



FOSTER A



CHILD

and Show You Care

MAY IS NATIONAL FOSTER CARE MONTH

BY SUSAN FRASCA

About 15 years ago, Miami resident Trudy Petkovich and a friend started a simple service project with their church: They wanted to give every child living in local foster homes a birthday cake on his or her birthday.

Little did Petkovich know that this simple wish to make a small difference in a child's life would turn into a lifetime of fostering more than 300 infants, and the adoption of three children.

"I'm sure there were people who thought we were crazy," says Petkovich, who already had two kids of her own in college at the time she and her husband began to foster their first child. Why would anyone want to do this over again?

"We thought we could make a difference by helping — one child at a time," she said.

This is precisely the way that thousands of abused, abandoned and neglected children in South Florida can receive the help they need: One foster family at a time.

WHO ARE FOSTER CHILDREN?

Children in need of foster care span the spectrum, from infants to teens, from cocaine-addicted and fetal alcohol syndrome babies to adolescents with functional mental or physical challenges. They are of all races and

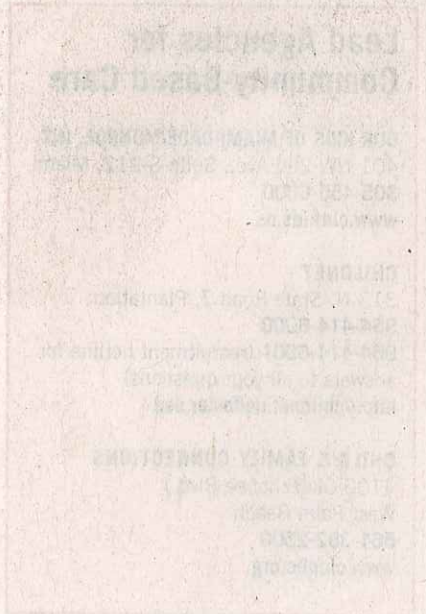
TOP LEFT: Shana McPherson was a foster child who began receiving emotional and financial assistance through Second Chance, a partnership program between Kids Hope United and Lutheran Services Florida.

CENTER: Foster parent Kim Rowe has cared for foster child Courtney, who has cerebral palsy, since she was 6 months old.

BOTTOM LEFT: Kids Hope United Foster Parent Liaison Trudy Petkovich with her three adopted children.

Petkovich has been a foster parent to nearly 300 children over the course of more than 15 years.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF KIDS HOPE UNITED



ethnicities. They are children whose birth parents may have hit a rough patch in life and are temporarily unable to care for them. Often, they are average kids who simply can no longer live in the unsafe or precarious conditions of their home environment.

"These kids are not in the foster care system by choice," says Larry Rein, vice-president of Network Development for ChildNet, the lead agency for foster care in Broward County. "The courts have seen fit to remove them from their homes for any number of reasons, none of which are their fault."

AGENCIES TAKE THE LEAD

Rein says the image of foster care has changed significantly since it was privatized more than five years ago. Community-based lead agencies (ChildNet in Broward, Our Kids in Miami-Dade & Monroe and Child & Family Connections in Palm Beach), now manage the local systems of services and support in each county in South Florida.

"The negative image of overcrowded homes and bad foster parents is very much a thing of the past," Rein said. "The quality of the services and the homes in the foster care system is light-years beyond what it used to be," he said.

Lead Agencies for Community-Based Care

OUR KIDS OF MIAMI-DADE/MONROE, INC.
401 NW 2nd Ave., Suite S-212, Miami
305-455-6000
www.ourkids.us

CHILDNET
313 N. State Road 7, Plantation
954-414-6000
954-414-6001 (recruitment hotline for
answers to all your questions)
<http://childnet.us/foster.asp>

CHILD & FAMILY CONNECTIONS
4100 Okeechobee Blvd.,
West Palm Beach
561-352-2500
www.cfcpsc.org

ADOPTION INCREASES THE NEED FOR FOSTER PARENTS

This improvement in the quality of foster care services, homes and foster parents has led to a considerable number of adoptions of foster children over the past five years. Since 2005, Our Kids of Miami-Dade/Monroe has completed nearly 1,000 adoptions, a remarkable and uplifting accomplishment, though something of a mixed blessing.

"The more successful you get in adoptions, the more pressure there is ... to create more foster parents," says Executive Director Fran Allegra. "Adoption is truly a happy ending – or beginning – but it always leaves a need for new foster parents," she said.

Replenishing the pool of foster parents for the thousands of other children still awaiting placement in a foster home is an ongoing crusade. The need is particularly pressing for foster homes for teenagers, sibling groups, children with relatively minor medical or behavioral problems and infants younger than six weeks old.

That said, all lead agencies agree that potential foster parents should start with whatever they feel comfortable, to "get their feet wet." No agency will ever force a parent to foster a particular child.

