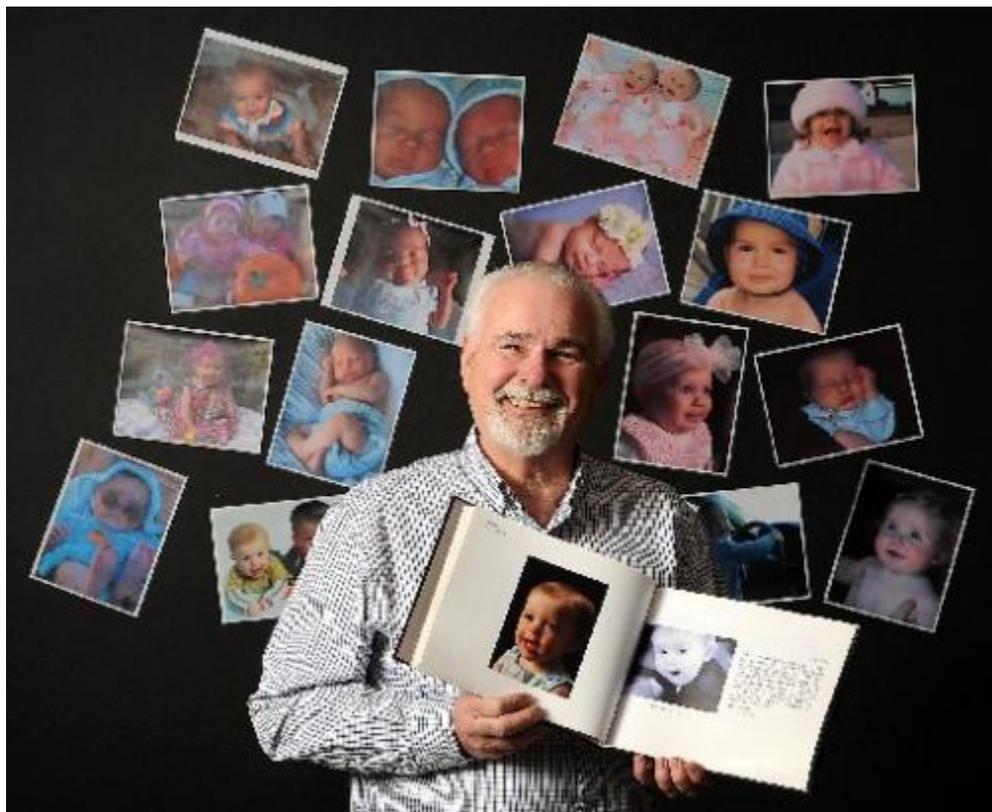


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Funding cut threatens Loveland-based program that encourages adoption of frozen embryos; women tell adoption stories

By Craig Young Reporter-Herald Staff Writer
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Loveland resident Ronald Stoddart, executive director of Nightlight Christian Adoptions, poses surrounded by photos of babies born through the Snowflakes Frozen Embryo Adoption and donation program that he created.

LOVELAND -- A potential \$2 million cut in federal funding -- a drop in the ocean of government spending -- has thrown a light on a little-known issue with an even lesser-known connection to Loveland.

Last Sunday, the Washington Times reported that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is planning to end funding next year for the Embryo Adoption Awareness Campaign.

While no other mainstream media outlet has reported the story, Christian and pro-life websites reacted quickly to decry the administration's funding priorities. And an organization based in Loveland started making contingency plans.

By the Numbers

600,000: Number of human embryos held in cold storage in the U.S.

\$600: Average annual cost to store frozen embryos.

\$72 million: Annual cost to store all embryos.

299: Number of babies born through the Snowflakes program since 1998.

No. 300 is due this month.

20: Number of years that a little boy's embryo was frozen before being born in 2010.

100,000: Number of couples who used in vitro fertilization in the U.S. last year.

\$25,000-\$45,000: Cost of an international adoption.

\$10,000-\$15,000: Cost of an embryo adoption.

Source: Embryo Adoption Awareness Center

"When we heard the Obama administration hadn't put it in the budget, we were not shocked," said Loveland resident Ronald Stoddart, executive director of Nightlight Christian Adoptions.

The nonprofit Nightlight has offices in Loveland, California and South Carolina and provides domestic and international adoption services. Through its Snowflakes Frozen Embryo Adoption and Donation Program, it also arranges adoptions of embryos being held in cold storage facilities around the country.

'Snowflake' Pioneer

Stoddart, an adoption attorney in California, pioneered the concept of embryo adoption in 1997 after becoming executive director of Nightlight. That year, he heard a radio report about the impending destruction of 5,000 leftover frozen embryos in the United Kingdom.

"I remember thinking, 'Embryos ... those are babies, not just sperm and eggs. That's not right,'" Stoddart said. "It was an uncomfortable feeling."

A couple he was working with at the time had been offered leftover embryos by a fertility clinic that had created them through in vitro fertilization for another couple who no longer wanted them. In vitro fertilization, a common infertility method used when others fail, involves fertilizing a human egg outside the body and implanting it in a woman's uterus. Because the success rate can be low, many embryos typically are created in the lab and frozen for future use.

Stoddart said the lab wouldn't allow any exchange of information between the donor couple and the couple who would receive the embryos, so the exchange didn't happen.

"I started thinking more about that," he said. His idea was to "treat the donor family the way you would a birth mother" in an adoption, allowing the couple to choose an adoptive family and to treat the couple on the receiving end as an adoptive family. The Snowflakes program was created, and its first adopted baby, a girl named Hannah, was born Dec. 31, 1998.

