

It's not unusual for a young couple to have a growing family.

It is a little unusual for a family of five to turn into a family of eight in less than a year, and it is even more unusual for that family to grow and shrink from the eight and back again in a matter of days. But that's life in the Williams household.

"It's just the acceptance of a busy life," Bobby Williams said. "I don't think we'd be comfortable if we weren't busy. It's just who we are."

Bobby and his wife, Courtney, have quite the brood. Their children range from ages 1 to 11, with the oldest two still halfway across the globe.

Three of their children, 7-year-old Eli, 5-year-old Ayla and 3-year-old Owen, are their biological children. Their 1-year-old daughter, Addy, was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo and has been living in the U.S. for about a year. Their oldest boys, 11-year-old Nahagi and 9-year-old Detcho, have been living in an orphanage in Ethiopia for four years but should arrive at their new home in Dickinson in the next few weeks.

In addition to taking care of their own six, they are foster parents, sometimes on an emergency basis, and can add even more children — from infants to pre-teens — to their large family.

Because of their work with foster care and international adoption, the Williamses are being honored by Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, D-N.D., in the Congressional Angels in Adoption program.

"We were just amazed by the work that they'd done and their commitment to children and their commitment to giving homes to children that other people don't give homes to," Heitkamp said. "There are very few people in the United States that I respect more than foster parents."

### **Building a life together**

Bobby and Courtney met in Grand Forks while they were both attending the University of North Dakota.

"She was heading up a broomball hockey tournament, and my friends and I were signed up for the tournament and there was a bracketing problem, and me being the college single guy, you see a beautiful woman, I was like, 'Guys, I'm going to go sweep her off her feet and solve the problem,'" Bobby said. "The rest is history, right?"

Courtney is from Dickinson and Bobby is from western Montana.

They dated for 10 months before Bobby popped the question and were married 10 months after that in 2004.

The couple dealt with infertility issues early in their marriage and decided to look into adoption.

“We started talking adoption way back when,” Courtney said.

But Courtney became pregnant by surprise with Eli, who was born in 2006. The couple had two more successful pregnancies, but then suffered miscarriages.

“Bobby said if we’re going to have more kids, he thought we should adopt,” Courtney said.

Adoption was always something Courtney was interested in, but was a little hesitant at first, already being a mother of three.

“We just started praying about it and really felt like it was something we should do,” Courtney said. “The more we read about — you see commercials on TV — but then we started actually doing research and seeing how many kids are orphaned.”

### **Building a home**

Courtney designed her family’s rural Dickinson home with the idea of bringing a lot of children into it.

The basement remains unfinished for the time being, but upstairs has what Courtney called a “bonus room,” a large family room.

The older boys were going to sleep in the basement once it was finished, but are staying in the large bonus room. The younger boys have expressed interest in staying there too. So Eli and Owen will be moving in with their big brothers.

“We like our kids sharing rooms,” Courtney said. “We designed the house with big rooms for them to share.”

Having a large family comes with some changes.

“We used to be real clean, real dust-free people and you find out you’re going to have to get some tolerances,” Bobby said.

### **Diversifying the family**

Though there are children in the U.S. who need homes — the Williamses will continue to care for foster children — they were drawn to international adoption.

“Biblically, it says to care for orphans,” Courtney said. “After we were reading the bible and seeing those things, it was kind of like, why wouldn’t we do it? We have room, we have a home, we have a love for it.”

They started the adoption process nearly three years ago and were drawn to the struggle of children in Ethiopian orphanages.

“Our heart was really broken for children in Africa, specifically in the orphanage setting and growing up on the streets and all that,” Courtney said.

The wait time for infants from Ethiopia increased once their paperwork was filed. More research led them to Addy and her birthplace in the Congo.

“After we brought her home, we were still waiting on Ethiopia — we were still on the waitlist,” Courtney said. “Our hearts just really — after going there, after physically going there and taking her away from the orphanage and seeing all the kids standing there and saying ‘bye,’ it was very emotional to drive away from that orphanage.”

They began to seriously think about adopting older children, but were worried what their oldest child, Eli, would think about not being the big brother anymore.

“He actually brought it up to us one night,” Courtney said. “‘What would you think about us adopting an older kid?’ We were kind of like, ‘What?’ He had no clue we were talking about it.”

