

## A Home for Teen Boys

**I**n a home along a county highway which connects the growing suburbs of Milwaukee, Ron and Donna run a busy household for a couple in their 60s. There they raised one son and two daughters, one of whom continues to live at home. Ron works for a local company. Donna is a homemaker who gardens, cans and keeps a neat house. These are the ordinary facts of their lives.

What makes this home extraordinary is the work that Ron and Donna have embraced: fostering children for the past 20 years. When they first began fostering, they cared for both boys and girls of all ages. Now they foster only teen boys and work as part of a treatment team for vulnerable male youth for whom it is often hard to find homes.

Ron says they have not kept count of the number of children they have fostered. It is more important to Donna and Ron that many of them have stayed with them for years, when they were unable to return home or be adopted. Three of their four current placements have been there for five years.

They began fostering as an extension of their commitment to their own family and the joy and satisfaction they experienced raising their three birth children. They wanted to help children who did not have families who

were able to nurture the kids as they needed.

The first child they took in was a nephew with a difficult home life. Ron told him when he was eight years old that he should call them if he ever needed them. Their nephew did just that as a teen.

It wasn't easy. Ron tells a story about modifications his nephew and one of his friends made to his Chrysler one evening when Ron was working the night shift. The car was a disaster. But Ron and Donna persevered and began their long career in taking care of other's children. They decided to foster at that time.

We talked over a cup of coffee at the large oak table surrounded by eight comfortable chairs. With a smile on his face, Ron told me that their boys stay so long because Donna is a wonderful cook. According to the social worker who has worked with this family for many years, Donna is a great cook.

Donna buys large amounts of fresh produce during the summer, in addition to having a vegetable garden. She fills the table with the large meals it takes to feed the three of them plus the four teenage boys. Their kitchen is the hub of this busy household.

They believe that it is equally important that

*Become active in local and state foster parent organizations. A foster parent can find the support and friendship of a group that understands the demands and rewards of fostering.*

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the boys take part in this process so that they learn to shop wisely, prepare food and eat well. They both teach these teens how to shop for bargains. I saw an example of this during my visit to their home. While Donna and I were talking, Ron and the three older boys were hauling in 47 cartons of soda that he was happy to have found on sale.

The three older boys were the first to get home. They arrived together on the bus from their high school. They were a polite, good looking, healthy threesome, and the comfortable way they handled introductions was impressive. After they helped Ron with the soda, each confirmed his plans for the evening and took some soda and a snack and went off to relax.

The youngest, an eighth grade student, arrived later on the middle school bus. He also was polite and friendly and knew how to greet a stranger when Donna introduced him to me on the front porch. He seemed glad to be home, and he seemed glad to see Donna. Ron and Donna describe them all as good kids.

Teen boys are difficult to place. Yet Ron and Donna opened their home to teen boys with difficult histories. Ron says that the challenges that those boys face run the gamut of seriousness. Over the years, they have fostered youth with severe emotional challenges and mental illness.

When they first began fostering 20 years ago, Ron and Donna lived in a smaller home in a neighboring community. At the time, Donna's aging mother lived in a Community Based Residential Facility (CBRF). The CBRF closed and the house was up for sale. It met state licensing regulations that would give Donna and Ron the opportunity to take more children. They made the decision to sell their house and buy the CBRF. This new home was a

perfect place for fostering more children.

Many of the boys who live with Ron and Donna, move to apartments or group homes and find jobs when they turn 18 and finish high school. Because it is hard to find homes for teen boys, and returning to their birth parents is not an option for many of them, Donna and Ron have kids who stay for a long time.

When parents are available to their children, Donna and Ron are happy to work with them. They open their home for one of the boy's mother who visits on a regular basis in their home. However, many of the boys who live with them age out of the system at 18 years of age or when finishing high school while at Donna and Ron's.

Many who have lived with them maintain contact after they have aged out of foster care. One young man returns on a regular basis for his haircuts.

A young woman they had fostered for a long time honored them at her wedding. They were touched when this young bride, after introducing her parents, introduced Donna and Ron as her foster parents to the reception guests.

As with all foster care families, there have been sad events. At the end of the interview, Ron shared of some of the heartaches they have experienced and talked about the challenges. He told of one of their long time placements who was very proud to be graduating from high school. This young man wanted to host a party to celebrate his graduation. He invited many of his relatives, including some he had never met. It was a successful party. But within a few weeks, this young man contracted a rare virus and died.

Ron says, that as a Vietnam veteran, he sees

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the importance of rules. They think their home might have more rules than some, but they are comfortable with the rules they have.

Their system seems to work well for them. They have a checkout board on the wall which each boy fills out after he discusses his plans for the evening with Donna and Ron and gets permission to go out. Some of the boys have jobs after school and on weekends. They are asked to help with household chores and expected to use good manners. There is no smoking in their home. They have an alarm system in each boy's room to protect the privacy of each boy.

Ron uses life experiences to teach the boys how to take care of themselves. One of the things they work on is money management. Ron offered to pay for half of the cost of new bikes for the boys if they would earn the money to pay the other half. There are several new bikes now in their garage.

Tracy, the adult daughter who lives with them, often treats the boys to dinner or a movie when she is in charge. Tracy has a respite license and provides Donna and Ron with breaks for such things as the WFAPA (Wisconsin Foster and Adoptive Parents' Association) conferences. This gives Ron and Donna some freedom to spend well earned time away from home.

The house also has a busy computer with four teens who love computers. Ron gives the boys computer access but carefully monitors how each uses it. They are excited about the wireless service which is just being introduced in their area.

Ron and Donna's church is an important part of their life and supports them in their commitment to their boys. These young men, in turn, participate in church activities. During the past several summers, the boys have chosen to spend a week with church

youth groups traveling to places where they do such things as rehabilitate homes and neighborhoods. They also choose to participate in other church activities during the year.

While the 60s are a time for many to retire and slow down, Ron and Donna have kept these years filled with teenage boys who need homes and special parenting. They extend a hand to these youth who are most vulnerable to being left behind and give them life tools to move ahead.

### **What advice do they have for new foster parents? Here are some of their suggestions.**

- The role of a foster parent is not to keep children away from their families, but to help get them back to their families.
- The role of a foster parent is to prepare the youth in their home for the transition to adult life and to live on their own.
- Foster parents have a role in supporting birth families.
- Think about all the implications if you choose to foster children older than your own.
- Be prepared for a lot of paperwork and record keeping.
- Be prepared to face allegations.
- Become active in local and state foster parent organizations. There a foster parent can find the support and friendship of a group that understands the demands and rewards of fostering.

