By Daris Howard
Syndicated Columnist

We had been foster parents for several years when the opportunity came for us to have a beautiful 19-month-old foster daughter in our home, whom we were told we could possibly adopt. She went by the nickname of Angel, in the foster-care program, and that was what we called her too.

She truly was a little angel. She had a round, cherubic face and light blond hair. She had a big smile and a happy disposition. We loved her from the minute she entered our home.

We were told that Angel's birth mother was still in her middle teens at the time that Angel came to us. Over time we learned, through association with the birth mother, of her love for Angel, even if she was not in a position to take care of her daughter's day to day needs.

We also had an 13-month-old daughter of our own and the two little girls immediately became best friends. We would sit them in their high chairs side by side and they would stuff the food into their little mouths.

The biggest problem with that was that Clarissa had a major sweet tooth, and Angel just loved food in general. If we turned our backs for one minute, Angel would pull most of Clarissa's main course onto her tray and Clarissa would pull Angel's dessert onto her own. They insisted on sitting together, but if they did, they would end up with a very unbalanced meal.

As much as Angel loved Clarissa, she loved my wife, Donna, and me more. She called us "Omma" and "Da-da" from the minute she arrived.

Being with Donna all day, when I arrived home from work, she figured I belonged to her. She was very possessive of my lap. She would allow Clarissa to sit by me and, at times, would even allow her on my lap. But no one else could be within reach of her chubby little arms. If they tried to sit by me she would reach out and whap them or push them away saying, "My da-da."

I would often rock my two little girls and read them stories. I would bathe them and put them in bed and then sing them a lullaby. Life couldn't have been more perfect.

But, just before Christmas, Angel came down with the chicken pox. Almost all of our children had had chicken pox before and it seemed like nothing to worry about. We had been told that Angel had been born as a crack baby, but we didn't think much about it, not realizing her immune system had been compromised.

On Christmas Eve, we have always reenacted the Christmas story. I always have a leading role as the donkey, a type casting if ever there was one. But on this Christmas Eve, Angel wasn't feeling well, and didn't want to let "Da-da" go so I could play my starring role. Instead, I read the scriptures and the rest of the family acted it out. Angel watched quietly, curled up in my arms.

I got pajamas on my two little girls and tucked them into their cribs that stood end to end in the bedroom. I remember vividly that night, reaching out and brushing Angel's beautiful blond hair from her face as I sang Away In The Manger to them for their lullaby. Little Angel reached out her chubby little hand and held onto my finger for quite a long time as if to say, "I love you, Daddy," and I told her I loved her too as I kissed her soft little face.

That was the last time I would be able to tell her that in this life, because the next morning, Christmas Day, due to complications from the chicken pox, she had gone to spend the celebration of Christ's birth with Him.

The grief was so hard for my family and I tried to be strong. But in the evening, when I would go

out to feed our animals, in the quiet, calmness of the evening, underneath the starry sky, I would fall to my knees in the soft hay and sob. While doing so, I would often question why God took my sweet little daughter from me.

Finally, one night, when I felt the pain in my heart would tear it in two, I felt a peacefulness settle on my soul as if it was emanating from the heavens, and it seemed I could hear God say, “I, too, am her father, and I wanted her to come home to be my Christmas Angel.”

Now, each Christmas Eve, we light two candles. One for Angel, and one for the baby we lost Dec. 23 two years earlier. Their flickering light reminds us of the glorious promise that came from a child’s birth many centuries ago, a promise that gives us hope that we will see our two little Christmas angels again.