. I'll never forget visiting their home the day after she arrived, seeing her in her new living room playing with legos, surrounded by her new family. It really rocked my world, and we began taking action toward an international adoption that day. But things fell through for us two different times. This was pivotal in our journey, which eventually ended with God using Child Bridge to open our eyes to adopt through foster care. They were instrumental in helping us really understand local needs of children in Montana. That was an eye opener too.

Joey: After learning about the needs, and what the journey might look like from Child Bridge, we were thinking about foster care and adoption. I remember thinking in the kitchen one day: "Four kids is enough. We have four of our own, and adding a fifth may be too much for us." And it was as if God spoke to me audibly and asked, "what number are you?" I'm the fifth of six kids in my own family. That really sealed the deal for me. We knew that God was leading us to adopt.

We had other friends from our church who were also similarly challenged. We went through the training together and began our journey into foster care. After the training, it took about a year to finally find ourselves in the right situation to begin taking calls for placements.



His name was a confirmation he belonged in our family. All of our boys have names of men with strong character from the Old Testament. Jeremiah fit that perfectly.



Debb: The phone would ring...and we'd evaluate every call we received from the social worker. "Should we take this child in? Should we take this placement? Is this the right child for us? Are we the right family for this child?" Finally, we decided that God had called us to adopt, and we were confident of that. We don't have to evaluate; we just have to say "yes!" We decided that the next call we received we would say yes, and the next call resulted in Jeremiah being placed with our family.

Even his name was a confirmation he belonged in our family. All of our boys have names of men with strong character from the Old Testament. Jeremiah fit that perfectly. Even his given middle name is the same as Joey's mom, who went to heaven 17 years ago.

How were you introduced to Child Bridge?

We attended an informational meeting at our church. Child Bridge presented information about the local needs of foster children, and the possibility of adopting children who come into care. The goal is always to reunite children with their biological families, but sometimes this isn't possible. This information intrigued us because we had a long-term interest in adoption, but had mostly considered international adoption up to this point.

How was the transition for your family?

The transition was fairly smooth. Like any foster situation, it took some time for Jeremiah to form attachments with our family, but he now has very healthy, loving bonds with all of us. He's simply one of the brothers and fits in beautifully. The biggest adjustment took place with David, who was the baby of the family. Although a bit shocked by it all at first, David

has assumed the role of big brother and really enjoys having Jeremiah as a little brother. They bug each other at times, like normal kids.

We've all learned that we don't have a finite amount of love to share. At this point we can't imagine our lives without Jeremiah. It feels like he has always been a part of our family. From our perspective, this is something that can only be explained by God's loving hand in all of our hearts and lives.

What is the most positive change that has occurred in your family dynamic?

One of the biggest benefits has been for our own children. They have learned to open their hearts to the needs of others, to grow in their love for Jeremiah, and accept him as their own brother. Also, watching Jeremiah grow in his love for his four new brothers has been a beautiful thing to experience.

There's also a big increase in laughter and activity! Jeremiah has a wonderful sense of humor and says the funniest things. He brings levity and a fresh look at this precious life we've been given. There are certainly plenty of conflicts with five boys, but he has a unique bond with each of his big brothers, and we all treasure his energy, enthusiasm and laughter.

Can you describe any struggles that you may have had that would help other families looking to foster or adopt?

For us, most of the struggles involved the journey through the foster and legal system. We were often frustrated and felt like the only ones without a voice in the court. Also, it was difficult to maintain the balance of open hands and a fully committed heart. We

lived each day striving never to hold back our lives and love.

Every foster situation is uncertain, but we learned from our Child Bridge connections and foster-care training that the investment we were making was so valuable, and Jeremiah was more than worth the risk of our hearts hurting if he didn't end up with us permanently.

Did you have a strong support system through family and Child Bridge?

Child Bridge was very supportive throughout the entire process. They were there to answer questions, lend a compassionate ear when we were confused, and cheered us on every time we interacted with them.

We had numerous families from our church who were going through the foster/adoption process at the same time. Even though each experience was unique it was so helpful to lean on each other and pray for each other throughout the experience.

Our own families were also very supportive and encouraging from the very beginning. They have fully accepted Jeremiah as another nephew/grandson/cousin. Joey's brother and sister-in-law are also foster parents, and it's been really special to share our journeys together.

Anything else you would like to share?

Well, yes! On May 22, 2015 Jeremiah became Jeremiah Jay Gardner!

In you are interested in learning more about Child Bridge, please visit www.childbridgemontana.org.