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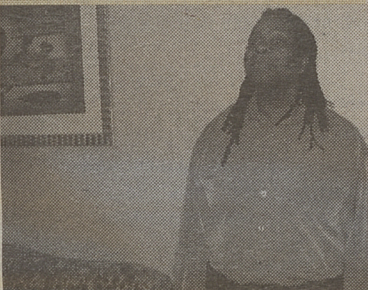
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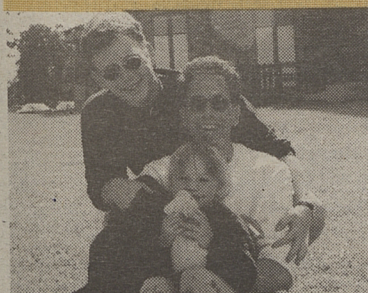
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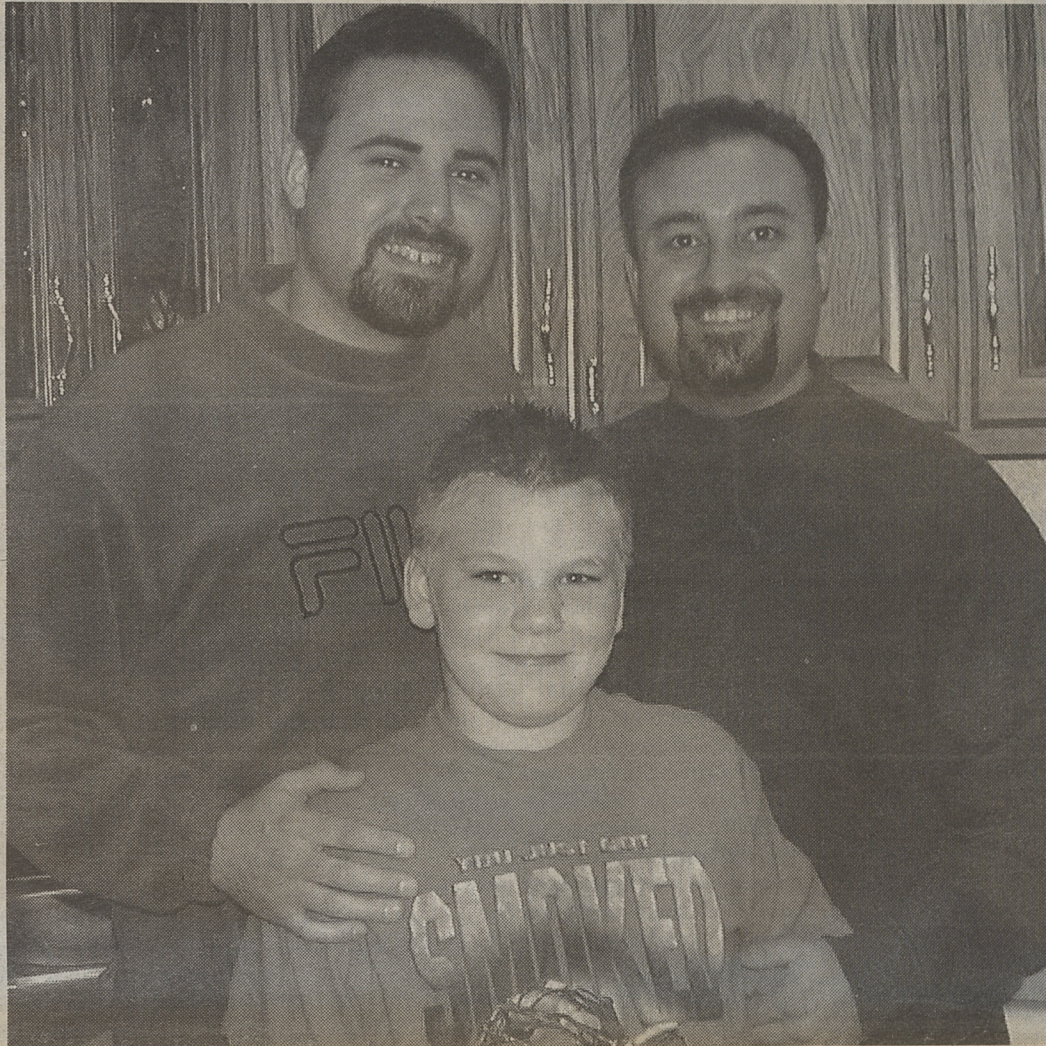
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Keith & John Nelson-Miles, with Levi: "We have a good home, good jobs, and a pretty structured life. We were ready for a child!"

