



# Boatright Family Introduction

## It's Not About Handouts, But About Opportunity

By Fred J. Klinkenberger Jr.

Many times during the past dozen years, 48-year-old Alexandra “Alex” Boatright felt her life was unraveling. Though today she radiates energy and a joy for living, this belies the physical and emotional challenges she has faced and overcome – challenges that surely could have defeated someone of lesser faith. Yet, it indeed was her faith in God that has kept the Canadian woman forging ahead despite confronting an almost insurmountable series of setbacks in her life.



She left her native Ottawa, Ontario in 1992 for America and married a U.S. soldier. They left for Europe for what promised to be an adventurous tour of duty. Unfortunately, that adventure turned into an emotional roller coaster ride spanning more than a decade and leading her to Habitat for Humanity. She applied in January 2008 to be considered for a Habitat home and was accepted last July.

Her initial experiences in Germany and Italy as a serviceman’s wife were “incredible” but fate then intervened when she gave birth in Hanau, Germany, to a son, Garrett. He was born with Down’s Syndrome and also was diagnosed as needing open-heart surgery. The European tour of duty was cut short by several months in 1998 when the family returned to U.S. shores because Garrett needed that surgery. As Alex describes it, his heart then was “like a wet Kleenex.” His operation was successfully performed at Norfolk’s Children’s Hospital of the King’s Daughters in May of 1998.

“He was a trooper and got right through it,” Alex recounts.

However, it would not be the last of Garrett’s health issues, and by now Alex and her husband had a second son, Adyn, who was 14 months old.

Alex explains. “When he [Garrett] was three months shy of his fourth birthday he had congestive heart failure, and that took him from running and playing [and confined him to] a wheel chair, permanently dependent on someone for his survival. Her son required another open-heart operation. She says, “This was in 2001 – Garrett had his second open-heart surgery at the end of March [2001].” He began to have problems and

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Alex took him to Ft. Eustis near Williamsburg, Va., where it was decided to transfer him to the Portsmouth Naval Hospital. He was in Portsmouth for three weeks, where Alex several times tried to convince the medical staff Garrett's problem was his heart, yet she was continually rebuffed.

In Portsmouth Garrett suffered congestive heart, contracted pneumonia and other complications, including briefly lacking oxygen to his brain. The hospital medical staff then belatedly acknowledged Garrett's heart indeed needed attention. The young boy was then medically evacuated (MEDEVACed) to Charlottesville, Va., where what-was-to-be a two-hour surgery was completed in 30 minutes, though Garrett wasn't expected to survive. He did, but lack of oxygen while in the Portsmouth Naval Hospital resulted in permanent damage, and he now is confined to a wheel chair needing 24/7 care. Alex tries to see him "three or four times a week depending on my days."

Another gut-wrenching event would face her in Charlottesville: While she and her husband were staying in the Ronald MacDonald House during the surgery, her husband met another woman and without warning left Alex. "He found someone at [the Ronald] MacDonald House and they had a brief moment, and then he moved on," she says. Though she doesn't dwell on it or speak badly of her former husband, the failed marriage – on top of her son's medical issues -- took an almost insurmountable emotional toll on her.

That was eight years ago, and Alex remembers standing at the edge of an emotional abyss. "I was devastated," she explains. "I thought of suicide. What kept me going was my youngest [Adyn], because nobody was around...financially I was in a really tight situation, and I had no help at all from my [ex-husband] 'gentleman-person.' God gave me the strength. I still have issues. But [now] I'm okay – It's made me a stronger person."

She currently distributes audiovisual media. "I'm a vendor – I work for a company called EuroPac and they're out of Virginia Beach, [Va.] and I supply CDs, DVDs, new audio and video releases, and similar products to stores...I have about four to six stores." Her life is indeed busy – she also is contributing 250 hours of service helping build other Habitat homes in the Norfolk and Greater Hampton Roads, Va., area. She never thought she'd be building houses anywhere. "I'm enjoying it. I never had the confidence...to image I could help build somebody's house. I really like it!" she exclaims.

The breakup of her marriage would by no means be the last travail Alex would face. Garrett had a relatively mild degree of Down's Syndrome and successfully recuperated from his open-heart surgery, then played and ran around like any spunky young lad. Today the now-11-year-old is confined to a wheel chair and requires 24/7 care because of a subsequent tragic event.

Alex is hoping to move with both sons into her Habitat house later this year. Once Habitat buys land where the house will be built, things will move quickly. “We’re still waiting for the land to put my home on. Once we get the land – hopefully it will be in the spring sometime – then we’ll build the house. It will be a one-level because of [Garrett’s] wheelchair,” she says.

For Alex Boatright, it will be a dream-come-true because all she wants is to have both Garrett and Adyn living with her under one roof. Yet tears well up in her eyes when she talks about another challenge she faces in caring for Garrett – that of getting him the proper therapy so her son can one day again walk and be ambulatory. Tears flow as Alex explains, “They see his [Garrett’s medical] record and...because of the damage to his brain they think he’s ‘no good’ anymore. He can do things you might ask him to do – it just takes a little longer. His brain is shrinking because it’s not being worked...so I just want therapy for one year...that’s all I want. When I see people who have children at home who are playing, I envy that because I don’t have that anymore. But you have to move on...you can’t dwell in the past.” Yet she is convinced Garrett needs only the proper therapy to gradually be able to get out of the wheel chair.

As though overcoming these hurdles hasn’t been enough, Christmas 2008 brought more misfortune. “I had a major car accident...[during the holidays] and it has done something to my back. So I can’t pick him [Garrett] up like I used to be able to. And that’s hard. Usually I would take him for two or three weeks...hopefully my back will get better.” She briefly describes the accident. “Someone was going about forty-five miles an hour and I was sitting at a stop light.” It was a horrific crash yet she considers herself fortunate, exclaiming, “I’m walking, and I’m blessed that I’m walking. I had these dreams of bringing my son home, and now [because of the injury] I don’t know if I can do it.”

Yet she forges ahead. “It’s been a challenge, but you know – you learn to jump over those hurdles and move on, and that’s what I’m doing. You can have all the material things in the world and still be extremely unhappy,” she says. “I don’t make a lot of money...I struggle [financially] every month. But I have my kids and I have a roof over my head...I need to have my friends and my family, and that’s what’s most important. Seven years ago it was all [about] money...and now...it’s amazing how you change,” she wistfully reflects.

She laments the fact that today people are seemingly less caring for one another than in the past. “As you go about your daily activities and look around you, the kindness is not there [like] it used to be. I would like to spread the word to everybody [to] be patient and more kind to others,” she says. And she wants to be remembered for her love for her children and for her family in Canada, whom “I don’t get to see as often as I’d like...but that will come when the time is right.”

Alex Boatright isn't bitter nor does she feel life owes her anything – she certainly wants no handouts. “Absolutely not because there are people who are in worse shape than me,” she emphasizes. “Nobody owes me anything. Why [would they]? I wish I had more money to help others...You know, [there are] people in the streets who have no food. I just think we have so many things lacking in our society...we see people in the streets and other people walk by them...”

Alex certainly has had more than her share of heartbreaks during the past 12 years, yet her energy and zest is contagious. A new chapter will begin when she moves into her Habitat house later this year. Alex never loses sight of the fact that – no matter how bad things can seem to be – there's someone who is facing worse situations. It is people like Alexandria Boatright for whom Habitat for Humanity offers not a handout or a gift, but rather, an opportunity.

And as is readily apparent, Alex – as are others like her – is genuinely grateful. That is the very foundation for Habitat for Humanity's success.