

LiftedUp Takes Extra Care to Aid Foster Parents, Youths

Volunteers from the Sherwood-based program offer hours of service, acting as extended families

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Julie Rettig, a West Linn mother of two, felt an instant bond with the young girl she met at a camp for children in foster care. But she wanted to do more.

After they parted sadly for the second summer in a row, Rettig, a volunteer counselor at the camp, went through background and reference checks and took 20 hours of training to become a respite foster care provider through LiftedUp, a Sherwood-based program.

The next spring, Rettig and the girl reunited. "She said, 'I was praying I'd get to see you again,' " Rettig recalled. "I knew that I'd done the right thing."

In the past four years of monthly visits, the girl has grown close to Rettig's son and daughter. She has joined them camping and on family trips to the zoo and has hung out with them at home playing games and watching movies.

Rettig has found it rewarding to be a source of constancy and nurturing in a young life with so much turmoil. This year brought a big transition: The now 13-year-old was adopted in April and left her foster home of seven years. With the adoptive family's approval, Rettig has continued her visits, reassuring the girl that "I wasn't going anywhere."

LiftedUp was started in 2000 by a Sherwood couple, Gene Head, 56, a computer consultant, and Jacqueline Head, 53, a psychologist. Their goal was to provide support for foster parents and foster children.

The Heads estimate that about 30 volunteers -- about half of them husband-wife pairs -- now act as extended family to about 15 foster families. "When you take care of foster parents, you take care of foster children," Gene Head said.

The Heads draw from their Christian faith and from the experience of raising two birth children and an adopted child -- along with 17 years of caring for foster children.

The idea for the respite care program grew partly from their nine years of involvement with the Royal Family Kids Camp, an international program of churches that sponsor weeklong summer camps for kids in foster care. Jacqueline Head is the volunteer counselor, and for the past five years, Gene Head has been the volunteer director of the camp run by Grace Community Church in Tualatin.

Many of the LiftedUp volunteers such as Rettig first met their young charges there.

Cathy Zellmer of Beaverton said her two foster children -- 12-year-old brother and sister twins -- look forward to the camp and the volunteers they see there and through LiftedUp year round.

Her foster daughter would come home crying because camp was over, Zellmer said. But for more than a year -- since the girl and her brother connected with a counselor they met at the camp and her husband, both of whom are LiftedUp volunteers -- they have gotten together each month for five or six hours. They go places and do things that Zellmer's full and busy household just doesn't have enough time for.

She and her husband, Paul, have three birth children -- 21, 20 and 17 -- and an adopted child, 7, also at home.

The Heads know that foster parents can thrive with support, but that it's hard to come by, especially in tight budget times. Cultivating volunteers seemed the way to go. They found they didn't really get a handle on being foster parents until their third year into it because of the steep learning curve involved in caring for children who often have been neglected and abused.

LiftedUp volunteers provide a break and are trained to be open to help -- by listening or offering advice if asked by foster parents. "If we can retain them," Gene Head said, "we can prevent children moving from home to home."

In 2001, after the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility opened in Wilsonville, Head helped found Operation BabyLift to assist foster families caring for the babies born to women inmates while incarcerated. Volunteers provide respite care, deliver donated baby supplies and help with visits to the prison and to doctors.

Head is trying to spread his respite foster care and foster care recruitment efforts by preparing a couple from the Beaverton Foursquare Church to make the pitch to others in their congregation. He hopes the model can be replicated in faith communities.

He also volunteers with the Oregon Department of Human Services, returning phone calls -- as many as 80 a week -- to people from Washington County who have left messages on the state's foster parent recruitment phone line seeking basic information.

Catherine Chase, the agency's supervisor in the Beaverton office of foster certification and adoptions, said reducing the foster care trainer and recruiter's call load has allowed her to arrange for additional training this year.

Head also volunteered to follow up with potential foster parents who have gone through state training.

"He has a lot of great ideas," Chase said, "and a lot of connections in the community to get people to sit down and talk about them."

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