600,000 Frozen Embryos

Nightlight's Snowflakes program was the first, but now several other organizations offer embryo adoption services.

Although relatively few people are aware of it, the stockpile of frozen embryos presents a major problem that's getting bigger, said Kimberly Tyson, Nightlight's marketing and program director and the director since 2007 of the Embryo Adoption Awareness Center in Loveland.

She said about 600,000 embryos are sitting in cold-storage facilities across the country, and the number is growing by 4 percent a year. Since 2002, the center has received a number of federal grants through the Embryo Adoption Awareness Campaign, which was instituted during the administration of President George W. Bush.

Typically, the center in Loveland has received about \$500,000 a year, Stoddart said. "If there are no grants, there really is no other source of funding," Stoddart said. He acknowledged that federal spending needs to be cut in many places but added, "We believe that a life-affirming education program is a good thing to do."

He is constrained from lobbying for the funding, but he said he hopes "some senator or representative believes the same thing and writes it back in." Stoddart said the embryo adoption awareness activities are kept separate from the Snowflakes program, which is based in California.

The funding pays for five employees, including Tyson, and also is used for video production, webinars, print and online advertising, and maintenance of the website embryooption.org.

Tyson said she works to educate the nation's 500 fertility clinics, 1,500 adoption agencies, physicians and counselors who work with infertile couples. The Embryo Adoption Awareness Center lists eight different embryo adoption programs on its website. "Our goal is to be a provider-neutral center to promote embryo adoption throughout the United States," Stoddart said.

Finding a Match

As a result of increased awareness, Tyson said she has seen a "significant shift" in the attitudes of couples who have extra embryos and don't know what to do with them.

As they consider adoption, "they are particularly interested in being able to choose the family," she said. Nightlight has the genetic parents and the potential adoptive families fill out profiles to help both sides make a decision. And although Nightlight treats the transfer of embryos as an adoption, it technically is just an exchange of property under the law, Tyson said.

No termination of parental rights or adoption decree is required, Stoddart said, although some families do go through those formalities in court. "But this is an adoption from the standpoint of how you're bringing the child into your household," he said. The agency encourages openness between the families, and it advocates telling the adopted child.

"You want the child to know growing up that's their story," he said.

At get-togethers of "snowflake" families, "the children talk about it," Stoddart said. "They say, 'What snowflake number are you?'" And the snowflake name fits the program perfectly, Stoddart said: "Snowflakes are frozen; each one is unique and is a gift from heaven."

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Women share stories from both sides of 'snowflake' adoption

By Craig Young Reporter-Herald Staff Writer

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Phoenix-area residents Todd and Jennifer Wright hold their baby, Matthew, at his first birthday

When Littleton resident Holly Broadway and her husband had their baby six years ago through in vitro fertilization, she was in her late 30s and he in his late 40s. Finished with the IVF process, they had leftover embryos. "I was concerned as to what would happen to these," she said. "I had several friends who'd gone through IVF, and they just thawed them and let them go. I couldn't do that," she said. "I felt like they weren't just cells, and I felt like I owed them at least more than that."

Broadway had heard about the Snowflakes Frozen Embryo Adoption and Donation Program, so she made contact and started the process of looking for an adoptive family.

"I wrote a profile about us," she said. "It was great because it allowed me to think about and express the kind of family I would hope they would have." The agency in turn gave her profiles of prospective adoptive couples. As an adopted child herself, she said one thing that was important to her was that the family would

agree to keep in touch and let her know once a year how her child or children were doing after the adoption.

"I didn't want to bother them," she said, "just a picture, a note: 'we're good, here he or she is.'"

The first family she and her husband were matched with didn't want such an arrangement, so she didn't agree to the match. "I didn't want to have that hole in my history on both ends," she said.

Then Snowflakes sent her another profile, and she said she immediately called the agency and said, "'Get them for me.' I really felt good about them." Two years ago, the adoptive mom gave birth to a little boy from one of Broadway's embryos.

And since then, "the mother and I have become very, very close friends." Although they've never met in person, Broadway said they touch base every week or two. "I love her. She's an angel. We thank each other profusely. It's been a wonderful experience." Broadway said some of her friends ask her how she can live with the knowledge that she has a child "out there."

Her response: "How could I live with myself throwing them away? There's not been one day that I regret it. Not at all."

'Proud Parents to 12 Snowflake Babies'

On the other side of the issue, Jennifer Wright and her husband, Todd, always had been interested in adopting children.

When the Phoenix-area couple realized that medical conditions prevented them from conceiving, they turned to embryo adoption. Between the two of them, she said, the only "reproductive part" that works is her uterus, and that's what the frozen embryos need. "It was a no-brainer for us," she said on her blog about embryo adoption.

The Wrights adopted 12 embryos through Nightlight Christian Adoptions' Snowflakes program from a woman she had met online through a Christian infertility group. On their third try, after losing five babies to miscarriage, she gave birth to their son, Matthew, on Jan. 22, 2011.

Jennifer Wright writes extensively on her Snowflake Family blog and has become an outspoken advocate for embryo adoption. She said she and her husband never have experienced a negative reaction from people who learn about their experience.

"The biggest reaction we get from people is confusion, like, 'What?'" she said in an interview Friday, "and others think it's cool."

The family who placed their embryos for adoption with the Wrights have three children from the same in vitro fertilization set, Wright said, so Matthew already has three siblings. And the Wrights plan to try for another snowflake baby next year from their remaining six embryos.

At some point, she said, they likely will try traditional adoption as well.

Wright said they don't intend to keep the details of Matthew's origins from him. "It's important to us that he know the truth," she said. "We will always tell him his story."

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