

# Burlington County Times

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## Home at last

By Rita Manno, Correspondent

This is the story of twins, now 12 years old, who spent their early years in environments of abuse and neglect, who had no social or personal skills, who were afraid of every new person, who thought strangers would hurt them or take them away, who built barriers to protect themselves and who did not know how to love or be loved.

It is the story of their journey — aided by a strong child care volunteer and an agency who were on their side even in tough times — and about the final destination, a family who adopted them and opened a world of discipline, love and security the children thought they'd never have.

By the time Michael and his sister Sofia were 8 years old they had lived in 14 foster homes, taken from the mother at birth who was unable to care for them. Some of the foster homes they lived in were in Palmyra and Willingboro.

The only stability Michael had in his first eight years was his twin sister. She was with him through all the abuse and neglect he suffered at the hands of people who found his behavioral problems and special needs too much to handle. So they punished him. He learned not to talk. Nothing. Sofia was quiet but not silent. She developed her own coping mechanism, like always blaming others.

Michael and Sofia met the Hammer family of Vineland four years ago. They thought it was just another foster home, strangers who would eventually send them packing like all the others. They were wrong.

Tina and Sean Hammer have three children, Alexandria, 24, and sons Justice, 12, and Tye, 10. Dad Sean, 43, is an equipment mechanic with MHS Lift and Mom Tina, 42, has owned a consignment shop in Vineland for the last 20 years.

“We’ve been so fortunate in our careers and we wanted to share our home with others not so fortunate,” Tina said. But sharing their home didn’t necessarily mean adoption.

Licensed in New Jersey to work as mentors and with special needs children, the Hammers agreed to take Michael and Sofia, then 8 years old, into their home. They didn’t know they had special needs and had severe issues, said Tina Hammer. “We thought we’d have them eight to 12 months and then move on.”

They got more than they expected.



Tina and Sean Hammer of Vineland look on as their daughter and son read, one of their favorite activities.

“Michael was introverted. He didn’t talk to anybody. He talked to himself. We’d see him talking to cereal boxes. He just had no social skills,” Tina recalled.

Michael also was learning disabled and showed signs of post traumatic stress. He had deep-seeded emotional problems and had a difficult time bonding. Sofia’s way of coping was to blame others when something happened. It was the “I’m the good one,” syndrome.

With so many foster homes, so much abuse and neglect, it was no surprise that both children believed that “it’s all about what you can do for me.” The Hammers showed them day after day that it’s all about the family, about being together. It was a hard sell at first.

The twins tested the Hammers. “They wanted to see us give up on them because everybody else had,” said Tina Hammer. So the Hammers ended up taking two steps forward and three back.

“We thought it would be enough to provide love and monetary things. But it wasn’t. It was showing them we cared through our actions and helping them learn how to live within a family.”

Friends and family members told the Hammers to give up, that the work they were doing was exhausting, difficult and might take its toll on the rest of the family. The first weeks after Michael and Sofia came, the Hammers admitted that their whole life was shattered.

“The kids back then were out of control,” Tina Hammer said.

Were it not for the love and advocacy of the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and volunteer Renata Baldwin,

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Sofia (left) and her new brothers Tye and Justice Hammer look at books at the Evesham library.

Tina Hammer said they may have not survived the difficult times. At one point there was a report that recommended Michael be institutionalized, which the Hammers and CASA successfully opposed.

When Baldwin was in a 40-hour training program to become a certified volunteer at CASA of Burlington and Mercer counties, the instructors cited examples of children (without names) who were in the system and who were still suffering after periods of time in multiple resource (foster) homes.

After her training in 2011, she was given her first case. It turned out to be Michael and Sofia. Later Baldwin, who said she was mortified by the severe trauma in the case study in her training class, found out it was the history of the twins in their first eight years.

A CASA volunteer often is the only constant adult presence in lives of the children they are trying to help. CASA volunteers write reports to the judge and detail what is being done for and with the children they are responsible for. They are the eyes and ears of the court.

Baldwin works as the director of an after-school program at the YMCA. She lives in Haddonfield and estimates that all the roles she has, including being a CASA volunteer, make for a 12-hour work day.

When she learned about the twins' history, she thought, "Oh no. I'm just one more person they don't want to talk to."

So her strategy for the first meeting was: play.

"We started with playing cards and then board games, lots of games. The children who were quiet up until they started to talk," she said.

Tina Hammer said it was amazing how Baldwin developed a rapport with the children. "She was level-headed and cool. The children began to trust her."

Baldwin said she had many battles with schools and other agencies on behalf of Michael and Sofia. "I cried a lot," she said.

She fought a service provider and a school that wanted to separate the twins. In the early stages she said various groups dealing with the twins didn't show they were really on the children's side.

