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### Miramar woman 'enhances' her home by caring for two foster teenagers

By Chris Guanche, Forum Publishing Group

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For Valerie Etkins, the foster teens she takes care of are just as much a part of the family as her own children.

Etkins has been a foster parent for almost two years working with ChildNet and its partner foster agency, the National Youth Advocate Program. The nonprofit ChildNet manages services in [Broward County](#) for abandoned, abused and neglected children by working with partners like NYAP.

Etkins and her 17-year-old son Ordell share their Miramar home with two foster teenagers. Etkins, who also has two adult children, decided to become an "enhanced" foster parent working with teens who have behavioral disorders, require therapeutic care or have other special needs.

Etkins sums up her experiences in one word: rewarding.

"You see where kids are at when they come to your home," she said. "You show them that you understand and can help them overcome their hurdles."

Some of the children Etkins has worked with have been in the foster system for years, while others are new. Some receive weekly therapeutic sessions while their biological parents take courses to prepare them for having their child returned. Depending on the parent and situation, those courses can include anger management, substance abuse and employment, said Sasheika Eugent, a ChildNet spokeswoman.

"There's a variety of services a parent might use," Eugent said.

Etkins' foster children have a daily schedule that's as normal as possible — go to school, do chores at home and play basketball in the backyard for fun. One thing that's important for Etkins is to not create a distinction between her son and the teens she's taking care of.

"It's like one big old family," she said. "One calls me Mom, the other Miss, whatever makes them feel comfortable."

Thirteen-year-old Jacob has been with Etkins since December 2008 (Etkins requested that his real name not be used). When he's not in school, Jacob works on his responsibilities around the house.

"I have to take out the garbage, clean up my room and make sure the backyard is clean," he said.

Jacob said one of the things he looks forward to is his weekly unsupervised visits with his mother, which allows him to also spend time with his brothers.

The need for foster parents around the county is always high because the available households decrease over time if there's an adoption, Eugent said.

"It decreases our pool because once they adopt, they may close their home to fostering," Eugent said.

Sometimes, teenagers can also be hard to place in a home, especially if they have special needs.

"They need love just like other children, but it may take more time to show," Eugent said.

For Etkins, working as a foster parent is a long-term commitment. In addition to fostering and raising her son, she also runs a freight business from home.

"You need to love children, and everything else falls into place," she said.

For more information, call 954-414-6001 or visit <http://www.childnet.us>.

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