

FOSTERING: Serving children in need is a calling

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convinced to foster two boys. This inspired Souza to commit to 30 hours of certification training to become a foster parent. That was in 2002, and the number of foster children grew.

After moving to their Camp Sherman home almost three years ago, the couple picked up where they had left off with children services in California.

They have four of their own children, the older three now adults. Yet, every foster child is considered their own child for as long as the child is with them. The program is designed to be a temporary guardianship for children in need.

There is a sparkle in Souza's eyes when she recalls the children who have come to their home. She feels like she learns something new from every child they host.

"I want them to first understand that they can walk with me and talk with me," she said.

Their own son, 13-year-old Jojo, is a valuable asset in welcoming and supporting his foster siblings, with a special enthusiasm to help in any way he can.

"We had a foster infant when Jojo was seven years old. While I was cooking dinner, Jojo explained that he had changed the child's diaper and burped him. That's the kind of asset he is, with a pleasant sense of duty."

The challenges of mental and emotional problems that come with these children make it a constant need for daily dedication by the Souzas to help their charges become secure, feel safe and find hope in their futures. For foster children, trust is a difficult leap.

"Sometimes the kids are misunderstood outside the home because they're in a new environment and need time to adapt and get comfortable," Souza explained. (The diagnostic term is reactive attachment disorder.) "For instance, a lone girl may feel left out in a house of boys, as any solo gender child could feel, before adapting to her new family."

The rewards come from seeing these children grow and become confident, especially when the Souzas hear things such as "you're the only person who has even been nice to me."

She recalls warmly the time she bought a purple dress for a "daughter" for Easter. She could see in the young girl's eyes the awe

over this dress, so she surprised her with it. The joy was unmistakable for a child that had not known support that was focused on her alone.

Souza's husband once said to her, "The only joy you have is when you can help people." Brad is a contractor, so he cannot invest as much as Shellie does, but he spends time with the children, reading and doing small projects. He also adapts his schedule to her needs, taking time from a job to supervise home life when she is obliged to accomplish things outside the home.

"She wanted to do this, and she's my wife, my best friend," he said. "I support her decision to make a difference for some kids."

There can also be heartbreak when a child's life traumas make it too difficult to becoming trusting and therefore unable to accept a new lifestyle. Yet the

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rewards override the sadness and sense of loss the family sometimes experiences, at least in the Souza household.

"This is not an easy or simple choice," Shellie warns. "Sometimes the kids have problems that are too big, and sometimes the process in the foster system is even more difficult. Being a foster parent demands strong conviction and ability to suffer huge disappointment."

It is not a job, she said, for the faint of heart or a head in the clouds.

She herself spent time in a foster home as a child, so she knows the difficulties from both sides of the coin. She promotes a new experience in which the kids learn that someone is actually listening.

So many children discover that their lives before, in sometimes unstable communities, "are not the only way to live." Souza felt that this was the most valuable lesson for her when she left her own foster parents. It inspired her to find a different way and hopes this is what children take from their time within the Souza household.

Souza reports that they have had from three to eight foster children at one time, and they manage to make it work.

"People ask me if I have favorites, and I sometimes say it's whoever is behaving,"

she said, laughing.

On this day without school, the kids were outdoors riding their bikes, petting the resident horses and playing in the barn. Two boys living there currently are from a city, so the country lifestyle is a new adventure for them.

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The boys like school, especially math, but their greatest pleasure is their swimming classes in Bend almost every afternoon. The seven year old had a couple weeks of swim lessons when he came across the pool in a self-taught breaststroke that even surprised the instructor.

"I didn't teach him that," he exclaimed.

The girl in the household is an avid reader who likes teen novels and adventures, bundled up in her private bedroom.

"The day I met Shellie, she took me to lunch in Sisters and then bought me cowboy boots," she said. "This is one of the best foster homes I have been in."

The Souzas have learned that most of the children who have lived with them do not tend to keep in touch after they either return home or go to a new home.

"It is understandable that they want to invest themselves in a return to their former home or concentrate on the next new thing," Shellie said.

However, a former foster child in the home, who remains a good friend of Jojo's, described Shellie this way: "This house was great. She took care of me and my sister. She just kept being nice. She just really cares for all of us."

Regardless of the outcomes, what is happening in the Souza home is a chance for hope in young children. Their futures are dependent on their own choices, and that is a message the Souzas want to help them learn.

There is always a shortage of available foster parents in nearly every state, Oregon included. The Oregon Department of Human Services has information about the program on its webpage: oregon.gov/dhs/children/fostercare.

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