"The kids wanted a fresh start. They so wanted to be adopted by the Hammers," she said. The twins decided to change their names to Michael and Sofia to symbolize a fresh start.

The decision to move from a foster home to adopting the twins is a lifetime decision and involves many factors. Sure, the Hammers loved these kids but they had to judge the impact of an adoption on their biological children, especially the younger boys, Justice and Tye. Turns out the boys and their older sister were fine with the adoption.

The Hammers also thought they would have a better legal standing on any issues involving the children if they were the parents.

So on Aug. 23, the children — dressed in their finest and with big smiles — entered Superior Court in Mount Holly with their foster parents. They emerged with even bigger smiles with their new parents, Tina and Sean Hammer.



Twins Michael and Sofia are now 12 years old.

"The kids were ecstatic," said Baldwin, who cried the "happiest of tears."

"We love them like our own kids. How could we not adopt them and then worry forever what would happen to them," said Tina Hammer.

Today, Michael and Sofia attend sixth grade at new schools. They attend therapy sessions daily.

The parents were shocked when Michael started talking. He talked about his horrific past. "He never told anyone much because no one listened to him. He was open, blunt and honest with us," said Tina Hammer.

"The butterfly has emerged."

After four years with the Hammers, Michael has become very social and talks to everyone.

"Truly, he is a joy and a very smart boy," said his new mom.

Sofia is a little quieter but has become more open to others. "She laughs and smiles a lot," said Tina Hammer..

The story of Michael and Sofia and their new life in the Hammer

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family is a triumph of love, patience, a lot of work and a belief that these two children deserved a chance at a stable life so they could grow physically and emotionally.

But there are many children who are not so fortunate.

“Those who never find a permanent adoptive family end up homeless, unemployed, depressed with severe mental health problems,” said Lori Morris, executive director of CASA of Mercer and Burlington Counties.

Children over age 14 are less likely to be adopted.

Morris said there is a shortage of trained CASA volunteers who make a major impact on the lives of children living in foster care. Volunteers who commit for at least 18 months are from various backgrounds — retired executives, insurance workers, stay-at-home parents, to name a few.



CASA volunteer Renata Baldwin (center) with the Hammer family.

There are 172 volunteers, called advocates, with 40 percent of them working full-time jobs like Baldwin. They spend five to 15 hours a month on their cases. But many spend much more time. CASA is working with some 266 children as of June 30 in both counties from newborn to age 21. There are 854 children who live in out-of-home placements in both counties, which include residential group homes.

Many times, children end up outside of the counties they grew up in because there aren't enough adoptive parents in Burlington and Mercer counties. That was the case with Michael and Sofia.

Sometimes children have certain needs that available foster families don't feel confident they can deal with, said Morris. “So we need to find homes in different areas. The most important thing is to have responsible foster and adoptive parents.”

Morris said that nearly half of children in their care in Mercer County are placed outside the county. While Burlington County is bigger and has more placements, there are still situations where children from Burlington have to be placed outside the county.

“It is a big problem,” said Morris. “We just don't have enough homes.”

Thinking about Michael and Sofia, Morris said every new foster home meant the children had to start again — new people, new schools, new teachers, a new town and a new home.

“These children are heroes,” said Morris. “After all they've been through, they deserve to be happy.” ■

## In their own words ...

Given the remarkably bad beginning to their lives — living in 14 different foster homes enduring abuse and neglect and never knowing if they had to move again during their first eight years — Michael and Sofia, 12-year-old twins, are happy and secure today.

Michael wasn't at all fazed about talking to a visitor even though for so many years his experience with strangers was they either would hurt him or take him away to another home. He's settled in to his permanent home.

“I am so happy with my family.

“They tried so hard to get me adopted. I love them with all my heart.”

Michael, 12, is in sixth grade. Once unwilling to talk except to himself, he's now funny and charming. Those around him say he has a lot of concern about other people and their feelings.

His favorite time in school is the silent reading although it doesn't matter what he is reading. His favorite food is pizza with pepperoni. “Yum.”

After school each day he does his homework and then he's allowed to go outside and play. But he has to make sure he takes out the trash and takes care of the cat's litter box.

Twin sister Sofia is quiet but has blossomed and become more open since the adoption. She likes school with her favorite times lunch and reading. She likes “scary” books and action books. “I love to read.”

She likes to eat ham and rice; she does her homework right away when she comes home from school. She likes to play on the swing set and play board games like Monopoly with her family. And she has chores to do every day: sweeping floors and helping to clean up.

It dawned on Tina Hammer, the twins' mom, one day that now there are three 12-year-old children in the family: Michael and Sofia and Justice.

“That means we'll have three teenagers at the same time. Oh my.”