

A Local Way to Love Your Neighbor: Agape Ranch

by Ruth Gnirk



Foster home house under construction, the first of many on The Ranch. *Courtesy Photo*



Agape Ranch team, Photo by Hope Vasquez Photography



Conceptual view of The Ranch. Courtesy of Agape Ranch via CLK

Since May was Foster Care Awareness Month, **June should be Foster Care Action Month!** This should be the month that we as a community start improving things, based on what we learned. Our community needs to continue supporting local foster families and foster care organizations.

In case you missed the statistics during Foster Care Awareness Month, here is just a small glimpse of the need right here in the Coastal Bend, according to Shannon Murphy, the Community Relations Coordinator for Agape Ranch:

- 477 vulnerable children were removed from their homes in the past year, due to abuse and/or neglect in the eight surrounding Coastal Bend counties.
- 173 children will not be able to be reunited with their birth families this year, and are waiting to be adopted into loving, permanent families. This number is only for the eight Coastal Bend counties.
- More than 60% of the children in the Coastal Bend that are removed are being placed outside of our area due to lack of foster homes, often being separated from their siblings.
- The turnover rate for foster families in the Coastal Bend is similar to the statistics across the US: 30-50%. This greatly impacts the care of vulnerable children.

The goal of Agape Ranch is that every child will experience unconditional love. How fitting, as the word agape (uh-GAH-pay) is a Greek word for the highest form of love, one that is selfless and sacrificial, thinking of others first.

The goal of foster care is reunification of healthy families. There are some simple ways that we as a community can help show agape love to foster children and foster families as they are healing and hoping for reunification with their birth families.

We can make a donation of our time or money. We can become a part of the Agape Acts Team, providing meals that are either purchased or homemade, running errands for a foster family, or going with a foster parent to appointments. Churches and organizations can join the CarePortal network to help provide for the needs of vulnerable families so children won't have to be removed for lack of materials.

Both individuals/families and restaurants can be a part of "A Home Touch" Meal Train by providing meals for children while they wait to be placed into foster care. Community members could also apply to receive training to become a respite care provider, which is a short-term childcare provider who is trained in safety and in the unique needs of foster children. And, of course, individuals, couples, and families, can apply to become foster parents themselves!

Agape Ranch was started after a foster couple recognized their own need for safe, trained, reliable care providers so that they could occasionally take care of their own physical or emotional health needs. The Klaus' had friends who were willing to help, but were not certified by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.



Susan and Tim Klaus. Photo by Cat Herndon Photography

They coordinated a training opportunity so those interested in becoming respite care providers could receive the required instruction in CPR and first aid, and other instrumental training, in one place. This allowed many of the Klaus' friends to become certified respite care workers after the full day's courses were complete. The success of the day-training was so great that the couple made it their new mission to coordinate training for others willing to become certified respite care providers, and to support all foster parents in the Coastal Bend. The next respite care training is on August 14. Register at <https://www.agaperanch.org/respitecaretraining>

In 2014, Agape Ranch became an official non-profit organization. The one-day respite care trainings are still being provided twice a year. Agape Ranch has added other programs to support foster

families and foster children, such as their annual local Christmas Store, and Foster Parent Night out. Agape Ranch also provides Trauma-based training.

In addition to the many programs, Agape Ranch is fundraising to build The Ranch. The Ranch will be a neighborhood for up to 24 homes. This is a place where foster families can live together, supporting and encouraging one another in an environment of like-minded people. The first foster house is currently under construction.

They are also fundraising to build a home for youth who are "aging out." When a young person turns 18, s/he ages out of the foster care system and will no longer live with a foster family. However, they still need people to care for them, and a place to call home. This home for young adults will be a part of the ministry of Agape Ranch, where the young adults will be mentored and supported while they pursue a technical or college career. Murphy explained that the State transitions to Supervised Independent Living for up to age 21. She also shared that Texas provides tuition for vocational training/community college/university for those that want it.

There are plans to build a home for respite care providers, so they can also live in The Ranch and be near foster families so they can readily provide support. This will give foster parents a break and help avoid burnout, and allow them to go to their own appointments, without having to take children along.

**Everyone can do something.
What will YOU do?**

To donate, visit www.agaperanch.org/donate

To volunteer, sign up at www.agaperanch.org

For information on CarePortal, "A Home Touch" Meal Train, or even the Christmas Store, contact Jessica Blakeslee jessica@agaperanch.org or 361-730-3225

To find out more about becoming a part of the Agape Acts Team, contact Yohance Warrick at yohance@agaperanch.org or 361-208-7004

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