The children in the household have been just as much a part of the decision to grow as the adults have.

“It’s not like we just say, ‘Hey, guess what, you’re getting two brothers.’ We’ve included them since day one,” Bobby said. “We really almost have adult conversations with them and they take a lot of ownership in this as well.”

In March, they decided to change the request from an infant and 2-year-old to children up to age 11 for Ethiopia.

“In June, we got a referral for our two boys,” Courtney said.

They were able to travel to Ethiopia in July to meet Nahagi and Detcho, who are biological brothers.

### **Bringing big brothers home**

“We were in Ethiopia for 10 days for court and we took Eli with us,” Courtney said.

The Williamses were worried about how their oldest children would react to meeting their parents for the first time.

“We got out — ‘Hi mom, hi dad.’” Bobby said.

“Whoa, they called us mom and dad right away.”

They had sent them a picture book about the family and the house about a month before their trip.

“We found those photobooks that we sent and it looked like they were 40 years old,” Bobby said. “They were just paged through that much — it meant a lot to us to put that connection.”

The boys had spent a year in the U.S. with a traveling choir and learned English and the culture in their time here.

“We didn’t know that when we got the referral,” Courtney said. “It was a pleasant surprise.”

Some questioned the Williamses’ international search when there are so many American children in need of homes.

“There’s children in America that need to be adopted, 100 percent,” Bobby said. “But for us, our heart was — through our personal research and prayer — was, here. We have the foster system and the kids have somewhat of a shot over here. Over there, they’re lucky to be found, first of all, and if they’re found, they’re even luckier to get into an orphanage. And even if they get into an orphanage, the care they get is — subpar care would be good, relatively speaking.”

The Williamses plan to keep foster parenting even with the addition of Nahagi and Detcho.

“There’s just two less beds available,” Bobby said. “We have to find space for two more beds.”

### **Being foster parents**

The Williamses became foster parents when they lived in Montana and continued to care for children in need when they moved back to Courtney’s hometown.

“There’s such a need for foster parents,” Bobby said. “There’s hardly any families to fulfill that need that so a lot of times they’re forced to go out of county or out of state to find families.”

The Williamses have been foster parents for about six years.

“There’s a need and there’s support out there for people that are interested,” Courtney said.

But the Williamses don’t see themselves as special.

“I hope people just see us and say, ‘If they can do it, I can do it,’” Bobby said.

Because there are a lot of stories and misconceptions about adoption and foster care, the Williamses worked with their church, the Evangelical Bible Church in Dickinson, to create a

ministry to educate and support potential and current foster and adoptive parents in the community.

“We started a ministry two years ago called Embrace at our church to encourage people to care for orphans in many different ways,” Courtney said. “Foster care, adoption, sponsorship, missions trips, just praying for them, helping out foster families and adoptive families. The Bible tells us to care for orphans. Here are many ways that we can care for orphans.”

Adoption is on the decline and is uncommon in western North Dakota.

“As people have found out about the ministry and our story a little bit, people have come out and said that, ‘I was adopted,’ or ‘I was in foster care,’” Bobby said. “There’s a lot of people who have gone through it.”

### **Becoming ‘Angels’**

The Angels in Adoption conference will be Oct. 7-9 in Washington, D.C., but the Williamses may not be able to attend, depending on when they can take their trip to Ethiopia. They may be able to stop in Washington on their way back, depending on the timing.

Regardless of their attendance, Heitkamp plans to share their story at the ceremony.

“What we really want to do is we want to draw attention not just to the good people who do this, but that there are opportunities for everybody to be good people,” Heitkamp said. “There’s lots of kids out there who need the love and care that families like the Williams family provide.”

The Williamses were anonymously nominated to be honored by Heitkamp as Angels in Adoption.

“Courtney said she got some random email — you know those emails you get sometimes and go, ‘Do I open it? Do I not?’ And then she said Sen. Heidi called her shortly after she received the email,” Bobby said. “That’s how we were made aware.”

Neither Bobby or Courtney had heard of the Angels in Adoption program before being invited to be honored in the nation’s capital for what they say is simply living their lives.

“When you get an award, it’s kind of cool,” Bobby said. “But this isn’t why we do this. We didn’t set out to adopt children and love our kids to get an award. But it’s cool.”