

LOCAL HEROES Debbie Wolf

By LEESA SUZMAN

It's no surprise Scarsdale is chockablock with high achievers, but many of them do truly amazing deeds without much in the way of financial reward or fanfare. Here's your chance to meet some of these "good neighbors" in our new column.

Age 53

Neighborhood Quaker Ridge
Occupation An attorney with a background in social work, Wolf has been the agency counsel for Forever Families Through Adoption Inc. in Rye Brook for the past eight years. This Hague-accredited, nonprofit agency provides both domestic and international services.

Not your typical lawyer. Debbie Wolf got to where she is today one challenging job at a time.

After studying psychology in college, her first job was as a social worker for the Massachusetts Department of Social Services. This turned out to be both wrenching and rewarding.

One Thanksgiving eve, she was charged with delivering a 6-year-old boy whose mother was mentally ill and abusing drugs to his new foster home.

"The place was so bad I refused to leave him there," she said. "Instead I took him back to my office and we ended up spending the night at work with another co-worker until we found a more suitable alternative."

That same night, she stood up her future husband for their first date.

"I just couldn't let this adorable, vulnerable boy go to that foster home," she said.

Wolf started law school a few years later with the goal of continuing her work in the public sector. After graduation, she took a job as an attorney litigating termination of parental rights cases back at the Massachusetts Department of Social Services.

"These were situations where staying with the biological family was no longer an option for a child due to the severity of the neglect and/or abuse," Wolf said.

She found removing a child from a home, even one with abuse, was traumatic.

Years later, when Wolf moved to New York with her husband and two kids, she hoped to continue her work as a child advocate. Her then 13-year-old daughter attended a job fair at the Scarsdale Teen Center and reported back to Wolf about a new adoption agency.

She called up the agency immediately and has been working as an attorney there ever since.

Happy place. At Forever Families Through Adoption, the mis-



SCARSDALE INQUIRER/JIM MACLEAN

Finding children loving homes

Debbie Wolf places children who might otherwise get lost in foster care

sion is adoptions as well as community outreach. Wolf meets with biological parents, adoptive parents and adoptive children — the adoption "triad," she calls them — to come up with legal, viable plans for each adoption. She also speaks regularly at conferences and local libraries, delivers anti-bullying messages at school regarding kids with same-sex parents or of a different race, and she visits birth moms in prisons to help them feel empowered to make a positive choice for their child.

Sometimes hospitals ask her to meet with pregnant teens or adults. She's worked with birth moms as young as 13.

"We talk about all the options, including parenting, foster care and temporary guardianship," Wolf said.

If the birth mom chooses adoption, prospective parents are asked to make a picture book about who they are, which is then presented to the birth mom and/or dad, who look through the books and pick a family for their child.

Even though adoptions can be very happy affairs, Wolf notes there can be sadness in the beginning as well.

Couples sometimes arrive at her office with heavy hearts because they have been going through infertility treatments and now need to think about adopt-

ing instead. Her agency provides extra training to these couples about what it means to be adoptive parents since it might not have been their first choice.

Wolf loves knowing the children she places are getting the permanency of adoption instead of the uncertainty of foster care.

Wolf's easiest-to-please clients tend to be gay male couples.

"They usually arrive in better spirits because they've always known adoption was the route they would go," she said. "Obviously they haven't experienced any of the painful disappointment of infertility."

Wolf said a couple need not be married to be considered for an adoption.

Balancing act. Adoptions have become a lot more open over the last 30 years, according to Wolf. Most adoption agree-

ments now require birth parents to share crucial background information with the adoptive parents. Birth moms sometimes hesitate to name the father, for example, but Wolf always tries to get the full story for the sake of the child.

With more and more focus on open adoptions, it's become commonplace for families and birth parents to forge a bond before the baby is born. According to Wolf, some do still see each other post-birth, but it's less likely. If the families do connect, it's usually through letters and photos sent back and forth via the adoption agency. At Forever Families, adoptive parents are required to send quarterly updates for five years, sometimes even longer.

Another change in adoption laws pertains to child safety. Prospective parents cannot begin the process of adopting in New York without being vetted through many months of home study, child abuse clearance, financial vetting and a lot of training.

"This gives a lot of comfort to birth mothers," Wolf said.

Baby on board. Adoption fees range from \$30,000 to \$55,000. These costs may cover the birth mom's legal representation and doctor bills, agency and living expenses, or counseling. Par-

ents can usually find a child to adopt in six months to three years, Wolf said.

One reason for lengthy waits is birth moms do change their minds.

"It can be tough to ensure the birth mom feels 100 percent committed to the adoption process," Wolf said.

If there's a birth father opposing the adoption, he could also stop the process, she said.

Wolf's agency mostly places newborns. The babies go to U.S. families as well as those in other countries.

"The international families tend to be much more forgiving about things like drug histories, birth defects, and even kids conceived as the result of a rape or incest," Wolf said.

She reports it can be much harder to find families who want to adopt in the U.S. when factors like race and ethnicity, or exposure to drugs and alcohol, are being considered.

Words to live by. Despite all the possible ups and downs of the adoption process, Wolf loves knowing the children she places are getting the permanency of adoption instead of the uncertainty of foster care.

She's experienced this up close with her nephew, whom her sister adopted from Vietnam.

"This 8-year-old boy hasn't just changed my sister and her husband's lives by making them parents, Wolf said, "he's actually affected so many people in positive ways, from me, to my son, to my parents."

Sure, there are days when Wolf wishes she made more money or had a job with more glamorous lawyer perks, but helping others is the only gig that's ever really interested her.

"Growing up, I was fortunate to have loving parents for whom education was a priority," she said. "But I still think: What if I had been raised differently, with parents who were drug addicts or worse? It always made me feel blessed and made me want to help."

Wolf is a member of the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys, a national consortium of attorneys with expertise in adoption matters.

Learn more about adoption at adoptionattorneys.org/aaaa/home and at foreverfamilies-throughadoption.org.

Leesa Suzman is a freelance writer and editor who has been on staff and/or written for magazines including Elle, Good Housekeeping, Seventeen, O the Oprah Magazine, Self, In-Style, Travel + Leisure and Parenting.