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### Adopting Love

Local moms talk about the challenges and rewards of adopting a child

By LACEY McLAUGHLIN, STAFF WRITER



Curt and Rosine McCauley with their adopted son, Stephen, in Flagler Beach. (NJ | Nigel Cook)



Lisa Fisher, center, and biological daughter Sunie, 23, left, and adopted daughter Aimee, 18, at their home in Ormond Beach. (NJ | David Massey)



Steve and Sandra Hogue with their adopted children, clockwise from top right, Stephen, 12, Selah, 7, Sammie, 1, Silas, 7, Seth, 11, and Simon, 8, at their home in Ormond Beach. (NJ | Nigel Cook)

The two young brothers weren't used to having three meals a day. Seth, 4, and Stephen, 5, would hide the snacks their foster mother gave them, wrapping the dried fruit in a napkin or stuffing animal crackers into pockets to save for later when they got hungry.

Sandra Hogue and her husband, Steve, tried to reassure the boys they would always have enough to eat at their new home, but it took awhile for the brothers to trust the couple.

"With my old family I would only get ketchup and fries for lunch," said Seth, whom the Hogues adopted in 2007. "We didn't live in a real house. We lived outside and for breakfast I ate Cheerios without milk and most of the time I didn't get anything for dinner."

The Hogues, who live in Ormond Beach, have adopted six children and have been foster parents to another 10. Sandra, who is the oldest of four siblings, had always envisioned starting a large family with her husband.

Unable to have children of their own, the Hogues learned that the pangs of childbirth aren't the only trials that can forge familial bonds.

The same was true for Rosine McCauley, who had nearly given up on her dream of having children when she turned 50, much less mastering a new technology to communicate with her 17-year-old adopted son. And Lisa Fisher knew she had enough love to give an adopted daughter, but she and her husband had to prove they could be there -- both for the new addition to their family as well as their older children.

Approximately 3,009 children were adopted in Florida last year and 800 remain in need of homes, according to the Florida Department of Children and Families. Currently 277 are with foster families in Volusia and Flagler counties and 72 are waiting for foster families. While mothers who adopt or take in foster children often help them overcome the emotional trauma of broken homes, for many, seeing their children blossom with healthy, productive lives outweighs those challenges.

"If we were able to have children of our own, we wouldn't be blessed with the ones that we have," Sandra said. "We see this as a way to rescue children. Without adoption, they are going to sit in a foster care system and never get a family."

## **A FULL HOUSE**

The 7-year-olds, Silas and Selah, and 8-year-old Simon, greet Sandra Hogue with hugs as they return home from their school, Calvary Christian Academy, on a recent Monday afternoon. Sandra, 37, who has a master's degree in social work and counseling, spends the day home schooling Stephen, now 12, and Seth, now 11, and taking care of 23-month-old Samuel, whom the couple adopted in January.

The Ormond Beach household is always a hive of activity, yet the family is hoping to adopt a baby girl through a private agency.

"Six children doesn't feel like enough; I keep looking around and it feels like someone is missing," Sandra said.

The afternoon consisted of homework, music and family dinner.

Building a family through adoption or foster parenting requires a flexibility of understanding that biological parents don't always need.

"A lot of them came to us with rotten teeth or malnourished," she said. "They were in need of physical therapy or speech therapy. Then there is the emotional abuse -- we've had kids with sexual, physical and verbal abuse. They have been emotionally injured and there is a healing process that comes with that."

In 2005 the couple became foster parents for Selah when she was just 9-months-old; the infant cried constantly and appeared to fear men. "She was always scared and would shake whenever my husband walked in the room."

Now Selah, whom the couple adopted in 2007, gives her father hugs as they spend time together after school. As the only girl in the family, she spends lots of one-on-one time with Sandra but is always eager to join her brothers for a bike ride or game of baseball.

Sandra's desire to help foster children goes beyond her family. She helped start All for Children, an orphan ministry through her church to encourage others to foster children or adopt them. The ministry holds panel discussions and training for parents who want to become adoptive parents.

Rachel Arazashvili, who helped start the ministry and is the executive director of the nonprofit Kiddy's aRe First that advocates on behalf of foster children, said she considers Sandra a role model.

"I go to her for guidance," Arazashvili said. "Her work with the ministry is an inspiration for so many."

When a judge finalizes the adoption in front of family and friends, the event is often an emotional one. The Hogues' children received new names on their birth certificates to symbolize their new start. Sandra said she has seen an immediate change in her older children's behavior when they understand they are now part of a "forever family."

