Filling Up an Empty Nest

By PHYLLIS KORKKI

RETIRING from work? Then it might be time to think about raising a family. Some brave older adults are turning the idea of retirement on its head by choosing to adopt children — this when many of their peers are traveling, socializing, taking up intellectual or entrepreneurial pursuits, or just plain relaxing.

Some of these older parents are empty-nesters who apparently didn’t have their fill of child-rearing the first time around. Others are grandparents or older blood relatives of parents unable to care for their own children. Still others never had children, and finally have the time, desire and means to give it a go. In most cases, the children are older and have special needs; it is rare for an older adult to adopt an infant, according to national adoption groups.

“We’ve always thought that more retired people ought to adopt kids instead of play golf,” said Rebecca Gawboy, 60, who along with her husband, Jim, 76, is taking care of 12 adopted children ranging in age from 8 to 19. They live in a nine-bedroom house on a farm in Tower, Minn., in the northern part of the state.

This is the second marriage for both Ms. Gawboy, a retired community organizer, and Mr. Gawboy, a retired game warden. They each have three adult children (one of Ms. Gawboy’s adult children is adopted, too), and a total of 11 grandchildren. “I was the adored child of older parents,” Ms. Gawboy said. “My brother and I lived an idyllic childhood.” She eventually realized that her childhood had been “an astonishing gift” and knew she had to try to give back.

The Gawboys were licensed for foster care in 1996; they adopted their first child, a foster child, in 2003, and in 2004 adopted a group of five siblings they had fostered. In 2008, they adopted a set of six siblings and stopped fostering at that time. Mr. Gawboy is half-Ojibwe, and all the children are Ojibwe; the adoptions were arranged through their tribes.

With the first set of siblings, “We were surprised they would let us adopt them because we were so old,” Ms. Gawboy said. But they were in good health and remain so, she said.

No organization or federal agency keeps statistics on the ages of adoptive parents, so it is hard to estimate their numbers. But executives at several adoption-related organization said...
they had definitely seen heightened interest among older adults. An informational Web site set up by Adoptive Families magazine has a special discussion forum for older adults with more than 500 members.

Chuck Johnson, president and chief executive of the National Council for Adoption, an advocacy group, said that over the last 20 years, age barriers formerly set by adoption groups had steadily fallen, so more older adults now qualified to become parents. With life spans lengthening and baby boomers remaining healthier longer, the time appears ripe for this kind of parenting.

As more singles and gay people, too, adopt children, it’s clear that the definition of what constitutes a suitable adoptive family is expanding. This reflects a recognition that “children do far better in families than in institutional or temporary care,” said Adam Pertman, executive director of the Donaldson Adoption Institute, a nonprofit research group, and author of “Adoption Nation.”

“These are competent, vetted people,” he added. Potential parents must go through a rigorous background check and participate in a home study process where a case worker observes the family before final approval occurs. The need for competent adoptive parents is great. In 2011, a little more than 50,000 children in the United States were adopted with the involvement of child-welfare public agencies, with around 104,000 waiting to be adopted, according to federal data. More than half of those waiting were over the age of 6.

Because most older adults are approved to adopt older children, the age gap between parent and child need not be all that extreme. Older adults are adopting young adults too, Mr. Pertman said. “People can adopt 21-year-olds,” he said. “They want families, too. They want a place to go for Christmas.”

When adults adopt older children it’s important to remember that “most of these kids have special needs at some level,” Mr. Pertman said. “They were placed into foster care for some reason. You don’t suffer abuse or neglect without some repercussions.”

This can raise questions about whether an older adult is strong enough to handle some of the behavioral problems, including aggressiveness, that a special-needs child may exhibit. Older adoptive parents “must demonstrate that they have both the physical and mental acumen to meet the challenges of raising children in the same way that all families have their full circumstances considered,” Mr. Johnson said.

Some older adults decide to take the international route, even though foreign adoptions have declined as rules have become stricter. But when it comes to adopting abroad, “there’s an
exception to every rule,” said Martha Osborne, founder of Rainbow Kids, an adoption advocacy group. Adopting a newborn is going to be nearly impossible, but the rules can be stretched for older children, she said. China, Bulgaria and Ukraine are among the more flexible countries, she added.

Linda Snyder, 54, has been preapproved to adopt two orphans in China, an 8-year-old boy and a 12-year-old girl in Guangdong province (they are unrelated). She has gone through all of the financial, background and health checks. Working through a group called Adoption Advocate International, she is planning to travel to China this year as soon as her travel documents are in order and bring the children back to Yakima, Wash., where she lives.

Ms. Snyder’s husband, who was more than 20 years older than her, died in October 2011, and she always thought she might eventually adopt if she outlived him. She is a registered nurse who does home care, including pediatric care, and plans to take a year off once the children are home.

She is not deterred by the thought of parenting when she is retired. She traveled extensively with her husband, so she doesn’t feel the need to do more of that in her 60s. It’s as if she is living her life in a different order than other people, she said.

Most of Ms. Snyder’s friends support her plans, but she has had acquaintances tell her she is too old to adopt, saying “you have no idea how much energy it takes to raise children.”

It’s true that older parents may not have as much energy as younger ones, said Mr. Pertman. “On the other hand, you may have more wisdom to bring to the table.”

As Rebecca Gawboy put it: “We’re really pros at this. We have a lot of experience.”

And they’ve needed it. Seven of the Gawboys’ children were found to have fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, an exposure to alcohol in the womb that can cause developmental problems. The Gawboys do not drink. “Our children’s lives were almost destroyed by alcohol in their birth homes,” Ms. Gawboy said. “Alcohol could never be a part of our lives for that reason.”

Because the children have special needs, they receive in-home care and therapeutic services from the state. Often, with adult children, grandchildren, adopted children and care workers in the home, “it’s like a zoo in here,” Ms. Gawboy said. One thing she and her husband have had to give up is their privacy, she said.

Their one-acre garden benefits from extra hands, though. They ask all the children to do 20 minutes a day of weeding, and 24 hands make quick work of it, she said.
Because they eat food from their garden, raise farm animals and also hunt and fish, they can keep their food bills low. They also receive food donations from the community, along with clothing, bicycles and appliances. With some government assistance, they are able to raise their children on Mr. Gawboy’s government pension.

Once a year, Rebecca and Jim Gawboy take a weeklong vacation alone, while Ms. Gawboy’s oldest adult daughter takes care of the children. The Gawboys also make sure to go out to dinner once a week and take one overnight trip a month without the children — for their sanity. “If we don’t have a solid loving relationship we can’t give to our kids,” she said.

Those who are considering adopting should guard against overly inflated expectations, Ms. Gawboy said. “If you expect kids to be grateful, if you expect immediate loyalty, then you’re definitely doing it for the wrong reasons,” she said.

“They shouldn’t have to be grateful to have parents and a loving family” — that should just be a given, she said.