

JENI GREENSHIELDS OF ENTERPRISE TALKS ABOUT BECOMING A FOSTER PARENT

'Hardest thing you'll ever do'

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ENTERPRISE — Jeni Greenshields wants to do what she can to help kids. She became a foster parent about six months ago. "I have to be part of the solution," she said. "My heart is I can help other foster families, and be a resource for foster kids." Greenshields lives in Wallowa County, exactly halfway between Enterprise and Joseph. Over the last 20 years, she and her husband, Randy, have hosted exchange students, and were legal guardians to three children. She has a master's degree in child development and family relations, and works

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— Jeni Greenshields, foster parent from Enterprise

with the local alternative education program. She also taught preschool for 18 years. "I love the littles and I love the bigs," she said. Providing foster care, she said, is not easy. "Being a quality foster parent is the hardest thing you'll ever do," she said. "It's loving someone else's kid." But she's committed to helping children. "It's very difficult, but very rewarding," she said. "They'll see a healthy family, a healthy marriage,

healthy sibling relationships." In all her years of working with children, this is her advice: "they don't need your pity." "They need your understanding that they are survivors," she said. "What they need is someone to unconditionally walk beside them. My main message to kids is 'you are worth working hard for.'" Greenshields sees foster care as a way of making a difference in a child's life. "It's so important. It's

part of taking care of each other," she said. And she's not in this journey alone — she relies on a support system that includes staff from DHS as well as other families who have fostered before or currently have a foster child in their care. "There's no shortage of hurting children," she said. "Being a foster family is an honor." And the experience has changed her. "It's grown me incredibly," she said. "It's made my life better, more compassionate. It's not for everybody," she warns. "It will test you, grow you. But for people who are willing, it can change your life and the trajectory of a child's life."



Jeni and Randy Greenshields.

Contributed Photo

FOSTERS

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"You've got to be willing to change and adapt," Ken said. Their entire family is involved. When a call comes from DHS about a foster child, they call a family meeting. "Our whole family is on board," Rebecca said. Mykail, the boy who came to them at just 12 weeks old as a foster child, shrugs when asked about his family. "This has been my life forever," he said. "It's definitely something I'll do when I'm older." Biological, adopted, foster — the Fosters don't really use



Rebecca and Ken Foster live in La Grande.

Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

these descriptions for the children who live in their house. "You're part of the family no matter what," Ken said. "There's no difference — they are all our kids."

That being said, they honor the situation of a foster child who comes into their care. "You'll never replace the biological parents," Rebecca said. "That has to be honored."

"We've learned over the years that there's a loss to them," Ken said of the children who find themselves in a new situation. As for getting attached to foster children — yes, that is part of the commitment. And Ken said it should be. "Attachment is what this child needs," he said. "It's not about us. It's about them." Ken said sometimes when a child leaves their care, the entire Foster family sheds tears. "That's because you gave your all and loved your best," Ken said. Although their house is busy — kids in and out of the screen door to play in the backyard, or off to sports practice,

or practicing on a hoverboard — this is life as the Fosters know it. When they don't have any foster children, Mykail notices the void. "The house feels so empty," he said. Rebecca and Ken have noticed how foster children sometimes respond quicker to the children in the house, rather than the adults. "Any adult they may not trust," Rebecca said. "But they will trust a kid their own age." "They always seem to connect to one person really well," Mykail said. The Fosters also depend on a support system of other foster families and friends.

Some can offer respite for a couple hours, and some lend a listening ear. "Having people who support what you do, believe in what you do," Rebecca said. "It's really hard some days, and it's really important to have community." As for their family — the permanent ones and the fosters who may only stay a while — Rebecca and Ken say hearts are made to expand. "Our capacity to love is constantly growing," she said. "It's incredible. It grows if we allow it to, and allow our hearts to be open." "We have to trust God," Ken adds. "He gives us a lot of love to pour out."

POTTERS

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"It hurts. It always hurts," Joyclynn said. "Tears are shed," Ben said. The Potters, along with all certified foster families, complete 30 hours of training every two years. Information about trauma, and how trauma affects a child, has become

more of a focus in the last several years. "Trauma is a common thread," Joyclynn said. "We parent from a place of extreme empathy." They receive training through their jobs, as well — Ben is a foster family certifier for DHS, and Joyclynn works for Early Head Start. Foster care is a family decision for the Potters, who consult their four

children before saying "yes" to taking in a foster child. "We always check with our kids," Ben said. Their daughters, Savannah (19) and Naomi (17), already plan to be involved in foster care when they are older. "They've all grown up with foster care," Joyclynn said. The Potters have supportive

friends and family, too. "I don't think you can foster without a good support network," Joyclynn said. And they keep in mind — always — that the goal of foster care is to reunite a child with his or her family. "You have to know and embrace that the goal is reunification," Joyclynn said.

And when someone asks them about foster care, the Potters are more than happy to have a conversation about it. "We're always hoping more families will foster. It's really needed," Joyclynn said. *Next in the series: Learn more about Every Child and CASA of Eastern Oregon.*



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You've worked tirelessly this past year saving lives, keeping spirits up, and comforting the sick and grieving. On behalf of all the lives you've touched, thank you.

