FAMILY PLACEMENT CARER RECEIVES MBE AWARD FOR TRANSFORMING CHILDREN'S LIVES OVER 25 YEARS

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Having helped around 100 vulnerable children and young people find a safe and loving haven within their home in Buckinghamshire, Judith , who has fostered with husband Stephen for the last 25 years and most recently with NFA Group's **Family Placement** agency, has been officially recognised with an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours list.

We chatted to Judith about their astounding adventure so far, including their experience fostering with Family Placement; who assisted them in adopting two children they had fostered with Family Placement after they became vital members of the family.

How does it feel to be nationally recognised for your services to fostering?

> *"It was a total shock when I found out because I had no idea. I really did think it was a scam letter when it came through the post!*
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> *"I was about to put the letter in the recycling basket and my husband said 'I don't think you should do that'. Thankfully he had a slight recollection that something was happening behind the scenes.*
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> *"It's strange really, because it's not something that I thought would ever happen to me. I know so many other fantastic foster carers, so it's really lovely to have been recognised.*
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> *"I think it's particularly helpful for people who want to know more about what fostering is and what we actually do."*

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What attracted you to foster care?

> *"I'd always wanted to work with children and have worked in schools, playgroups and nurseries previously.'*
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> *"I then found out more about fostering and felt that we had been quite fortunate in our lives, so we thought it would be nice to share what we'd had with someone else that hasn't been as lucky.'*
>
> *"It also saves having to grow up too much as it gives me an excuse to have all the toys in the house!'*

Do you have any foster children currently?

> *"I've got one foster child who is with us long term now. She has severe autism, but she's lovely. I have another young lady who came to me as a foster child who is now 31 and severely disabled, so she is staying with us full-time now as we've decided she is very much part of the family.'*
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> *"I also adopted two of our foster children and they are still with us. They are 12 and 14 now. The family keeps growing, so when people ask how many children we are fostering; we say 'well one officially but...!'"*

How have the rest of your family been involved in fostering?

> *"I have five birth children who have been around at various periods when we've been fostering. It was my first three birth children who were the ones that helped out initially.'*
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> *"When we began fostering, our first child was meant to stay for six weeks but ended up staying for six months. The youngest of my boys was about seven but the other ones were around 10. They just loved playing with this little girl, helping out and treating her like their little sister. Even now they are important to her in adulthood, because she remembers that time so fondly.'*
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> *"From there, I eventually had my two daughters and they were born into fostering. In terms of my eldest daughter who is 24 now, the day she was born I was also told that I was officially taking care of a baby boy.'*
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> *"She was a child that fostered from day one, and she has been brilliant. She's got her own YouTube site called **Melodysigns**. She originally learned Makaton sign language because one of our foster children didn't speak, and while we all tried to learn a little bit, she really ran with it.'*
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> *"Even when we had teenage boys staying with us and my children were little, they just looked on them as part of the family.'*
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> *"My second son is also a foster carer as well now. This really made me think that he did appreciate what we had done for the children who came into our home over the years and saw how much it changed their lives for the better.'*

Judith and her dog, Swiper

How have you found being a foster carer with Family Placement?

> *"They've been amazingly supportive. They focus on matching the right child to the right placement which is really important.'*
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> *"We don't tend to have too many issues, only because of how long we have been fostering now. They are good at remembering that we maybe don't need as much support as a completely new foster carer, as we tend to just get on with things.'*
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> *"I think all the new carers that are with them find them really supportive, which is great. Sometimes it's good just to have someone to let off steam to and take on some of the burden for any problems that do arise.'*

What are your most memorable moments as a foster carer?

> *"I remember when my daughter and a child that we fostered became best friends while he was staying with us.'*
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> *"They had such a lovely relationship, and it came to the point where even as he went off at three years old to his adoptive family, he asked my daughter to come and see his new house near Liverpool. It was a lovely moment despite them having to say goodbye to each other.'*
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> *"I had two other little children that I adored. When I got a message a few years later to say that both these children had graduated university, I could remember them as seven year olds still learning to read and write – that was just really wonderful news.'*
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> *"There was also a young lady that left us last year and was with us for nine years, and we recently found out that she has just been nominated as volunteer of the year by the British Heart Foundation.'*

> **This is our 'family portrait' including my husband and myself (centre), birth children (7) and daughter in laws (2) grandchildren (3) long-term fostered children (2) and long term foster grandchildren (2)**

How difficult is it when a child in your care has to leave?

> *"It is actually a wonderful thing when children do get to return home, and a foster carer's role in this is definitely worthwhile.'*
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> *"I remember a time when one young lady's mum was having a baby and her mum knew that she wanted to keep her child throughout, but she was also aware that she couldn't manage to care for both the baby and her daughter at the same time.'*
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> *"We looked after her daughter for the period that her mum was in hospital, as well when she came home and got settled – then she went back when her mum was able to care for them both.'*
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> *"Maintaining communication with everybody involved in your child's care is key, particularly with the social workers that oversee the placement.'*
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> *"When I first started, there was a group of foster carers in the area that I used to meet up with and while they did things slightly differently to me, it was more about being open to other suggestions and reflecting on them before deciding whether it is the right thing to do when considering the child in your care.'*
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> *"It might sound obvious, but I believe that children need to be the main focus throughout and not lose track of who that little person is and why we are doing what we do each day. As a foster carer, you do tend to become the expert on the child because they are living with you.'*
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> *"There are a lot of lovely children that come into foster care for different reasons. Some will naturally be more challenging than others, but with the right training and support, foster carers can help them overcome these challenges, which can be extremely rewarding in the long run.'*
>
> *"Remember, if things go wrong it isn't the end of the world! You've got a whole-team there supporting you that you can ask for help at any time.'*

What does the future hold?

> *"Children carry on changing with the times, what with social media and things like that now, and it has made the job different.'*
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> *"Even the younger children will come in and want iPhones and iPads and things like that and I always think, 'wow, we never had any of that in my day' – we have just had to move with the times.'*
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> *"There will come a time as we get older where we will need to decide whether to continue fostering or not, but I don't think we will ever stop fostering completely so long as we still have something to offer the children.'*
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> *"My daughter, who is training to be a social worker, has said that she is happy to take in any foster children that we have when the time comes, so we will be content with*