

Valerie Etkins

An Everyday Hero



Valerie Etkins has changed children's lives through providing foster care.

Most people look forward to the day their children are past their teen years. So why would a single mother with two teen sons choose to bring two more teen boys into her home? Valerie Etkins, a resident of Miramar, Fla., has wanted to foster children for as long as she can remember. When she was a child she recalls being touched by movies about children in foster care and was determined to one day help children in tough situations.

"I have always had a connection with children and children always loved me," Etkins said. When she was raising her three biological children, her home was the locale of many sleep-overs and was known as the house where all the children wanted to be.

In November 2007, Etkins decided it was time to realize her dream of helping youth in foster care and called ChildNet, Broward County's Community Based Care lead agency. Jennifer Smith, ChildNet's foster home recruitment coordinator, linked her with the enhanced foster care agency, National Youth Advocate Program. NYAP trains, licenses and manages foster homes for youth who are medically fragile, have difficult behaviors, have a recent history of or current problem with substance abuse; and are gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual or questioning. When considering which age group to serve, Etkins figured teenagers would be the best choice considering her children were also teens. Katherine Warner, NYAP's director of program development, was in the early stages of opening the agency's South Florida location when she first met Valerie.

"Her eagerness to get started with the licensing process was refreshing and motivating for me to start our very first MAPP class," Katherine said. "She then became NYAP's first ever licensed foster parent and we are honored to have her on our team."

Four months later Etkins and her family welcomed their first foster youth into their home. Imagine the challenge of being a new foster parent while learning how to best help a teen boy battling serious substance abuse and anger issues. It wasn't easy, but Etkins wasn't deterred from her mission to make a difference in the life of this young man. She constantly encouraged him and told him he had the potential to do great things in his life. Since then, Etkins has fostered four other teen males who struggle with issues ranging from substance abuse to sexual abuse. ChildNet's Chief Executive Officer, Emilio Benitez, believes that Etkins is a great example of what a foster parent should be. "Despite experiencing her share of tough days with the teens, Valerie sees the good in every youth, no matter what," Benitez said. "She is dedicated to making the children feel like a part of her family."

Today, 15-year-old Quincy and 14-year-old Anton, whose names have been changed to protect their privacy, call Etkins mom. The connection between Etkins and the boys is evident as you watch Quincy and Anton play basketball and compete for their mom's attention. Anton has made significant improvements since being placed in the Etkins household 14 months ago. He rushes to share his report card and is brimming with pride as he points to his three A's and honor roll certificate. Etkins' bonus system motivates the boys to excel in their studies and compensates them based on their grades. For each letter grade earned they receive money; A's are \$4, B's are \$3, C's are \$2 and D's are \$1. Quincy has been living with Etkins since August 2009 and his grades have also improved and he is smoking less.

Recently, she has noticed that he is setting personal goals and is eager to discuss how he can reach those goals. When the boys are asked what they love about Etkins, steady allowance and flexibility are at the top of the boys' lists. Etkins says while she is consistent with setting boundaries and providing discipline, she admits that she is also flexible with the boys. "If they have done something wrong and I realize that they understand the severity of their actions and its consequences, I don't have to drill it in," Etkins said. She ensures that the boys enjoy many of the outings their peers also enjoy. They go to the movies with their friends, attend school basketball games and hang out at the neighborhood park. The boys are a part of the Etkins family. They go to family gatherings and play a supportive role in Etkins' recent healthy lifestyle resolution. "Every evening, we go to the neighborhood park together. While I'm walking, they are playing football or basketball," Etkins said. "Not only does it allow us to spend quality time together, but it also provides support in helping me meet my fitness goals and keeps the boys active and engaged."

Etkins doesn't claim to have it all figured out but when she encounters difficulties she reflects on her initial purpose for sharing her home. "My purpose was always to help children and as an enhanced foster parent I am committed to helping the children who are a bit more challenging," Etkins said. She says that although it's not always easy, it is always rewarding. "The best part of fostering these boys is seeing the positive changes in them that come from being in a loving, understanding home," Etkins said. "They learn to trust, to love and to succeed in school and relationships." The most challenging part is when the boys first come into her home and she needs to make a connection with them and break through their "walls." But she always does and she sees the complete transformation, making everything worthwhile.

Although Etkins is a parent to two teen boys

and an adult daughter, she believes she would not have been prepared to be a foster parent without the wonderful training and support she receives from ChildNet and NYAP. "Everything they teach you in training really happens," Etkins said, "and NYAP is always there to answer questions or offer support." For anyone thinking about fostering, Etkins said, "Definitely become a foster parent because it is very rewarding." Prior to fostering she advises that the foster parents make sure everyone living in the home understands the children's history so they can be understanding and compassionate toward them.

Benitez says Etkins is a part of a special group of foster parents who choose to care for and parent teenagers. "Etkins not only does an exceptional job with the teens in her home but she is building a relationship with them that will last well into their adult years," Benitez said.

Although there are many wonderful foster parents in Broward County, there is always a need for more people like Etkins who are willing and able to take teens with "behavior issues." "These children, and they are still children, have been through a lot in their short lives and need a loving, understanding home to help them turn their lives around," Etkins said. What could be more rewarding than truly changing a person's life for the better? If you are interested in helping a teen or another child in foster care, call ChildNet's Recruitment Hotline at (954) 414-6001. ☀

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sasheika Eugent resides in Plantation, Fla., with her husband. She is the community and public relations specialist at ChildNet, the private, non-profit organization created to manage the child welfare system in Broward County. ChildNet's mission is to protect Broward County's abused, abandoned and neglected children. Eugent earned a master's degree in business administration from Nova Southeastern University.