

Finding her calling: Stoneham woman enriched through foster parenting

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GateHouse News Service

Posted Feb 03, 2011 @ 08:00 AM

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Stoneham — Stoneham resident Lynda Allard doesn't see herself as a hero for helping countless numbers of children and teens each year.

Rather, she sees herself as just another foster parent, providing as much love and security possible to youth in need during the time that she has them.

"I think it's our responsibility as humans to make sure that our kids and our society are cared for," Allard, 49, told the *Stoneham Sun*.

Allard's interest in foster parenting began roughly nine years ago, after seeing an advertisement seeking safe and loving foster homes in a local newspaper. It was almost a sign of fate seeing the ad, Allard said, as she had always thought about being a foster parent and had recently left her job as an executive to be a stay-at-home mom with her own biological children, Rebecca, 18, and Emily, 16.

"My first initial thought was, 'Geez, I am not even sure that this is something I can do,'" she said. "I didn't know anybody who was a foster parent. I worried if fostering was a good match for my family and me [which includes her husband, Doug]. But I had always wanted to contribute to the life of a child, so I just picked up the phone and started asking questions."

Allard contacted Dare Family Services, a private, non-profit social services agency based in Somerville, that specializes in providing therapeutic foster care to children and teens who have been severely abused or neglected.

Allard's primary concern was that she didn't have a "Leave it to Beaver" background — her father left her family when she was young, and her brother had died in an accident.

She was relieved, however, to learn that foster parents come from all walks of life.

"Sometimes a person who has been through experiences such as Lynda's are better able to understand and associate with kids from similar backgrounds," said Janelle Moore, foster parent recruiter for Dare Family Services. "It's not uncommon for foster parents to have experienced some sort of trauma, abuse or neglect in their pasts.

"They know how it feels," Moore added. "They know what it takes to get your life on track after something like that."

'We all have a clean slate'

After passing the necessary trainings, home inspections, and background checks, the Allard family was approved in 2002 to foster parent, and have had roughly 50 youth in their home since then.

For almost a year, the family has been fostering a 16-year-old girl, and just recently took in a premature newborn.

When a child comes into her home, Allard said, she tells them, "We all have a clean slate."

"You have to earn their respect just like they have to earn yours," she explained. "I'm proud when they accomplish simple milestones."

Allard told the *Sun* that she feels fortunate to be a foster parent in Stoneham, because the town has made it easy for her to obtain quality services and to be an effective advocate for the youth that she cares for.

"The school system, the special education department, the teachers, my local church — First Congregational — and early intervention have gone above and beyond for my kids," Allard said. "The town has made it possible for these kids to have the best services and support they could possibly have within our means."

Thousands of children awaiting placement

Currently, there are more than 8,000 children in foster care in Massachusetts, and 70 percent are in foster care temporarily, waiting to return to their birth family, according to Janice Halpern, director of public relations and fundraising at the Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange (MARE).

Roughly 2,400 of these youth cannot be reunited with their birth family for various reasons, and have the goal of adoption, Halpern said.

"Foster parents provide a wonderful service to some of our most vulnerable children — they offer stability and security so that a problem in their birth home can be resolved and the child can return safely," Halpern said. "We need more families to consider opening their homes and hearts to a child who needs a short-term foster home. And we also need more families who can provide a permanent place to call home."

Allard not only hopes to continue to help as many children as she can, but she also hopes her story can inspire others to become

a foster or adoptive parent.

"I feel like you only have one life and we are all put on the earth for something," Allard said. "Being a foster parent is my calling."

To learn more about being a foster parent, call Janelle Moore at Dare Family Services at 617-628-3696, and tell her Lynda Allard sent you. The next training begins soon.

To learn about adoption, foster care or mentoring, call the Massachusetts Adoption Resource Exchange at 617-542-3678 or visit mareinc.org.

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