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At 73, she's raised 18 kids, now she'll adopt 2 more

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There's no such thing as quiet in Lula Mae Walker's home.

Loud, bouncy and boisterous are all permanent features of the modest, light-blue house in northwest Fort Lauderdale, the place where Walker has raised countless children -- nine of whom she gave birth to, nine of whom she adopted, and countless additional foster children.

On Saturday, National Adoption Day, Walker, 73, will add two more when she adopts 16-year-old twins Rossano and Rossana Thomas.

For the twins, the adoption ends years of bouncing among relatives and foster families. Now, they have each other -- plus six brothers, 11 sisters and countless nieces, nephews and cousins, some far older than the twins are. One brother died years ago.

For Walker, the adoption is another chapter in a life devoted to loving children, no matter their race, no matter their birth mother.

"The kids just give me something to keep going," Walker said. "It's just amazing how blessed I have been."

The story of how Walker found so much love for so many children begins with death. In the late 1970s, she lost five people she dearly loved: her husband, two sisters, her father-in-law and a sister-in-law.

Walker turned to her church for help, but found little of it, she said.

A friend suggested that she become a foster parent.

"If you're going to help," Walker recalls being told, "give it to those who need."

Walker took in her first foster child in April 1984, she said.

By 1991, her nine biological children were grown, but her house was filled with 11 children of different races and ages, most of whom she adopted.

"It takes something else to make a mother," said adopted daughter Rebecca Walker, 31, of Fort Lauderdale. "She is my mother."

Those children grew up and started their own families.

By January 2007, Walker's house was a bit quieter. She shared it with a pair of foster children and one granddaughter.

Then she got a call about the twin girls, who were born five minutes apart.

The girls had been placed with ChildNet, Broward County's privately run foster-care agency. ChildNet assigned the case to Kids in Distress, the agency Walker has worked with.

"They said I would be the best possible place for the girls," Walker said.

The girls' mother died 12 years ago. Walker said their story reminded her of one of her own granddaughters, who also died and left behind twin girls.

After Rossano and Rossana's mother died, the twins bounced between family members and foster homes.

But they kept the nicknames their mother gave them, both from a Prince song: Diamond for Rossano, Pearl for Rossana.

The first time they met Walker, Rossano didn't say much.

"I was shy. I was always a shy person," she said. "I just sat and looked at her."

Rossana, who is more of a talker, said she and Walker just clicked.

"It just came naturally," Rossana said, "because we knew it was meant to be."

The twins moved in, and on the first day it was almost quiet, with just Walker and a few others in the house.

Then came Sunday -- which brought a tidal wave of Walker's children and grandchildren, most of whom still live in South Florida.

Rossana described her reaction as: "Where did all these people come from?"

The twins quickly became comfortable as part of the large, extended family.

Once the adoption is final, the twins hope to change their last names to Walker.

There is no age limit for foster parents as long as they meet certain requirements, such as good finances, sufficient space in the home and 12 hours of yearly training, said Jennifer Smith, ChildNet's foster-home recruitment coordinator.

Asked whether she would adopt more children once the twins are grown, Walker gave a slight smile, then said, "probably."

Anyone interested in adopting or fostering children can call the local recruitment line at 954-414-6001.

ChildNet holds an Adoption Open House every third Thursday of the month from 6:30 to 8 p.m. at its central office, 313 N. State Rd. 7, Plantation.

For more information about the open house, call Jim McElhannon at 954-461-9219.

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