



Actor David Keith and his wife, Nancy, are advocates for children.

Champions For Abused Kids

As he energetically strides around the room while chatting, this muscular 6-foot Tennessee native laughs often. David Keith makes as memorable an impression in person as he does on-screen in such films as *Daredevil* and *An Officer and a Gentleman*. Each time the actor's cell phone chirps, his wife, Nancy, smoothly steps in and takes over the interrupted conversation.

The attractive couple pirouettes through a dozen such conversational dances before their daughter, Presley, lifts her small arms in wordless re-

quest. Her dad promptly obliges and then visibly grows still and serene with the 3-year-old in his arms.

The Keiths' love for Presley (who happens to share the same birth date as Elvis) is palpable. Spend time with them, and you quickly discover just

"For our anniversary, instead of exchanging gifts, we contributed enough to either build or furnish one of the [Childhelp] village's rooms."

David Keith

Nancy and David Keith worked with Childhelp USA even before the birth of their daughter, Presley. But the couple doubled their commitment to the child abuse prevention organization after they became parents and moved home to the South.

how special and valuable they consider *all* children.

David serves as an ambassador for Childhelp USA, one of the oldest and largest national organizations for the treatment and prevention of child abuse. Begun in 1959 by Sara O'Meara, a Tennessee native, and Yvonne Fetters, programs include advocacy centers, therapeutic treatment villages, foster care training, and education in Arizona, California, New York, Michigan, Virginia, and Tennessee. Each year the organization serves more than 161,000 people through direct service and Childhelp's national child abuse hotline.

Coming Home

A few years ago, Nancy and David decided to move from Los Angeles to Knoxville, his hometown. "It was important to both of us that our daughter be born in the South," says Nancy, "where kindness and extending a helping hand are the norm, not the exception." Although she and David met each other in Los Angeles, "Nancy's from the *real* L.A.—lower Alabama," jokes David. "When we found out that we were both Southerners, it was like, 'Oh, great! Half the work is done.'" Nancy agrees: "We could just really talk about things that matter."

"When I moved back home," says David, "I had three or four goals to really root myself in Tennessee. At the top of the list was to become very active in Childhelp." ▶



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The center's colorful decor and wall-to-wall toys decrease anxiety in children who need a safe haven. Interview rooms include one-way mirrors so law enforcement staff can unobtrusively witness sessions.

Shocking Statistics

The organization helps a range of kids—from the very young (any child who is verbal) all the way up to age 18. The most horrible statistic is this cold fact: Three U.S. children die daily due to abuse and neglect. "In 1995, we worked with 300 kids," says Dick Willey, former Childhelp Southern Operations director. "In 2003, we helped 600 kids. Are there more instances? I can't tell you. Is there more reporting? Yes.

"Sexual abuse is so insidious, we have to come up with a good way of interviewing kids in a place where they feel safe," he continues. The Knoxville center provides such a place. The building sports colorful murals and life-size stuffed animals in every corner. A playroom features a

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"It was important to both of us that our daughter be born in the South, where kindness and extending a helping hand are the norm, not the exception." *Nancy Keith*

faux tree and a gazebo equipped with a TV and video games. Costumes spill from an armoire.

A specially equipped motor home allows similar service in Tennessee's rural areas. For kids who need long-term intervention, Childhelp is creating the Village of East Tennessee Smoky Mountain Haven. The 50-acre pastoral site outside of the city will feature three eight-bed cottages, a barn, a school, and an inter-denominational chapel.

"These are children who are traumatically troubled by what they've experienced," Dick says. "If we allow them to grow into adulthood without doing something for them, we are going to have some major problems to deal with." Not only can abused children become abusers, they may also unleash pent-up rage in other destructive ways. He soberly adds, "We have jails full of them."

Star Power

Celebrities such as David help bring in money, which Childhelp uses efficiently; 91 cents of every dollar goes directly to programs. In addition to organizing benefits, the Keiths give of their own personal time and money. "At least twice a month, we're doing something with Childhelp," says Nancy. "For our anniversary," David adds, "instead of exchanging gifts, we contributed enough to either build or furnish one of the village's rooms."

As he talks enthusiastically about the Childhelp village and other programs, David comes across much like the guy next door that he often portrays on-screen. When asked about child abusers, however, the amiable actor's eyes turn icy. "My knee-jerk reaction to any of it is, in a word, murderous," he says. Then he sighs and admits his vengeful outlook "doesn't solve anything. Childhelp comes in with these severely

abused children and fixes them," he says, "Thank God for people who are more like Christ taught us to be. Because of Childhelp USA, there will be fewer child abusers."

As if on cue, young Presley begins to cry the tears of a child fretting over a missed nap. David cradles her in his arms and begins to croon a low lullaby to his daughter. She

is soothed. So, by the way, is her daddy. *NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON*

For more information visit www.childhelpusa.org. To reach the The Childhelp USA national child abuse hotline, call 1-800-422-4453. For more information about stronger child protection laws, visit www.protect.org.

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