DEVON AND CORNWALL FOSTER CARER STORIES: MARLENE AND GEOFF LOOK BACK ON OVER 40 YEARS OF FOSTERING TOGETHER

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MARLENE AND GEOFF – LOOKING BACK OVER 40 YEARS OF FOSTERING TOGETHER

As part of our aim to spread the word about the need for more foster carers in the South West region, we have spent time talking with existing foster carers in the area to find out more about their experiences with vulnerable children and young people and discuss their fostering adventure so far.

Marlene and Geoff live in Gloucestershire, and have fostered for nearly 40 years. They spoke to us about the contrasts of being a foster carer in past decades with caring for children and young people in the modern day, as well as offering advice on what they believe are the qualities which can help someone to become a successful foster carer.

Beginning in 1976 with another agency, Marlene and Geoff were soon to be among the first carers in the country to look after as many as seven foster children in one household, with Marlene describing how this came about:

"We had an emergency placement with a young girl, and within the ten days that we started to care for her, we discovered that there were six of her siblings located in various places, each with different carers", said Marlene.

"They were then slowly introduced to us although their extended family were originally going to care for them, but that didn't work out. The social worker at the time said it would be lovely if they could all stay together, so we accepted the challenge, applied for a residence order and brought them up.'

"I do believe there are other carers now who look after larger groups of children, as there seems to be a greater level of importance on keeping siblings together where possible."

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Foster care and our family

Alongside Marlene and Geoff's decades long dedication to improving the lives and future opportunities of children that need it the most, they explained that the desire to help others runs throughout some of their fourth birth children and extended family.

"My daughter has just finished being a carer and has been so for around 15 years", Marlene continued.'

"18 years after our first child was born we had a little lad born to us, which was a bit of a shock. He then grew up with the seven foster children that we had in the house, so the idea of fostering and what it entailed was very much familiar to him.'

"They will all still come around and babysit. For example, our foster daughter once broke down on her moped and my son went to pick her up – so everyone pitches in when they can.'

"My sister fostered and my sister's daughter also fostered until recently, so we had our own ready-made support group."

Marlene went on to describe how they have kept in touch with the now grown-up adults who they used to care for, as well as the joy they have found in seeing each of them build their own lives after leaving the care of herself and Geoff.

"We have stayed in touch with quite a lot of young people and so we are surrogate grandparents to a lot of young people's children! One of the lovely things about fostering for as long as we have is that we've been able to see the positive impact we have had on their lives, watching them grow and have families of their own.'

Managing foster and birth children in the home

One of the most challenging aspects of looking after vulnerable children and young people within any foster family home exists in managing the relationships and overarching dynamic of both foster and birth children under one roof.

The requirement to provide foster children coming into a home with the amount of love, care, attention and access to life experiences they may previously not have enjoyed has to ultimately be balanced with the need to ensure that birth children understand the reasoning behind it is a topic that Marlene poignantly expands upon:

"We went through a period of five years looking after young men on remand, as they could not be held in prisons. At one point when we were looking after these teenagers, the idea was that if you took them out on experiences such as go-karting for example, that they would become more rounded young people.'

"Our kids would observe this happening and say 'If that person has broken into another person's house, how come they get to go go-karting?'"

"You could have a lot of jealousies; including situations where our children would be saying 'How come you give him £10 pocket money a week but you can't afford to give me £5?' – but we would just need to tell our children that this is how it has to be.'

"One of the things that our sons will tell anyone is that they didn't have to go out and see the world, the world came to them. Learning how to be compassionate towards other people less fortunate than themselves was something that they learnt early on."

Transfer to Pathway Care

After over 30 years as foster carers, Marlene and Geoff took a short break from taking on any more children and young people into their home. However, they soon realised that the quite life was not for them, and decided to become foster carers once again by transferring to Pathway Care's fostering services in 2015.

They soon discovered that much had changed from the days when they first signed up to become foster carers. In the past, the short process to become a carer had involved dialogue with a social worker for around six weeks, before having a house inspection, upon which a decision would then be made around suitability and placements could begin short afterwards.

Marlene articulated how changes to legislature within fostering had led to a lengthier yet more worthwhile and thorough period of training and assessment to be able to take on placements with Pathway Care:

"Our daughter actually worked for Pathway Care and introduced us to the agency. Some things have stayed the same, but the process itself in terms of being introduced to Pathway was different.'

"It was more thorough in a good way, and even though we had been foster carers for some time, we were asked to do the 'Skills to Foster' course and go back to some of the basics.'

"During the time we were fostering with our other agency I actually did a lot of training with new carers and talks, but ultimately, having the rare opportunity to reflect back on our relationship with fostering was good for us.'

"Lots of legislation has changed, so Pathway were excellent with supporting our transition".

Future plans and how older generations can help vulnerable children and young people

"We have to change the long-term outlook simply because of our age, but we have always fostered right from when myself and my husband started to talk about it when we had been together around seven years. We've never ever been without a young person in the house and my husband will tell you that it is far better than looking at me at the end of the table!'

"In a way, fostering children hasn't changed in the sense that children and young people still have many of the same problems as they have unfortunately always done, although there is an awful lot more pressure nowadays though on young people.'

"We have been able to look past that as we have never been as heavily wrapped up in modern life in terms of the pitfalls of social media and things like that.'

"What has helped us throughout the years as foster carers? I would say a good sense of humour and a lack of a judging character is what has kept us going."

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