

## A Cop with a Different Beat

**T**axi driver, teacher, nurse, counselor, mentor, protector, caregiver, cop, and coach. Are these descriptors of someone's career interests or a list of job openings from a recent ad?

Most certainly not. They actually define the role of Jeff, a modest but proud foster and adoptive dad from rural Wisconsin, who is also a cop.

What started as a way for Jeff and his family to "help the county have more foster homes" has resulted in the protection and nurturing of eight children who have been placed with them over the past 10 years. Even though most of the kids placed have now returned to the care of their families, they have left a lasting impression on Jeff, his wife Esther and their four children.

Jeff's wife and kids had been talking about doing foster care for years. As Esther says, "Jeff was not on the fence about doing this work; he was not even on the farm!" After much discussion and deliberation, Jeff came on board to join in the family's interest. They considered fostering as their responsibility.

As a law enforcement officer, Jeff often mentioned the struggles that county social service agencies had in finding enough families to do this important work. Esther also understood the need since she works as a social worker in the field of adoption and foster care.

When Jeff's family "signed up" to do foster care, Jeff did not anticipate being involved in the day-to-day care, joys and challenges of foster parenting. His career as a law enforcement officer kept him away from home often. The family planned for Esther to be the main caretaker of their foster placements. That plan soon vanished!

*"It's nice to give a kid an opportunity and a chance. If you can turn one life around, it is worth it."*

*—Jeff Hoffmann*

### **The Trials and Joys**

In 2003, at the age of six, county social workers placed Christian in foster care with

Jeff and Esther. He had a great smile and a great personality. His behavior was challenging. Jeff recalls that Christian lived with them for one year and then he became available for adoption. Still having an interest only in providing foster care, social workers told Jeff and Esther that they were looking for adoptive families for Christian to meet.

It was Jeff who suggested that their family

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consider adopting Christian, based on their connection and love for him. Jeff knew of the great strides Christian had made while a part of their family. Jeff was worried that this special child may have a hard time connecting to a new family. He wanted Christian to succeed.

Jeff said that “somebody needs to step up to the plate,” meaning, “We need to adopt Christian.”

In 2004, Christian was adopted by this northern Wisconsin family while Christian’s classmates and school served as witnesses. It was a grand celebration!



The Hoffman Children at Christian’s Adoption

### Foster Dad Takes A Front Seat

Despite his heavy schedule, Jeff has now assumed the role of adoptive dad and is the main caretaker of Christian as well as the other kids that they foster. Esther’s work commitments have caused her to be out of town and unable to assume the main caretaking role as she had in the past. As a result, Jeff and Christian have a really close bond with each other. “We’re tight,” says Jeff.

More often than not, Jeff is taking his son and others to doctor appointments, school meetings and soccer practice. Some days he also faces challenging behaviors from other kids in their care.

He and Esther try to keep their son and the

other children very active physically. Keeping their kids active helps distract them from other behaviors and helps them learn healthy ways of spending their time. It also gives them a chance to connect with other kids and adults who could be a positive influence!

### What It Takes

Jeff has thoughts for folks who are considering foster care. He suggests that as a parent, one needs to be patient, honest and consistent. Both he and Esther also recognize that even experienced parents need support from others to parent. They recommend consulting with the child’s social worker often and keeping in close communication.

Jeff emphasizes taking care of yourself. He takes a break from parenting by meeting weekly with his friends to play basketball or golf, depending upon the season.

He sees that the physical activity and connecting with positive, healthy friends is a way for him to decompress. Esther uses craft activities and an involvement with mission trips as her release. Jeff says you still need “some of your own time.”

Both he and his wife recognize the need for all parents to have good friends and family to support their efforts to parent and to step in occasionally to give parents a break. They recommend using respite (when someone

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else watches the kids for a day or two) so that everyone in the family can feel refreshed and ready to spend time together again.

### The Team Approach

Has Jeff parented alone? Definitely not. He credits Esther with the care and nurturing of their son and the other kids in their home. Jeff and Esther work well as a team and support each other as they care for the children living with them. Jeff says that it was a “wake up call” when he was exposed to some tough and difficult behaviors of the children placed in their home.

He has counted on Esther and the agency social workers for tips on parenting kids who often have been abused or neglected. Talking with your partner about day-to-day issues, making a plan and figuring out each partner’s talents and limitations are topics to discuss for those who want to foster or adopt. (Also check out our tip sheet, *Is Fostering A Good Fit For Us? Thing to Consider.*)

Learning from their fostering experience, Jeff has gained a better insight and appreciation for the parents with kids in foster care, especially single parent families. Jeff recognizes how single parents’ job can be overwhelming, especially without additional support from family or friends. Developing a good working relationship between foster parents and the family of kids placed can really help the youth in foster care—the children appreciate that their family and the foster family get along.

Esther also comments on the importance that

foster and adoptive dads play in the lives of foster kids and those adopted. Many youth placed in care have not had healthy or positive relationships with men or father figures in their lives. She says that foster and adoptive dads can be great role models for kids in care. She has seen the difference that dads make, both with her son Christian and with other kids she has known through her adoption work.

### Men Can Foster

Jeff thinks that with the right information and the support from family, friends and social service agencies, women *and men* have the talents and understanding about kids to do a great job to foster or adopt a child. Is Jeff glad to have changed his mind about doing foster care? His short but emphatic answer is “Yes!”

“It’s nice to give a kid an opportunity and a chance. If you can turn one life around, it is worth it,” he says.

