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### Foster parents find rewards watching children thrive

#### Foster parent Janet Hendricks

By Jose De Wit

Special Correspondent

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Pete and Janet Hendricks, of Miramar, had two children in elementary school when they first saw a television ad seeking foster parents.

Soon after, they moved from their native Connecticut to Broward County, where they became foster parents. Over the years they offered their home to more than 100 children — most of whom were sick or disabled. They also adopted two infants, Ricky and Patricia, who are now 18 and 12.

"Growing up, my house was like the Kool-Aid house, always people coming in and out," Janet Hendricks said.

"There were neighborhood kids whose parents had to work or were home alone for whatever reason, and my mom had them come over after school. 'If there's room for one, there's room for 20,' she'd say. So when Pete told me he wanted to do it, it came naturally to me."

At first, the couple wanted to adopt and told the state they wanted two children of any race, age or sex. They were told they should try becoming foster parents first.

"Out of the first three children we received, we adopted two at once. Our children were ecstatic," Janet Hendricks said. "And we didn't stop taking in more children. I guess it was for the best. Otherwise, we would've just adopted and we wouldn't be foster parents today."

Janet Hendricks is one of only eight medical foster parents in Broward. She is trained and certified by Medicare to care for foster children who require specialized medical attention. Of the six children currently living with the Hendricks, only one has a clean bill of health.

Being a medical foster parent is grueling, but satisfying, Janet Hendricks said. It means attending to feeding and medication schedules at odd hours, rushing to doctors' appointments and, when a child gets sick, often staying up for days on end.

"Sometimes things move along so quickly, you forget to eat or sleep," she said. "Pepsi helps. It keeps me going when I have to stay up all night. And cat naps."

The hard work is made worthwhile, Pete Hendricks said, by watching the children develop and grow.

"The doctors will say a child is too sick, they'll say a child's never going to walk, and the children prove

them wrong," he said. "It helps when there's a solid family structure for the kids — when you have that and you treat the child like any other kid, and the child acclimates to what you're doing."

The hard work is "part of the commitment," Janet Hendricks said.

What really makes it difficult to be a medical foster parent is the bureaucracy, the couple said.

"Just to leave the county, you have to fill out so much paperwork," Pete Hendricks said. "We like to take the kids out to Alligator Alley during mating season to count alligators, but we can't even go that far without getting permission from the doctors, the social worker, the medical director.

"There's too many cooks in the soup. We've been doing this for almost 20 years. At some point you've got to have a little bit of trust."

Larry Rein, vice president of network development for the child welfare agency ChildNet, said Janet Hendricks already has done plenty to change that. She served on ChildNet's first board of directors and was president of the local chapter of the Foster and Adoptive Parent Association.

"She thinks about foster parenting in a very intelligent way from a foster parent perspective," Rein said. "Foster parents are really the people who really have the most contact and most influence on a child."

He said foster parents need to be involved in all parts of process, from giving input to judges to getting as much information as they can from the school system and from doctors.

"Historically, a lot of people in the bureaucracy don't get that," he said. "Janet Hendricks helped educate me on Florida's foster parent system."

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