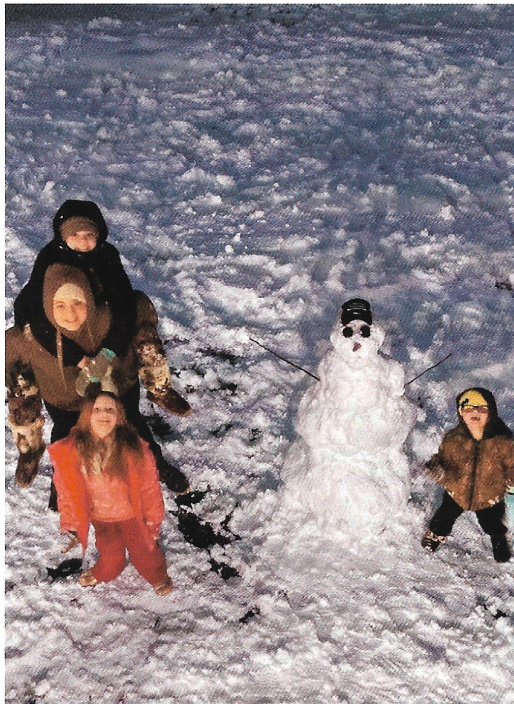


perfectly imperfect

Barry and Beverley Abernathy had a family, a home at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains, and successful careers. But they didn't realize their life was missing two key people. **BY ANN KLEIN**



Clockwise from top left: Barry and Tyler show off their similar left hands; Chassady, Zoey, Emma, Beverley, Barry, and Tyler at the Zoom adoption ceremony; Tyler and Barry play together after dinner; the Abernathy kids have fun in the snow.



The most beautiful thing about home is that it's ever changing—just when you think you're settled, life will call you to another adventure. In that sense, and as the Abernathys show, there's no limit to how much love a home can hold.

—DREW

“I know this sounds crazy because we were already a family of four, but the house has never felt full until now.”

—EMMA ABERNATHY

It's summer in Ellijay, a town in northern Georgia at the foot of the Appalachian Mountains, and you can smell the fish frying for dinner at the Abernathy house. Barry's doing the cooking and calls his kids to the table: 18-year-old Chassady, 16-year-old Emma, seven-year-old Zoey, and five-year-old Tyler. After returning from her job as deputy of the county's superior court, Beverley, their mom, washes up the younger two, who've dragged a hose into the yard to make mud.

They pull up chairs, six of them now where a year ago there were four. In a moment, they'll pass homemade coleslaw and hush puppies. But first, they bow their heads. It's prayer that got them here, and in Barry's mind, it's prayer that's going to get them through the challenges ahead. "Lord," he begins, "we come before you with humble hearts. Help us to get to a place where we can do your will." That's the prayer that feels right to him, an unselfish one. It's a contrast from a year earlier, he says, when he prayed what he considered the most selfish prayer he's ever prayed.

Chassady had been talking a lot about Tyler and Zoey, who attended the day care where she worked. What had caught her attention was Tyler's left hand: Just like her dad's, it had no fingers. The siblings had been in and out of foster homes most of their lives. "I wish there was something we could do to help," she said one night to Barry, who learned to play banjo despite his missing fingers and today is a member of acclaimed roots band Appalachian Road Show. "They've been in eight places so far in the last 10 months." Barry brushed it off. "Honey," he said, "I'm 50 years old. Your mama's 46." With that, he let it go. "There'll be someone out there for them."

But a few days later, the kids came back to Barry's mind. "It was like

something was just pulling at me to go see them," he recalls. So he stopped by the day care. Chassady had shown Tyler photos of Barry so the five-year-old could see someone else with a hand like his. When Barry walked in, Tyler ran to him and asked, "Are you my dad?" Barry left the day care shaken. He called Beverley: "I went to see the kids Chassady was telling us about..."

"I did, too," Beverley said. "I went at lunch." Barry didn't answer. They hadn't even talked about it, and now, in the same day, both had been drawn to meet the kids. "What are you thinking?" she asked. "I don't know what to think," he said.

Barry had a long drive on the way to a gig, so he used the time to pray. "God, I don't know what you're doing," he said aloud. "But there is no way, no way I could raise these kids. I'm 50 years old. We barely can make it the way it is. We struggle to make our house payments. We're not rich and not even well off and not even really comfortable."

But a week later, the kids were at the Abernathys' table. And a year later, in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, the family gathered around a computer monitor for a tearful adoption ceremony with a Fannin County Juvenile Court judge.

A new energy pervades their mountain home now. There are more plates to clear, more shoes to step over at the door, and more voices to talk over if you want to be heard. "Chaos that I love," Emma calls it. These are powerful words from a teenager who sleeps on a cot in the living room every night so her new siblings can have bedrooms of their own. "I know this sounds crazy because we were already a family of four," she says, "but the house has never felt full until now."

The older girls make it home for dinner together every evening now.

"They recognize that it's a special time for all of us," Barry says. Sometimes, after the dishes have been put away, he and Tyler settle in and pick the banjo. In the background, the girls chat about their day. It's sweet music to a man whose gigs and income pretty much evaporated when the pandemic started. Mostly, he says, they're getting by on faith: "Not that we have much, but we've survived. God put something on us; he knew this was coming and he's made a way to take care of us so far."

Barry and Beverley know that the years ahead will take a lot of work and patience. The trauma the kids endured shows through almost every day in one challenge or another. But they talk it out together, in a home where there's plenty of time and space for imperfection.

What does home mean to the two youngest Abernathys, who went so long without a place where they could feel settled and safe?

"It means home," Tyler says simply.

"It means being loved by my family," Zoey says.

Chassady, whose heart brought them here in the first place, nods: "Now that Zoey and Tyler are part of the family, our home is complete."

Barry is a Grammy-nominated banjo player in Appalachian Road Show.

