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There's a great need for foster parents:

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Lis and Keith Smith, foster parents, Childhaven
– Donna Cadena photo

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For the last two and half to three years, Keith and Lis Smith have been licensed regular and treatment foster parents registered with Childhaven. Prior to being licensed, they spent about a year going through the qualifying process.

"Basically," said Keith, "we went through a whole lot of training. Once you volunteer, it is quite a process to get licensed to be a foster parent. If biological parents had to go through what prospective foster parents had to go through, you wouldn't need foster parents. We have gone through background checks and have been fingerprinted. The training and hours we put in has been a huge commitment. It took almost a year from the time we started the training until the time we became foster parents and earned our license. From our vantage point, foster parents have to be committed to it."

A calling

Both Keith and Lis taught in the Central Consolidated School District and both retired; however, after a few years of retirement, Keith got bored and has since started teaching high school at Navajo Prep. The couple moved from Knoxville, Tenn. to Farmington in 1991. Keith said, "We felt the call to come and work with the Navajo. For a few years, we lived on the reservation.

"A few years ago, we heard the call to be foster parents, but our kids were grown and out of the house and we rather liked the empty-house syndrome and we decided not to pursue foster parenting at that time. But later, one Sunday we were sitting in church and I heard a voice and it said, 'You need to become a foster parent.' I looked around to see who was talking in the middle of a service and nobody was talking. I said, 'Okay Lord, if you me to be a foster parent, you need to tell this woman sitting next to me because I am not going to say a thing.' When we walked out of church that day, Lis turned to me and in a very serious manner she said, 'Keith, we need to talk.' My response was, 'Oh God.' She told me, 'We need to become foster parents.'"

The calling to be a foster parent is not for everyone. Keith said, "We have talked to members of our church about foster parenting, but no one from our church has come on board. I think the more it is discussed and the more people talk about it and pray over it, the more people become aware that there are different ways they can help the system; such as respite foster care," he said. "There is a great need for foster parents and we would certainly encourage people to think about it, pray over it and come and talk to the people here at Childhaven."

Fostering a young boy

To date, the Smiths have been foster parents to both regular and treatment kids, but for the last two years, they have been regular foster parents to an 11-year-old boy, who Keith said is a great kid with a lot of personality. "We tell him, and have told the other kids we have fostered, that we love them, but it is tough for them to say it back. For the most part, our experience is that foster kids don't want to get attached. We have also found that kids have a hard time saying thank you. If we are sitting at the table and they are passed the ketchup, they will say thank you, but if we take them to the movies or swimming or buy them something of value, they don't know how to say thank you," explained Keith.

Lis said, "Our foster boy has been rejected by his mom at least twice. And prior to being placed with us, he was in a foster home where the placement was abruptly ended because of issues the foster dad had with post-traumatic syndrome. So one day, he was moved from that home to our home. Two years later, he saw the foster dad who he had not said good-bye to and who he had not seen in two years. He was fairly attached to the foster dad and having been removed from that home and placed in our home was another instance of someone being abruptly gone from his life. He was close to a CASA worker who left and who did not say good-bye before leaving. We feel that down the road it is important that we keep in contact with him to show him that people don't just have to disappear from your life."

Reactive detachment disorder is an understandable disorder that many foster children battle. Keith said, "The thing we have come to understand is that when you talk about abuse, abuse has so many different definitions and these kids have suffered abuse in so many different ways." Lis adds, "We hope that the time they spend with us will show them there is a different way to live than what they are used to; life doesn't have to be the way it was."

Keith said, "Because we have our kids and grandkids over a lot, I think our foster kids have the opportunity to see alternative ways to live. Most of these kids have very severe attachment issues. They have been dumped on and left, abandoned and abused in so many ways that most of these kids don't trust anybody/adults; they have no reason to trust. They have had too much happen to them in their young lives. We try to show them love, consistency and discipline, and when they leave us, it is hard."

Michele Renaud, Childhaven treatment foster care coordinator, said, "Love, consistency and discipline are three really important things. More than anything, it is what these children need."

Time-in

Whereas traditional ways of discipline might include time-out, discipline for a foster child often means just the opposite. Lis said, "You want them to be with you and you want them to be where they can be observe proper ways of interacting."

Keith experiences prompted him to say, "Sometimes, there is a fine line between what is regular and treatment foster care. A kid may be categorized as a regular foster kid, but his/her action or behavior may deem him/her a treatment foster kid. We have been fortunate to have mostly regular foster kids and have not had too many issues." And as might be expected, how a foster child gets along with his/her foster parent/s is a matter of chemistry.

Having come from some sort of abusive situation, most foster kids do not know appropriate ways of interaction. And regardless of the situation they were removed from, many desire to go back to their parents and their homes. Keith said, "To some extent it makes me think of the battered wife syndrome, battered wives go back to their husbands. As bad as things may be, there is a degree of security in that situation and many kids want to be with mom and dad; maybe the kids blame themselves and as in the case of divorce, they may think it was their fault. A lot of them have a hard time dealing with reality. A lot of times after a foster kid goes back to their family, they lose contact with their foster family. We would like to keep contact with the kids we have fostered."

Culture

"I think every situation stands on its own and as a foster parent, you have to be sensitive to the child's needs. Most of the kids we have fostered have been Navajo and we try to make their culture available to them. It is interesting, some of the kids want to foster their culture; it is important to them. For other kids, maybe because of what has happened to them, they don't want anything to do with their culture," said Keith. Ethnicity and culture plays a role when a child is placed, but with no registered Navajo families on Childhaven's roster of available foster families, many times, ethnicity and culture cannot be considered.

Renaud said, "We try to incorporate the child's culture into their foster care experience. The state exhausts all efforts to place kids with a relative. We have had kids who have been discharged from our program who have gone into adoptive homes; some go to relatives and some go to non-relatives. Unfortunately, we do not have any Navajo foster families."

Keith said, "A lot of the kids are Navajo and the Navajo will go to every extent possible to place a kid with family member. Understandably, the Navajo want Navajo kids placed with a Navajo family and in terms of adoption; that is a source of frustration."

For the most part, Keith and Lis experiences have been good. Their grown son has told them they were nuts in a good way for becoming foster parents. Keith says, "I hope the kids go through school and post-secondary training, find a spouse, raise a family and be productive citizens and not repeat the cycle." Lis says, "I hope that what we are providing these kids will help them know they can have a better life. I want

them to know, that should they go back to their families, it will probably not be easy and relationships take work on both parts. I hope they understand that just because people have disagreements, it does not mean they do not love one another."

For more information on the regular, treatment or respite foster care programs, call 505.325.5358 or visit Childhaven's website at: www.childhavennm.org/.