"It's like this gigantic cycle of insecurity, instability and mistrust has ended," Sandra said. "All of a sudden a burden has been lifted. They get a new start in life."

## **LAST CHANCE FOR FAMILY**

At 50, Rosine McCauley started to doubt if she would ever have children to share her life experiences. At 16, Stephen Klinker thought it was unlikely he would ever have parents to guide him through high school and adulthood.

Teens who haven't been adopted by the time they turn 18 transition from the foster care system to living independently -- making the chances of finding a permanent family less likely. Several years ago the Daytona Beach-based nonprofit Community Partnership for Children, which provides child welfare services for Volusia and Flagler counties, started a mentor program that matched teens with adult volunteers. That's how Rosine and her husband, Curt McCauley, met Stephen.

Stephen had been in the foster care system since he was 6. He started going on outings with the McCauley's when he was 16 and over the course of a year started spending weekends with them before being adopted in January of this year, the day after his 17th birthday.

Rosine, an assistant harbor master at Palm Coast Marina and Curt, 67, a yacht captain who travels frequently for his job, were required to take a training course and undergo a home study that evaluated their background and lifestyle.

Fewer than 10 percent of teens ages 14 or older are adopted, and as teens get older they start to lose hope of finding a family, said Mark Jones, chief executing officer for Community Partnership for Children.

"We want folks to realize that teens also need an opportunity to have a family," he said. "What we see most often in teens is that they have been rejected so many times that they are not willing to open up to other adults. They have a lack of trust for adults. But you have to be patient and build relations on their own terms."

For Rosine, getting through to Stephen required her to become adept at cellphone texting. She found he could communicate things to her in texts that he was unable to say in person.

"If we didn't have that tool I don't think Stephen and I would be where we are today," Rosine said. "Texting was a huge icebreaker for us."

In April, the McCauleys were the speakers for the CPC's annual Friends of the Children breakfast. Rosine shared her top 10 reasons for adopting a teen. Her list included no 3 a.m. wake-up calls for feeding, 24-hour tech support and rekindling memories of her own youth. While her list garnered several laughs from the audience, it also drew a few tears. Her No. 1 reason for adopting Stephen was the risk was worth the reward, she said.

"For all the risk you take in life, I promise that his is the one worth taking," she said. "Because of adoption, we are now three hearts that beat as one."

## **BLENDING FAMILIES**

Aimee was 9 and living in a residential facility for girls in Melbourne while her mother, who had been incarcerated, was battling drug addiction. Lisa Fisher had worked with Aimee's older sister while volunteering with New Start, an organization that provides mentors for at-risk teens.

Lisa, 54, was confident she and her husband, Jack -- a financial adviser in Ormond Beach -- could give the younger girl the love and attention she needed. But their youngest daughter, Sunie, who was just starting high school at the time, needed to feel those connections, too.

Aimee struggled with attachment issues and required lots of attention from Lisa, as well as counseling. But Lisa, whose two older daughters were grown and out of the house by then, feared a distance was growing between her and Sunie.

"When (Sunie) was pulling away I thought, that's not a good deed I'm supposed to do if I'm going to lose my family," Lisa recalled.

But as time went on, the family grew closer. Aimee looked up to Sunie, now 23, and the two girls have become best friends.

"We had to choose to love each other and to care for each other," Sunie said.

A turning point happened two years after Aimee came to live with the Fishers, when the couple surprised her by attending parents' day at a camp she was attending. Aimee did not think anyone would show up for her. The Fishers were just her legal guardians at the time and Aimee had given up hope of ever reuniting with her biological mother.

When Aimee saw them at the camp, she came running.

"She was hysterical," Lisa recalled, "and fell in a heap of tears into her dad's lap. That's when we realized all we had to do was show up."

After a couple of years of failed attempts to reunify with her mother, Aimee asked the Fishers to adopt her when she was 13. She chose a new name for her adoption certificate to signify a break from her past. Lisa also made a break, trading soccer and the booked schedule she'd maintained with her older daughters for dinners at home and walks on the beach.

"What she needed was family," Lisa said of her adopted daughter, now 18, who graduates from Seabreeze in a few weeks and plans to attend Daytona State College in the fall. "It was more important to sit at a dinner table together than on a soccer field or dance team."

Lisa said Aimee feels like her own child. The only difference between Aimee and her biological children, Lisa said, is how that bond formed. "When you give birth, a bond happens instantly with your biological children," Lisa said. "For Aimee, it was showing up, that was the beginning of our bond and as a mother you think: I have to keep doing this till the day I die."

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