

“Instant Family”

By Helen Lutz

When I think back on raising our daughters, we did all right. We didn't have the fanciest cars or exotic vacations or a barrel full of money; but there was a lot of love and laughter and good times (except when we fed our one year old strawberry milkshake – she loved it until it started coming out of both ends). Now I look at my grand kids who are blessed with wonderful parents (my daughter chose not to go the strawberry milkshake route with her kids) and happy lives. However, there are so many children who are not as fortunate. Locally, right here in Bexar County, there are between 1,800 and 2,000 children at any time who are with Child Protective Services and in need of a home and love – it's heartbreaking.



The movie “Instant Family” opens with a brief explanation by Sean Anders, director and co-writer, that the story is a composition of his own life's story. Pete and Ellie, played by Mark Wahlberg and Rose Byrne, are happily married thirty-something year olds. Their passion and profession is flipping houses at which they are quite good. Ellie and Pete seem to always catch heat from her family regarding children since they have none. Ellie's siblings try to make every little thing a competition including kids. One of her sisters even mentioned that they may adopt since her biological clock is ticking.

The thought of adoption perked both Pete's and Ellie's interests. After all, if they can turn a sow's ear into a silk glove when it comes to flipping houses, how hard can parenting be? Besides, it would be better to adopt a little bit older child to get past the diapers and yucky stages of babies.

They begin their search on the internet which results in too many tears. The foster/adoption sites pull at their heartstrings. So the next logical step is to sign up for the foster care program and classes to learn more about the process and needs. Here they meet an array of people all of whom are interested in adopting for every reason imaginable led by two social workers, straight-laced Sharon (Tig Notaro) who spouts the politically correct line and Karen (Octavia Spencer) who tells it like it is. Maybe adoption is not their thing.

Periodically the agency arranges a ‘Meet and Greet’ day where available kids get a party and prospective parents the opportunity to check them out; which reminded me of a big box store for selecting a kid. Pete and Ellie are slightly taken aback with what they see as well as the adults, who view them as competition, especially for the smaller ones. They then spot the older kids off in a corner; no one is interested in them. Teenagers just hang around until they finally grow out of the system. While looking at them one girl steps forward to tell them just how it is. Ellie immediately feels a connection with Ms. Lizzy (Isabela Moner) and would like to invite her live with them. Perfect – however, Lizzy comes with baggage; a little brother and sister and the agency doesn't want to split up the family.

Presto! “Instant Family” tells a remarkable, funny, sad, heartwarming as well as heart breaking story of Pete's and Ellie's instant family of five. There are many lessons to be learned on both sides and Anders tells the story well through both humor and tears. How are Pete and Ellie supposed to deal with all the baggage that comes from raising three kids who have lived difficult lives with no parenting skills? They quickly learn that it's not like flipping houses. That by providing good food, a beautiful home and Christmas isn't nearly enough, but building deeper connections – with both sides ready to give and receive. On a scale of one to four Hart Beats I give “Instant Family” THREE HARTS. It's good for the soul without being preachy – and Margo Martindale as Grandma Sandy alone is worth the price of admission.