

A home for every child

Personally and professionally,
Nadine Marsh-Carter
makes adoption
her mission

By Susan Grandpre



Nadine Marsh-Carter is following her heart, both as a mother and a children's advocate.

As president and chief executive officer of Children's Home Society of Virginia (CHSV), Marsh-Carter has spent the last five years guiding the 111-year-old agency. She is dedicated to the mission of CHSV, which is to find permanent homes for all children and to provide related services to birth families, adoptive families and adoptees.

Marsh-Carter has always been dedicated to children, but her professional career began in law, not advocacy. She was content to follow her path into the practice of law until she made a life altering decision. Her decision was not a change of heart; it was more akin to listening to her heart.

After receiving her undergraduate degree from the University of Richmond, Marsh-Carter returned to earn a law degree from the T.C. Williams School of Law. Like her father and several uncles, Marsh-Carter graduated law school and began to practice law in Richmond by joining the same law firm, Hill, Tucker & Marsh. The firm is renown for its civil rights work and for producing a number of judges from the ranks of its attorneys, including Oliver Hill. Marsh-Carter's father, Henry L. Marsh III, became the city's first black mayor and went on to serve in the state Senate.

While working as an attorney, Marsh-Carter primarily handled cases where she finalized adoptions. She found her legal practice rewarding.

"I was happy practicing law and was not consciously looking to do anything else," said Marsh-Carter.

Until she experienced a single, life-changing event. Her uncle, substitute judge Harold M. Marsh, Sr., died suddenly, a victim of murder. It was during his funeral that she had her "aha moment" and began to reexamine her life's purpose and direction.

As she listened to numerous speakers at the funeral emphasize the life and legacy of her uncle as a person and advocate, she realized she needed to listen to her heart. Each speaker gave testimony to how her uncle had lived his life helping others and how he had made a difference to so many people. She knew, at that moment, that she wanted to make a change in her own life.

With this inspiration, Marsh-Carter decided to give up her job as an attorney and turn to advocacy full time. She knew that she was an advocate at heart and had always felt drawn to children. It seemed a perfect fit to work as an advocate for children.

After leaving her law practice, Marsh-Carter became the executive director for a non-profit organization, Volunteer Emergency Families for Children (VEFC). This organization helps provide temporary shelter to children in crisis due to abuse, neglect or abandonment.

While her professional life seemed to be on course, Marsh-Carter found herself facing profound disappointment in her personal life. She and her husband, David, had been battling infertility. Desperately wanting children, they decided to explore the possibility of adoption.

In a way, Marsh-Carter experienced a convergence of paths both personal and professional, and both leading to adoption. She possessed an overwhelming desire to be a mother and have children of her own, and she felt determined to work on behalf of children.

While leading the VEFC, Marsh-Carter served as a board member for the Children's Home Society of Virginia. During this time, she and her husband actively pursued adoption. They were delighted to adopt a baby girl through CHSV and adopt a baby boy two years later. Throughout the adoption process, Marsh-Carter took a leave of absence from the CHSV board to avoid any appearance of impropriety. When the position of president and CEO of CHSV opened up, it seemed a natural fit for Marsh-Carter.

Marsh-Carter brings an interesting perspective to her leadership role at CHSV.

"I have the unique experience of having sat on that couch in the reception area as the prospective parent. That experience makes me better at my job of connecting parents and children," she said.

At CHSV, Marsh-Carter wants to lend a voice to children and families.

"Nadine approaches her work not just as a job, but really as a passion," said Laura Ash-Brackley, who works with Marsh-Carter through the Partnership for Adoption program at CHSV. She said that Marsh-Carter is a "fabulous mom who cares so deeply about her kids and also recognizes the gift of motherhood."

Marsh-Carter knows that her children – Kaitlyn, 12, and David, 10 – are gifts, and she has a favorite saying that she shares with them reflecting this knowledge: "We did not give you the gift of life, life gave us the gift of you." This is the message that Marsh-Carter hopes that "all birth parents who have looked beyond themselves to make such a sacrificial decision about their children know in their hearts after a placement," she said, adding that she is grateful every day for her children and their birth parents who felt that adoption was right course to follow.

Marsh-Carter's capacity to care is not only found in her own family. She applies the same attitude toward her work.

"Nadine is so full of compassion, and she cares so much about how the children in foster care, the adoptive families and the birth families are feeling," said Ash-Brackley. Marsh-Carter possesses a remarkable sensitivity to everyone involved, whether it is the birth mother deciding to give up her child for adoption, a family considering adoption, a child who has been removed from the only home they know or the staff members who diligently work to bring it all together.

When addressing the task of finding permanent homes for children living in foster care, Marsh-Carter knows that each day is important to those children who are making due without the love and security only parents can provide.

"Our foster parents do a phenomenal job, but children need the guidance, permanency and unconditional love of permanent parents in their lives," she said.

She believes that children in need of adoption are in that position through no fault of their own. "They are children. They are little girls who love to shop and little boys who love to play soccer. They need help with homework, advice about a

first date. They need a parent to attend the parent–teacher conference. They don't need superwoman or superman, they need moms and dads," Marsh-Carter said.

Regarding the foster children awaiting adoption, there is a sense of urgency felt by Marsh-Carter. She knows what will happen to children if they linger in foster care or if they age out of the foster care system. She sees the struggle of these children and she knows what the pertinent statistics reflect.

Information gathered by the Virginia Department of Social Services reveals that as of March 2011 nearly 6,000 children lived in Virginia's foster care system. According to CHSV, children in Virginia remain in foster care an average of three years. Since this number is an average, many children stay in foster care much longer than three years. Currently, about 1,300 of the children living in foster care in Virginia are available for adoption.

Marsh-Carter is concerned about all the children. She is particularly worried about how difficult it is to place older children and teens living in foster care. If teenagers are not adopted and remain in foster care, they eventually age out of the system and face serious challenges. "Aging out" means that when a child becomes 18 years old and has not been adopted, he or she loses the support of the foster care system. Recent data shows that Virginia has more teenagers, about 21 percent, age out of the system than any other state.

Once these teens age out, their future is uncertain and all too often results in a negative outcome. For example, one in four children who age out will end up in jail within two years of leaving foster care. One in five will be homeless within two years. Only one in six will earn a high school diploma. Of prison inmates, 80 percent have been through the foster care system. The largest growing homeless population is comprised of teens aging out of foster care.

These are just a few of the realities that Marsh-Carter faces everyday as she guides CHSV to find permanent homes for children. She firmly believes that hard work and policy change among other things will make a difference for children awaiting adoption.

"Every single child placed with a family should be viewed as a positive and as a success," Marsh-Carter said.

For more information about the Children's Home Society of Virginia, call 353-0191 or visit www.chsva.org. RPM