WHO CAN BE A FOSTER PARENT?

Maybe you. Foster parents must be at least 21 years old, have adequate income to provide for their family and enough room in their home and heart for a foster child. Foster parents are single or married, homeowners and renters, parents or childless, male and female. Some are looking for a long-term commitment, possibly including adoption; others are offering their time and their home as a temporary solution.

All want to make a difference in the life of a child.

Miramar resident Sandra Grant says that her first experience as a foster parent was nothing like she thought it would be.

"It really tried my patience and I wasn't so sure I wanted to continue," she recalls. Grant has gone on to foster five sets of siblings during her six years of foster par-

'All they really want is someone to read to them, help with homework and sit down and talk with.'

enting and keeps in touch with all of them to this day. Grant is also in the process of adopting her first child, 2-year-old Michael, whom she has fostered since he was 5 months old.

She tells other parents who are even mildly considering the notion of fostering that these kids don't need or want as much as one might think. "What they need is structure and some positive influence in their lives," she said. "All they really want is someone to read to or with them, help with homework and sit down and talk with," she said.

Grant also suggests that individuals who are interested in foster parenting, but still reluctant to commit, consider offering respite services where they might care for a child for a week while his foster parents go on vacation.

WHAT POTENTIAL FOSTER PARENTS CAN EXPECT

Some of the effort involved in becoming a foster parent may appear daunting. There is paperwork. There are background checks, personal interviews and home inspections. All foster parents must complete a 30-hour Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting course, which Grant says offers invaluable advice.

"Every parent should be required to take a course like this," she said.

The entire process can take as little as three months, says Kristine Gregory, a family case manager supervisor at Kids Hope United, an organization that pairs foster children with foster parents, provides prevention, intervention and community-based programs and training, services and

support to foster kids and families.

"The agencies work side by side with prospective parents to make the process as painless as possible," she says.

The support doesn't end there. "Once a foster parent becomes licensed, they learn

MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about foster parenting, attend one of these informational orientation sessions. Check with each county's lead agency for additional dates.

PALM BEACH COUNTY

May 5, 6:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.

The Children's Place at Home
2840 6th Ave South, Lake Worth
561-832-6185

May 7, 6:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.

Kids In Distress
601 N. Congress Ave., Suite 413,
Delray Beach
561-272-0204

May 17, 9 a.m. – 11 a.m.

The Children's Home Society
3333 Forest Hill Blvd., West Palm Beach
561-868-4300

May 22, 6 p.m. – 8 p.m.

Family Preservation Services
5841 Corporate Way, Suite 106,
West Palm Beach
561-697-2231 or 561-697-2278

May 31, 9 a.m. – 12 p.m.

The Mentor Network
701 Northpoint Parkway, Suite 315,
West Palm Beach
561-656-4106

BROWARD COUNTY

May 6, 10 a.m. & 6 p.m.

Camelot
1925 S. Perimeter Rd, #120,
Fort Lauderdale
954-491-2020

May 28, 6 p.m.

Choices-Faith based (Christian)
2300 NW 6th St., Pompano Beach
954-968-6777

MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

May 7, 11:30 a.m. & 5 p.m.

Kids Hope United
10720 Caribbean Blvd., Ste. 500,
Cutler Bay
786-573-9000

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they are part of a team working on a child's case with the agency, the caseworker, the judge, the guardian ad litem and in many cases, the child's family," Allegra says.

Foster parent liaisons help new foster parents navigate the system to access services with which they are likely unfamiliar. Medicaid and monthly board payments cover the majority of a foster child's living expenses, including subsidized childcare, school supply and clothing vouchers. Agencies provide tutoring, counseling, therapy and other services and support to help promote stability in a foster child's life.

Foster parents do invest their own time and income in their foster children as well. "I take whatever help the agencies can offer, but at the same time, I try to run my home not as a foster home, but as a regular home," Grant says.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU?

Fostering is not for everyone. It requires sacrifices of time and emotion. It requires flexibility, adaptability, compassion and generosity. It requires loving a child you don't know and often having to give that child up. It requires wanting to make a difference in the life of a child and being selfless in that decision.

"These are all our children and some come with baggage, but every child needs and deserves unconditional love," Petkovich says.

Sometimes the rewards are instant. The joy in the faces of two foster boys who went to the beach for the first time; the look of surprise in a child's eyes when told she does not have to hoard and hide food; the elation when a child is told he is going back home.

Sometimes, the gratification may not be as immediate. "It may not surface until many years later, but somewhere down the road, these children will remember there was someone there for them," Petkovich says.

If that someone is you, a list of this month's information sessions is on Page 65.

Susan Frasca is a freelance writer and frequent contributor. She lives in Coconut Creek.

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