

# Meet Lula Mae Walker, who's been a foster parent to 300 kids

The Fort Lauderdale woman has also had nine kids of her own and adopted 11 others. Happy holidays ... from a busy household.

By [Jacqui Goddard](#) | Correspondent / December 23, 2008 edition

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As a child, Lula Mae Walker loved to dress up her dolls and dream about becoming a real mom some day. Now 73, she reflects on her decades of parenthood with a smile, proud of the children she and her husband brought into the world and the joy they have given her.

Her first-born, Charles, arrived in 1952, followed by sisters Florence and Denise, then a brother Dennis. After that came Katrina, Desiree, David, and Dwight. Rounding off the brood in 1968 was Twyla.

But while most people might have stopped at nine, Ms. Walker found room in her heart and her home for more, reaching out to needy youngsters on a scale few could even contemplate. Over the past 24 years, she has added to her family by adopting 11 more children – and fostering at least 300 others. Then there are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren – 85 in all.

“There was never a dull moment, I’ll tell you that,” she admits, raising her eyes to the ceiling and chuckling fondly at the memories. “If I slowed down, I don’t know what would happen to me. My life is about kids, my whole life.”

Even more remarkable is that she has been a single mom since the late 1970s: Her husband died at 53. His passing was closely followed by other family adversity, including the deaths of two of her sisters. Her grief had the potential to overwhelm her, and the prospect of being alone once the last of their children grew up and left home was formidable.

“By that time I only had two kids left living with me. I had had so much tragedy and a good friend of mine said, ‘Why don’t you go into foster care? I think it will help you.’ So I went to a meeting about it. I enjoyed it, tried all the classes, and signed up.”

First to arrive were foster children Anton, 5, and Anice, 6. She felt immediately at ease with children at her feet again. “Then came a little girl from up North, a teenager who had had serious problems in her life. She was so sweet and such a special little girl. Then I got five more kids and so it went on,” she recalls. “The foster people would say: ‘Mrs. Walker, they have got to move on, don’t fall in love with the kids.’ But I fell in love with all of them.”

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Life at her modest one-story home in a black working-class neighborhood of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., has been a revolving door. Most foster children have arrived with emotional baggage – abandoned, neglected, or abused, such as two sisters who, aged just 12 and 13, each had babies, having been sexually abused by the same man.

By day, Walker would show them how to care for their babies. By night, she tended to the infants to allow the girls some sleep.

“They were just babies themselves,” she says.

Many children suffered from trust issues and behavioral difficulties. But not once did she consider giving up on any of them. She lost her own mother when she was 18, “so I have a sense of what it is to not have a mom around,” she says. “I can relate to them, sit down and talk with them. Some kids give you problems, but we have got to reach out to them when they are hurting and find out why they do what they do.”

That lesson even applied the time two foster daughters stole Walker’s new car, rounded up two of her other children, and sped off on a joyride. They were found by police after a two-hour hunt. “I just thank God they were safe. They apologized, but one of them had to go to the detention center for two weeks,” she says. “The other one felt really bad, but she thought I wasn’t going to let her come home. She said, ‘No one would want me any more’ – I have had so many say that to me. I said, ‘Oh no, I’m not going to kick you out. I love you.’ ”

Walker ended up adopting her.

To officials at [ChildNet](#), the state-appointed child services agency for Broward County where Walker lives – and where 1,000 children are currently in foster care, 200 of them awaiting adoption – she is virtually a saint.

“She’s able to relate to the children, make them feel valued, loved. They are able to trust her,” says ChildNet adoption specialist Monica Haynes. “She loves to cook and that’s one way she connects with them.... She’s always having a lot of family members in her home and people from her community, her neighbourhood, her church. She’s always been a giving person and her kids adore her. She’s a rare jewel.”

Over the years, the cost of caring for so many children has run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. After Walker’s husband died, her eldest son took over his plastering business, which helped to pay bills. The state assists by granting a monthly allowance – \$297 per month per child to foster parents and between \$400 and \$500 per month for adopted children.

“When I had 15 kids all at the same time ..., I’d say I was spending about \$1,000 a month” on groceries, she says. As her children grew up and found jobs, they have always pitched in where they could as well.

With so many to care for, there has been a never-ending list of household chores, mountains of laundry, and mass catering. Outings and vacations involved herding children on and off trains like a flock of sheep, and at birthdays, Thanksgivings, and Christmases, the compact six-bedroom house burst at the stucco seams.

“But I came from a family where the sky was the limit,” says Walker, a sprightly, smartly attired woman who was one of 14 children herself. “My conscience told me that this is what my mom would have done. She loved her kids and there was nothing she wouldn’t do for them. She told me, ‘One day, you’ll

know what it is to have kids.' I sure do."

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As she sits in her lounge talking, grandson Tyler, 7, and granddaughter Deja, 10, watch TV in the back room. There is a wail, followed by the patter of footsteps as Tyler presents himself before us. "Deja won't let me watch television," he announces, adding: "And she hit the football on your china cabinet."

Deja is summoned, told politely but firmly that she is not to be a bully, and then dismissed, under strict instruction not to answer back. "Kids will be kids, but I think most of them have learned from me," says Walker.

Last month, 17 years after her first nine adoptions, she attended a ceremony making official her 10th and 11th, 16-year-old twins Rossana and Rossano. They first moved in with her two years ago as foster children after their mother died. Their father was never around, and they had been bounced around relatives' homes.

"They were having some behavior problems; they had been let down by their biological family members so, of course, they reacted to that in the only way they knew how, by taking a negative attitude," says Ms. Haynes of ChildNet. "But Mrs. Walker has done an excellent job of working with them and being a loving caregiver, someone they can trust and rely on. That's really huge to these children. Now they are totally different people."

The girls – both of whom are in school, one with ambitions to be a lawyer and the other to be a mortician – are now well mannered and engaging. "I had difficulty at first, because I just missed my family and stuff," says Rossana. "But she understands us like nobody else would."

Her sister nods. "She knows where we're coming from, she gets it. She told me every day: 'There's nothing you can hide from me, because I already know. I know what you're feeling.' She was there when we needed her and I'm going to be there for her in her time of need, too."

She adds: "I don't use the word 'luck,' I use the word 'blessed.' There are kids out there who would love to be in the position we are now."

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