BY EUAN BEAR

Levi Stanley Nelson-Miles wasn't born with that name. It became his not quite a year ago when a family court judge finalized his adoption by John and Keith Nelson-Miles. The boy and his two dads immediately went out to celebrate. The seven-year-old Levi got his ear pierced and then they went out for his favorite food, pizza.

Before he was adopted, Levi was just one of the 1200 to 1700 children in foster care under the supervision of the Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services on any given day. According to Diane Dexter, chief of adoptions for the state of Vermont, about ten percent of these children will require adoption: "These are children whom a judge has determined cannot and should not be returned to their families typically because of abuse, neglect, or abandonment," Dexter explained. "Most of these children are not being given up by their families voluntarily."

"A lot" of foster care kids are adopted by gays and lesbians, Dexter said, and those adoptions are successful because "gay men and lesbians understand about feeling different from everyone else, being an outsider. That makes them good at parenting children who may have a learning disability or are of a different race."

Now, Dexter wants more gay men and lesbians to consider adopting Vermont kids who need and deserve a "forever family," and not just a place to hang out for a few years. Under the auspices of Project Family – a joint project of SRS and the Lund Family Center – Dexter is looking for families for 112 girls and boys who as of mid-April had been freed for adoption. Another 118 children in foster care have potential families already identified.

"For the first time, we don't have enough foster families who are willing to adopt the number of kids who are available," Dexter said. "Until recently, 99 percent of the children in foster care available to be adopted were adopted by their foster parents. We need to increase the pool of foster parents willing to adopt. But in the meantime, we need parents *today* for the children available *today*."

The kids range in age from nine to 17, and many have physical, emotional, and/or behavioral challenges related to the abuse or neglect they suffered. Some of the kids looking for forever families are briefly profiled on the Project Family website (www.projectfamily.state.vt.us).

There's 11-year-old Bridget, who is developmentally disabled and loves baking and doing arts and crafts. And Ann, a 13-year-old animal lover who

might someday be a veterinarian or work in an animal shelter. There's Jamell, a 14-year-old sports enthusiast and student-athlete; he also likes to write and draw and thinks about designing books someday. And there's LK, age 10, who loves horses and the out of doors; he's curious and invented a "kidney" to clean dirty water in order to understand what a kidney does in the body.

A Boy and His Two Dads

Levi Nelson-Miles, a sturdy blond boy, came to John and Keith two years ago. He was six years old, stood 51 inches tall, and weighed 72 pounds, Daddy (John) recites. Papa (Keith) chimes in with updated statistics: 55 1/2 inches tall, 100 pounds. Levi says that the first thing he liked about his two dads was that they were fun. They had a choo-choo train that didn't work. Asked what he remembers about his foster family, he says, "They beat me."

We're sitting at the kitchen table in their modest hillside bungalow home in Barre. The yard and driveway are being reconstructed to reduce the slope. Levi has a small 'living room' of his own and his own bedroom, which he shows off, hastily grabbing for a few laundry items on the floor. The TV is in the grown-up living room, and his viewing is limited by his dads.

Papa (Keith) is the

stricter of the two, Levi says, pointing across the kitchen table. And there are plenty of rules in this family: "No playing ball in the house. I have to make my bed and vacuum. I sort my clothes for the laundry ..." Daddy (John) chimes in, "And every day he packs his own lunch." He's been good this week, so he gets pizza for the next day's lunch.

Keith goes looking for Levi's report card, which shows considerable progress, both in the "grades" (1 to 4, with 4 indicating "consistently exceeds requirements") and in the teacher's comments.

When John gently confronts Levi for making up bogus answers to some of my questions – out of a kind of shyness, and a sense of playing a game, John says – he reminds Levi about being honest and sends him off for a brief time out in his room.

John, an instructional assistant and the more talkative of the two dads, and Keith, a CAD draftsman, have been together for 5 years. They celebrated their civil union in May, 2001. Keith brings out six "memory books" of photos, one dedicated to their civil union, the rest filled with pictures of friends and family, mostly as they interact with Levi.

John and Keith knew they wanted children As John says, "We have a good home, good jobs,

and a pretty cont'd on page 8