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FORMER ORPHAN TO SPEAK ON IMPORTANCE OF ADOPTION

It would have been easy for Steve Feldmann to live a life of excuses. Born with a cleft lip and other birth defects, he was placed for adoption at birth.

Yet today, at the age of 40, Feldmann is a man who made positive choices instead of excuses. Married, with two children and a successful career as an attorney, he will speak on the importance of adoption in a child's life on Wednesday, Feb. 28 at a Newport High School teen health class in Newport, KY.

Feldmann is president of Healthy Visions board of directors and a speaker in the agency's Adoption Option school-based program. Healthy Visions is 21-year-old, non-profit Cincinnati organization dedicated to serving youth and adults who seek stronger relationships by equipping them with skills and knowledge to make better choices in sexuality, marriage, and parenting throughout their lives.

Feldmann will focus on his positive experiences from the ages of six to eight at St. Joseph's Orphanage in Sharonville, where he now sits on the executive committee for its advisory board. The two years he spent at St. Joe's, he says, laid the foundation for his successes today, providing the stability, security and emotional and spiritual support he needed to succeed in life.

From birth to age six, Feldmann lived in a diocesan infant home and a series of foster homes before coming to St. Joseph's Orphanage. Because of his birth defects, he was classified "unadoptable." But then he met orphanage volunteers and teachers Don and Tracy Feldmann, who felt an instant connection with him. They adopted him at age eight, and oversaw a series of successful surgeries for him.

His face, as well as his young life, was transformed.

Choosing the gift of life over death by abortion, or risking poverty as a single parent and making an adoption plan is one of the most selfless things a teen mother can do for her child, said Carole Adlard, founder and director of Healthy Visions.

Unmarried birthmothers who make adoption plans are more likely to continue their education, more likely to marry subsequently, and are less likely to receive public assistance than birthmothers who choose to parent their children out of wedlock, she said.

"About 1,000 unmarried teenaged girls become pregnant every day in the U.S.," said Adlard. "Adoption often provides the unprepared birthmother a second chance to better her own life while giving her infant the opportunity for the successful life the child deserves. Our adoption education program, Adoption Option, presents the facts about adoption, as well as a message of hope and positive action. National statistics indicate pregnant teens who receive counseling and adoption information are almost seven times more likely to choose adoption than those who do not receive it."

One reason Feldmann's talks are especially effective for young people is that his life is an illustration of choice. He could have chosen to feel sorry for himself; he could have chosen to fail.

“My mom and dad never allowed me to make excuses,” he said. “They were going to make certain I succeeded. I had a great family, a great education and now have a great marriage, two wonderful children, a successful career and the opportunity to help out in my community. No matter what circumstances life has given us, we all make choices as to whether we will allow those circumstances to defeat us or whether we will write own script and succeed.”

Pregnant teens, as well as children of alcoholics, children with mental illness in the family or other domestic problems ultimately have the keys to improving their lives with the choices they make, he said.

There are over two million infertile couples and individuals in the U.S. who would like to adopt children. According to a study published in the new issue of American Sociological Review, couples who adopt spend more money on their children and invest more time in activities with them such as reading to them, eating together and talking with them about problems than biological parents.

“One of the reasons adoptive parents invest more is that they really want children and they go to extraordinary means to have them,” said Indiana University sociologist Brian Powell, one of the study’s three co-authors. The study examined data from 13,000 households as part of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education.

Only one to two percent of adopted children seek out their birth parents as adults.

Feldmann, for example, has not sought to find his birth mother. “Some adoptive adults go looking for their birth parents to complete a piece of the puzzle,” he suggested, “and that search is perfectly normal and understandable. For me, my puzzle is relatively

complete, so I don't have to search for my birth mother. But I do think of her and pray for her and thank her that she made this decision, and hope she thinks of me sometimes, too."

Feldmann is a resident of West Chester and a member of St. Maximilian-Kolbe Church in West Chester. He is available to speak locally about adoption as an option and delivers a strong message of hope, perseverance, thanksgiving and the profound, life-altering impact that parental love has on children. He can be reached at Healthy Visions at www.healthyvisions.org or at (513) 793-7268.

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