

## **Adopting Aaron, Austin, Aiden and Ashton: Boys make this house lively**

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When Gina Dortch and her husband, Kelly, take their family of seven boys out to eat, they tend to attract attention.

Gina's short answer to the inevitable question: Yes, all of them are ours. Aaron, another Aaron, Austin, Kaylen, Christian, Aiden and Ashton - ages 20, 15, 14, 13, 12, 8 and 7.

But the full story is a little longer. Only three of the boys are their biological children. The other four are brothers who were separated in foster care but never stopped hoping they could be together.

In June, the Dortches adopted all four.

"It is not," Gina Dortch says, "a quiet house."

### **How it all began**

Gina, 40, and Kelly, 41, of suburban Lake Worth, were high school sweethearts who had their first son Aaron, now 20, a year after they married. Kelly, a district manager for Amerigas, thought they would probably stop after one boy.

"Well," he said, "they just kept coming."

Six and a half years after Aaron, they had Kaylen, now 13. And then came Christian, 12.

More recently, they began thinking about adoption as a way to add a girl to the family. But they decided to become foster parents instead, figuring that they could help more children that way.

The first children to arrive after they got their foster care license in 2005 were Aiden and Ashton, the youngest of the brothers they would eventually adopt.

The Dortches were immediately struck by how much the boys, then 5 and 3, looked like they could be family. They have Gina's freckles and Kelly's red hair.

The oldest brother, then 12, moved in a few days later. Because his name was Aaron, just like their own oldest boy, they called him Little Aaron. But Gina thinks that one day soon, Little Aaron, now 15, will be taller than Big Aaron.

By the time the boys came to the Dortch home, they had already spent three years in foster care, often apart. Aiden and Ashton had been staying at a shelter in Royal Palm Beach, far from Little Aaron, who was in a Fort Lauderdale shelter.

Austin continued to stay with a Port St. Lucie family for more than a year after the Dortches took the other three brothers. Whenever they visited him, "the little kids would cry, because they missed him," Little Aaron said.

The visits got to be so upsetting for the boys that they had to stop them altogether, Gina said.

In the fall of 2006, the judge assigned to the boys' case asked Little Aaron if he could do just one thing for him, what that would be. Little Aaron said he wanted Austin to come live with them, too.

The Dortches agreed to take one more brother.

### **'You're not leaving again'**

But at that time, the Dortches still weren't thinking about adoption. Kelly worried that if something happened to him, Gina would be left alone with a large number of children.

In the summer of 2007, a local foster care agency found another couple that wanted to adopt all four brothers together. Gina and Kelly made the hard decision to let them go, thinking that it was the best thing for the boys.

They didn't realize until it was too late that they had already become a family. Sometimes, she said, "you don't see something that's right in front of you."

Everyone missed the brothers, she said. Her birth sons, who had been reluctant to share their house and parents with foster kids at first, were always on the phone with the boys at their new home, Gina said.

Things didn't go well with the new family. Little Aaron, who missed the Dortches, acted badly. Gina and Kelly agreed that if the new family decided not to adopt, then they would.

In late 2007, Gina and Kelly got the call. The adoption was off. Their boys were coming back.

Gina told Little Aaron she understood that he was mad at her for letting them go.

It doesn't matter what you do, she told him, "you're not leaving again. This is it."

### **Dining in shifts**

Gina left her career as a nurse to care for her sons full time. Of her seven boys, five are diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. One has cerebral palsy and seizures, and another is autistic.

"Everyone has a thing," she said. In this family, "you're not normal if you don't have a thing."

How does she manage?

It helps that she has experience: Dortch grew up helping to take care of three younger brothers, in a house that was a headquarters for neighborhood kids.

Another key is meticulous organization - "you should see my calendar."

And when it's time to head home from the baseball field, she always stops to count heads.

"I'm so scared that I'm going to leave someone behind," she says.

She isn't the sort of person who minds too much when things get broken, but she can't stand a cluttered house, and upholds a policy that any Legos left on the floor go straight to the trash.

"They don't last long in my house," she says.

Dinner is just like a school cafeteria line, Little Aaron says, though Gina prefers to call it "buffet style."

The younger boys sit on stools around the table - they gave up on chairs because the boys wouldn't stop leaning back and breaking them. There aren't enough seats for everyone, so they sit in shifts, or use overflow seating on a nearby couch. "We probably need a bigger table," Kelly says.

Kelly does most of the cooking, often a big vat of spaghetti or hamburgers on the grill - about 15 for the family of nine. Weekends are a treat, with Kelly making a hot breakfast of bacon and biscuits.

He's trying to turn Little Aaron into a chef, but the results so far have been mixed. Little Aaron, who does not share his dad's perfectionist streak, says he is still working on not burning down the house.

### **Family motto: Be prepared**

Dortch works hard to keep things calm. Still, you can't help but notice that there are seven boys in the family.

The family's 1,800-square-foot home has four bedrooms but only two bathrooms, so there is a lot of banging on the door.

There are arguments, baseball injuries and the occasional alligator encounter when the boys go fishing at a nearby canal. Gina has come home more than once to find a baseball-sized hole in the wall. The fire extinguisher has gone off twice.

