



Couple provides care for foster children

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Brad and Mary Lou Black agree with the African proverb that takes a village to raise a child. They know it takes a neighbourhood, but most importantly, it takes a family as well.

The Keswick couple have been foster parents for the York Children's Aid Society for three years, offering loving, supportive care for a group of children on the awkward verge of adulthood.

In the majority of cases, the CAS provides families to children aged from infancy to 16 years. After that they are free to be on their own, if they choose.

"A lot of 16-year-olds were leaving the agency because they suddenly had the power to make their own decisions about their future and, when you have parents who are used to implementing rules, being listened to and providing that sort of direction, the reins may be been a little to tight for these young colts," Mr. Black said. "Our program loosens the reins."

It's called the co-operative living program, Ms Black said.

The Blacks hadn't intended to become foster parents, but found themselves in the program when they wanted to open their home to a teenaged nephew who was already in the CAS system.

"He had outgrown the foster home he was living in and had requested to live with us," Ms Black said. "When were seriously considering that, we found we need to do the PRIDE pre-service training to be qualified.

"That's a nine-week training program that covers nine different aspects of caring for children, from multicultural awareness and recognition of the diversity of the children and respecting that diversity, to working as team player with the agency."

PRIDE stands for Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education.

That included behavioural training and getting personal information about the child and his or her unique needs.

"When Brad and I were at the first session, a lovely young lady by the name of Jane Kennedy was part of the training and when we were introducing ourselves and we were describing our home and how large it was she said, 'We're going to have to fill your house up'," Ms Black said. "Brad and I looked

at each other and we were like, 'that's not the plan',!" she laughed.

As they started getting to know more people and taking the courses, it began to make sense, Ms Black said.

The first call was to provide temporary relief for a family with two younger boys, then they settled into providing care for boys 16 and older, who are more difficult to place because of the unique challenges they bring to foster parents, or indeed, any parents.

They've found a way to do it successfully, by providing them with just enough freedom and supervision where they don't chafe under restrictions older teenagers usually resent.

It's called the Third Floor.

"In this house, on the main floor, we have the living room, kitchen, dining room," Mr. Black said. "We also have a kitchen living and dining room on the third floor, so we have two complete setups."

The third floor is for their sons who have achieved that level of maturity to be more independent.

"They have the opportunity to purchase their own groceries and as long as they're filling the commitments around school or work they can set their own hours," Mr. Black said.

When you have older teenagers, it may be difficult to get them around the dinner table or to go to bed at the same time every night.

"Teenagers and young adults find that's quite restrictive and not recognizing their independence and the level of maturity that they believe that they have."

The Blacks are a blended family in every respect, with four sons from CAS, in addition to their own stepchildren and children.

Ms Black knows from personal experience how difficult it can be.

"I was an independent parent for the first seven years with my four children and that adds another wonderful flavour because there but for the grace of God go I," she said.

"I have an awesome rapport with the bio parents of our foster children whenever it's possible. I can relate to some of these issues."

And every child in the home is considered their child.

"We don't distinguish between them, they're all treated exactly the same," Mr. Black said.

"We always refer to them as our sons. Some of our foster children prefer to call us Brad and Mary Lou, but most call us mom and dad," Ms Black said.

"Whatever they're comfortable with. They can call us whatever they like.

"We fulfil the role of the parent, so whatever they choose to call us mom and dad, Brad and Mary Lou, it doesn't make any difference to us."

Where needed, the CAS provides support until the child turns 21, York CAS foster parent recruiter Latika James said.

"Usually, people who are interested in fostering call our agency to inquire and then are directed to me," she said. "I explain the children are from infancy to the age of 16.

"Prospective foster parents go through a telephone interview outlining their preference for children.

"For example, some want just infants, it all depends.

"They have to look at their family makeup and what would fit their skill, their home environment, then we take it from there."

The need for foster parents is great and growing, she said.

"There is a need for infants, sibling groups and teenagers, 13 to 16. If they are 16 and up and we feel they're not quite ready to move on we will extend care up to age of 18 and even up to 21."

The Blacks make sure to have a good relationship with the parents of their sons where possible.

"The families are certainly fully involved," Mr. Black said.

The neighbours are understanding as well.

"All the neighbours know what we're doing and they're all quite supportive," he said. "And of course we've got the support of the York Support Services Network when we need it.

"There are various counsellors and therapists who often come into the home to talk to the children and take them out on some therapy sessions.

"It's a well-rounded system where everybody's involved in raising the children."

They love the new dimension fostering has added to their lives, but there are practical considerations as well that comes with the financial support given by CAS.

"Although it's rewarding work in itself being a foster parent, it also has its incentives too," Mr. Black said.

"We can have certain luxuries, based on providing the care for the children which does benefit the family as a whole."

It has also enabled his wife to become a full-time stay at home mom.

"One of our recruitment issues is people who are making a choice between going back to work or maybe staying home and taking care of their children because they actually want to raise their own children," Mr. Black said.

"Fostering may be the method by which they can do that.

"So, for example when they had two children at home who were say three

and five, taking one more child actually provided the financial support so they could stay home."

But don't bother applying if money is the motivation.

The careful selection process and training weeds out people who are less than altruistic.

"The one thing I love the most is all the training you get," Ms Black said.

"It's current and it's ongoing and it puts you in a place where you get to be with your fellow fostering partners."

In addition to fostering, the Blacks are on a number of committees. Mr. Black is chairperson of the foster parents association and kinship parents committee and sits on the board of directors.

One of the Blacks' sons is disappointed he can't be part of the story.

"He came home before his next class and I told him you were coming and he said I want my picture taken too because I'm proud to be your son.

"I explained to him the confidentiality rules that can't happen, but it was a beautiful thing to hear him say that," Ms Black said.

The Blacks said they will keep fostering until they retire to the 100 acre property with a lake they own in northern Ontario.

They'll need all that room for the family reunion.

For more on the York Region Children's Aid Society and the programs available for prospective foster parents go to www.yorkcas.org