

A house to come home to

Written by Darci Tomky

An old story paints a picture of a little girl walking along a beach with thousands of stranded starfish on the sand. Again and again, the child bends over, picks up a starfish and throws it back into the water.

Finally, an onlooker points out it's an impossible task to throw all the starfish back before they die. "You can't possibly make a difference!"

At this, the girl stoops again, picks up another starfish and tosses it into the waves. "It made a difference to that one," she said.

"You're making a difference you may not see," said Caryl Harvey, foster parent to 45 children in the last 10 years.

This dedicated mom and her husband Charlie are making a difference in the lives of these foster children, a small chunk of the nearly half a million foster kids in the U.S. today.

The Harveys became certified with Logan County Department of Social Services in 2000 when the sister of their daughter's boyfriend needed foster care.

On Harvey's website, <http://beyondqueen.tripod.com>, she explains the time it takes to become licensed. Foster homes must complete an application, interviews, background checks, home studies, mandated courses and physical examinations.

Harvey said families can request or turn down any children, noting her family specializes in adolescent boys. If other boys are already living in the home, it's ideal to put other boys with them, and for Harvey, it's easier to have older kids who can accept some responsibilities for their own care.

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Foster kids have stayed in their home in Holyoke for as short as overnight to as long as one year or more.

The Harveys have adopted three of the children who came to their home for foster care, and Harvey encouraged families who are thinking about adoption to consider being foster parents.

Other couples, who have already raised a family, like the Harveys, hold a wealth of information and experience, making them great candidates for foster parents.

“But you’ve got to go into it with open eyes,” said Harvey. Foster parenting is a serious matter, not something that can easily be taken back. “You have to be realistic about it.”

After all the preparation that goes into certification, the average foster home is only certified for one year. And every time a child is taken out of a home, that causes more trauma, said Harvey.

Normally foster kids, especially the older ones, have a tendency to separate from family. “Most homes don’t want to deal with that population,” said Harvey.

Colorado in need of more foster homes

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Currently, no homes in Phillips County are certified with the local Department of Social Services to house foster children. A large number of children in foster care and a shortage of homes in the nine-county northeast region is problematic. In 2007, the region had 429 children in foster homes followed by 370 in 2008, 321 in 2009 and 348 in 2010.

Anyone interested in becoming a foster parent—or would simply like more information—can contact Phillips County Department of Social Services at 854-2280.

Her online article said foster children aren't "normal kids," that is, they have all undergone trauma and will all eventually show the effects of that stress. Sometimes that means lying and stealing, cruelty to animals and children and even wetting the bed.

She goes on to say, "We have had our back door kicked in, our money stolen, our upholstery ripped open, our window screens cut from their frames, our carpet permanently pee-scented and stained, windows broken, dryer timers burned out and locks forced."

If that wasn't enough, Harvey said have been the victims of shoves, pushes, street language, curses (from both kids and their families), allegations and public and private tantrums.

Some children are behind in education because of missing school or learning disabilities. "That means foster parents must spend extra time at school in meetings and at home attempting to translate math equations into language the child can assimilate," said Harvey.

"There are court dates to attend, records to keep, relationships with case workers and biological families to build, antagonism of some family members to counter, boundaries to set and all

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within the regulations of the county agency and/or the state.”

Children in foster homes are in the custody of the county and under state protection. Their parents still have rights, and the ideal situation is to reunify the children with their parents.

With the Harveys, foster kids get a chance to see what “normal” is, especially if they stay one year or longer. “Our family is very close and very big, and we interact a lot,” said Harvey. “The kids get a view of normalcy by having a family around.”

Harvey treats all of her foster kids like they were her own, taking them on vacations, to family get-togethers and to church functions.

The children have the opportunity to try out for cheerleader or the school play, learn a musical instrument or play on a sports team.

Most of the kids haven’t had boundaries in their home in the past, so in foster homes they live within the security of boundaries that require them to go to school regularly and do homework, said Harvey.

Since foster parents can’t use any physical discipline, the Harveys get creative with the boundaries they set in their home.

“I’m perfectly comfortable not being their best buddy,” she said. “I’m not supposed to be their buddy.”

Just like with boundaries and discipline, the Harveys treat foster kids the same as their own with the money they spend on them.

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“You’re not going to get rich doing this,” said Harvey.

The reimbursement for foster care is not intended as a salary. It covers their food, their share of utilities, their clothing, their allowances, gifts, sports equipment and that extra \$10 you tuck into their lunch box as they go on a school trip.

So why become a foster parent if the kids only destroy the house, cause some insanity and leave the bank account a bit smaller?

“It’s a way of leaving a legacy,” said Harvey, hoping her effect on these children may keep them from lifelong dependence upon the system, and so, their children and their children’s children.

“These children coming in desperately need someone to love them,” she said. “Do what you can do while you’ve got them.”

One foster child told Harvey, “Thank you for showing me what a family is like because now I know how to value mine.”

Sometimes a thank you means an invitation to a former foster child’s graduation, while other times it’s merely a smile, since the Harveys don’t often hear from children once they’re gone.

By now the Harveys know they can’t help every child who stays with them, but that doesn’t mean they don’t try. They’ve cried at the departure of some and celebrated over others.

But, like the little girl saving starfish on the beach, the Harveys are making a difference in the lives of many children.

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Website sparks interest

Harvey's website, <http://beyondqueen.tripod.com>, is a great place for parents to go for support, encouragement, advice and education on foster parenting, especially if they are in that "age 50 and beyond" group.

Information on everything from teenage culture to what to do if a child runs away to meal ideas and everything in between is offered.

Harvey started her website four years ago and said just in the last few weeks there has been a big increase in activity and interest with the site.