One time it exploded in the trunk of the car, not the boys' fault, but proof, Little Aaron says, that in this family, you need to be prepared for anything.

### **Flowers and love notes**

The Dortches get by with Kelly's income, as well as subsidy payments the state gives families who adopt from foster care. The adoption stipends aren't as much as foster parents get paid, but they do help, Dortch said.

Christmasses are chaotic and happy. The kids get great presents - including big gifts like a video game system, Little Aaron says, "even though there are, like, 30,000 kids in the house."

Dortch said she prefers it that way. She doesn't like to be alone, and loves a house full of kids. Being a mother to a big family, she says, "is my calling."

Seven-year-old Ashton follows her everywhere she goes, never wanting to be apart. When she finishes a shower, she often finds him waiting for her outside the bathroom door.

Aiden, 8, knows that his mom loves flowers, because he saw Kelly bring them to her on birthdays and other special occasions. He picks the small yellow ones that grow alongside the road, and presents them to her on the way to school.

He often writes her notes, telling her that he loves her, and recently helped make a box for her to keep them in. One day this summer, he sat down with a note pad and carefully printed a new message: "Thank you for being so nice to me," he wrote. "Thank you for being so nice to me. Thank you for being so nice to me."

### **Needed: patience and faith**

Little Aaron said his family's time in foster care was scary. He lived in at least five different places, always moving, often without his brothers.

One foster family was really nice, he said. They had their own boat and taught him how to fish. But that eventually fell apart, like all of the other places except the Dortches.

Many families who gave them up, Gina Dortch said, didn't have the patience to deal with children who have been through so much, or the faith that things would get better.

Little Aaron learned not to get his hopes up. The first time he was told he couldn't stay somewhere anymore, he was surprised, he said. "The second time, I was like, OK, lemme go pack my bags."

By third time, he said, his bags were already packed.

Moving was hardest on his little brothers, he said, because they would get attached.

Of all the families he stayed with, the Dortches are the best, Little Aaron said. Some parents, he said, wanted them to "put on an outfit and pretend we are a perfect family, even when we all aren't. Well, with this family, it was like, 'I don't care what you think about us. We have our problems, but we can work them out.'"

### **'They'd actually punish me'**

On June 19, the Dortches took all seven brothers to the Palm Beach County Courthouse to make the adoption official. They posed for pictures, and afterward went to Fun Depot, where they partied until midnight.

The adoption "was awesome," Little Aaron said. "We'd been waiting for a long time."

He felt happiness, but also a sense of relief.

"We don't have to worry about each other anymore," he said. "We are, like, safe."

And not only did he get his one wish, to live with his three brothers by birth, he also got three more. Little Aaron, Austin and the Dortch's birth son Kaylen have become the Three Musketeers, Gina said. And anyone who picks on a Dortch has six other brothers to contend with.

"It's an 'I have your back' kind of thing," she said.

Little Aaron can't pinpoint a single moment when the Dortch home no longer felt like just another temporary stop. Only gradually, he said, did he start to believe that these parents weren't going to give them up.

"They'd say I love you," Little Aaron said. "That's the first time that's happened. They'd support me. They'd actually punish me if I did bad in school. Most families, they would just be like, oh, you got an F. I don't care. You're not my kid." But the Dortches grounded him until he brought his grades up, the same as with their own kids.

And eventually, he knew that he and his brothers were finally home.

"It's been feeling like a family for a long time," he said.

### **Gina and Kelly plus 8?**

Gina Dortch couldn't be happier that her original plan to adopt a girl brought her four more boys instead.

Still, she can't stop thinking about tiny dresses ...

"I want to have that mother-daughter bond. You can plan their prom, you can plan their wedding. When she's a baby, I want to dress her up like a doll, with all the frills and lace. All the things you can't do to a boy."

She has her eye on one girl in particular, a 14-month-old in foster care.

When this topic comes up, Little Aaron coughs and rolls his eyes. By the time that happens, he says, he had better be out of the house and far away, ideally working a crab boat somewhere off the coast of Alaska.

"I can get along with girls, just not sisters," he says. The fundamental problem, as he sees it, is that "all girls are the same."

But Gina Dortch is not one to be deterred.

"I think," she says, "they'd be good big brothers."

### **Seven boys, seven days of laundry**

**LAUNDRY:** 'All day every day,' about 20 loads a week.

**GROCERY SHOPPING:** Dortch goes to Publix nearly every day but doesn't buy in bulk - she finds that the more food she brings home, the faster it goes.

**FOOD BILL:** About \$800 per month (and four or five boxes of cereal a week)

**UTILITIES:** Around \$400

Looking for families

Florida's Chief Child Advocate Jim Kallinger recently met with the Dortches in Boca Raton to thank them personally. A total of 3,674 children were adopted from Florida's foster care system last year, an annual record.

Kallinger, the first to fill the new job created by Gov. Charlie Crist, said the state is working hard to recruit families willing to take teens, groups of siblings and children with disabilities. The state recently introduced a new Web site for families thinking about adoption, [www.adoptflorida.org](http://www.adoptflorida.org). There is also a hot-line, (800) 96-ADOPT.

At any given time, there are about 1,000 children in Florida waiting for homes.