

A Glimpse Into One Foster Family's Home

George has been a nurse at Dodge County Correctional Facility for many years. He was so horrified by the young kids coming through there that he went home and told his wife Sarah that they had to do something about it. So 16 years ago, they became foster parents to the first of 23 kids.

“These kids are in a bad position. They didn’t ask to be put in foster care, and they don’t need more people to be mean to them,” George says.

“So we try to keep our house ‘light.’ When kids come into our house we set the limits and tell them to have fun. We don’t come down hard on them except for serious stuff.”

Sarah says patience and a sense of humor are essential for foster parents. Foster daughter Cindy says they have no shortage of either. “I made life difficult for them for a couple of years before I figured out I was home,” she says.

George and Sarah are accustomed to kids showing up without basic necessities like clothes. “We usually take them to Kohl’s or Boston Store and get them what they need,” George explains.

“But one little girl—we brought her home in her nightie in the winter. She didn’t even have a jacket.”

So Sarah went over to her son and daughter-in-law’s house and raided her granddaughter’s closet for a short-term solution.

George says that the little girl’s parents never visited her during a long hospitalization. Some people don’t change. They love their kids, but they can’t seem to make the effort to raise a child. Drugs and alcohol are the biggest problems.”

Sarah adds quickly, “And parenting skills.”

When asked what he would tell someone thinking about becoming a foster parent, George’s reply is simple and straightforward: “You’re saving a kid’s life, that’s what you’re doing.”

While there have been no official adoptions, every one of those 23 kids is still George and Sarah’s kid. “We have kids coming over to do laundry or have a meal, and they bring the grandkids,” says Sarah. “Or they’ll send me a message on Facebook or just pick up the phone and call.”

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And that's just fine with George and Sarah. "We keep school pictures on the wall so the kids see those when they come over and know that they're part of the family," George says. And when they retire in four years? Well, hey ... the door will still be open for "their" kids.

Cindy was 12 years old and sleeping in the park when the police arrested her for smoking a cigarette. "I don't know why I was smoking, but I stayed away from home most of the time after my dad broke my jaw," she says.

Cindy had suffered years of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse that had not attracted the attention of the child welfare system, so when she was caught with a chargeable offense, a decision was quickly made to declare her delinquent so that she could be placed in out-of-home care.

"I was initially sent to a group home, and then to juvenile detention, even though I don't think anybody thought I was actually a 'delinquent,'" she says. After a short time, she was placed in foster care. Her first placement left a lot to be desired.

"It wasn't good, so basically I ran away—right back to the police department," Cindy says. "They sent me back to the group home, and several weeks later I met George and Sarah."

George and Sarah are long-time Dodge County foster parents with "the patience of saints," according to Cindy. "The first couple of years were tough; I was very 'iffy' about them. I couldn't sleep, had lots of nightmares and started fights with the other kids."

Finally, after about three years, Cindy had a sudden realization: "George and Sarah were my home."

From that point on, things began to get easier.

George says, "We let Cindy do everything she wanted to do and had never been able to do... school play, class trips, cheerleading, everything. She was an overachiever."

She still is. Cindy graduated from high school and went on to the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, with the help of scholarships.

"Money is a constant struggle for me," she says. "I'm not working, because I'm carrying twenty credits or more a semester to save time and money. I want to go to graduate school as soon as I finish my bachelor's degree."

Cindy will graduate next year. Her 3.6 grade point average is impressive for anyone, especially someone carrying an extra-heavy load of coursework. She also speaks about her experiences to lots of civic and community groups.

"I just want people to understand what goes on with foster kids," she says.

