

# The Changing Climate of Foster Care

by Marsha Riben

*We know for a fact that there are fewer infants available for foster care and adoption. We also know that there are more options available for all parties involved. However, is there any relationship between the two?*

Helen Vreeland: Princeton Foster Mother

There once was a time when anyone in the Aiken Avenue area of Princeton knew where to go for the best advice on baby care: Helen Vreeland. After all, it's not every woman who has "mothered" over 30 infants!

Helen and her husband, an attorney, have been married for 25 years. When their two sons, now grown, were 6 and 10 years of age, the Vreelands heard that there was a need for foster parents of newborns. Their decision to become foster parents was a natural one: Mr. Vreeland himself had been an orphan at the Children's Home Society of New Jersey.

For the next 15 years a baby was always either coming or going at the Vreeland house. They were barely able to dry their eyes, she recalls when the phone would ring to announce a new arrival. "Love is easily transferrable," she says. "We'd never pack the baby clothes away, just keep going one to another."



photo by Lisa Gilbert

## Changing Times in Foster Care

But things are quiet in the Vreeland home now. The ever-ready cradle in the parlor stands vacant and bare.

Harriet Poland of the Children's Home Society explains what has happened: there are fewer babies available for adoption because abortion is available and because "the ones who carry to term are making decisions other than adoption or foster care. Some are using foster care simply to get back on their feet."

In fact, The Children's Home Society has begun a pilot project to help allow young mothers the opportunity to keep their baby with them. It and the State Division of Youth and Family Services are looking for foster families who will accept both mother and baby, and sometimes the mother while she is pregnant.

The unique thing about this project is that mothers are not separated from their children as they were in the past. The program is, of course, designed for young women who choose not to surrender their baby at birth.

The idea of the program is to offer an environment where the young mother (aged 13-17) will learn parenting, household and budgeting skills by working and living with a family. While

the baby is in a Children's Home Society day care center, the mother receives career training. The agency offers financial reimbursement to the host family as well as a great deal of emotional support.

The need for this type of solution was seen when statistics were compiled. In 1980 alone, 27,000 New Jersey teens became pregnant. Forty percent (10,800) carried their pregnancy to term and 95% of these (10,260) elected to keep the baby.

So far, The Children's Home Society in Trenton has only one such home and on a trial basis. Homes and funding for the project are difficult to find. Harriet Poland feels, however, that it is a "very needed service and always has been." Some girls fit very well in a group setting, such as maternity home, while others need the personal setting of a private home.

## A Change in Attitudes

As the "volume" of "available" babies decreases, there seems to be another and related change in options, this time in attitudes regarding the past and future of these children. Foster homes are no longer assembly lines but a part of the continuum of families that such children have. Until recently, Helen Vreeland never knew what became of the babies she had fostered. This has all changed. The last child Helen cared for was sent off to its new adoptive family with pictures that they gratefully accepted. Later, Helen received a glowing progress report on this "graduate" of hers, along with updated photos of the toddler.

Ms. Poland, who has been with the Children's Home Society for 20 years, has seen a "very big but gradual change" in attitudes. Yet she is unable to pinpoint its origins. Are adoptive couples more liberal in their attitudes about bridging the gap between past, present and future? Or is it that social workers are asking if they would like to give and receive photos of their children? Are young, unwed mothers of today freer or stronger than unwed mothers of the past? Or is it simply that they have more options?

Poland sees some form of open adoption - with varying degrees of ongoing communication between the birthparents and the adopting family - as the wave of the future. The Children's Home Society is in the process of evaluating all the possibilities.

Despite the decrease in available infants, there is still a need for foster homes. In this regard, the State Division of Youth and Family Services is planning a foster parent recruitment drive for October to make the community aware of this need, particularly for black infants, hispanic children of all ages and adolescents.