

By Diane Urbani de la Paz, Peninsula Daily News

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PORT ANGELES - Heart-swelling highs, lows that sear the soul: That's motherhood. Julie Stockert knows both well, though she's never given birth.

Julie and her husband Perry live in a six-bedroom house with four children who are 12 years old, 4 years old, 3 years old and 11 months, plus two great Danes - and somehow, it's a place of peace.

This is probably because the Stockerts are doing what they have always wanted to do: care for kids who've had a tough time too early in life.

They've also accepted the fact that parenthood's path never will run smooth.

When you have children, foster or otherwise, "everyone's got something going on: an ailment, or some disaster has happened in their lives," Julie began.

In the case of 4-year-old Miranda, who came to the Stockerts March 25, 2005, two days after they received their foster-home license, the disaster was her parents' methamphetamine abuse.

Miranda, then 2 years old, weighed 17 pounds.

Today, Miranda behaves like a typical preschooler.

She's excited about watching a Disney DVD, but obedient when Julie asks her to wait quietly in her room while Mama talks with a visiting reporter.

Miranda's sister Sarah, 3, wasn't quite ready to go to her room, however.

She stuck around for kisses and snuggling, sneaking glances at the visitor.

The Stockerts are in the process of adopting the girls, while continuing to foster baby Ben, who came to them in February, and 12-year-old Neika, who moved in six months ago.

Open-door policy

"We're rare in the sense that we have an open-door policy," said Julie.

She's from Pasadena, Calif.; Perry grew up in Port Angeles, in and out of foster care.

They're willing to take in six, even seven children.

"At one point we had five toddlers," Julie said.

She's a stay-at-home mom while Perry works nights as a boiler operator at the Interfor Pacific mill.

And there are times when he comes home and she says, "Tag, you're it. I need to go to my room."

And when the couple wants to go out to dinner without the brood, they can't call on just any neighbor or friend to baby-sit.

Anyone who watches over foster children must be approved by the state Department of Social and Health Services, following a background check, Julie said.

"We can't be spontaneous," since state-sanctioned baby-sitters are relatively few.

"Planning a trip to Victoria last year practically took six months," she added.

Other everyday complications: coordinating visits with their foster children's birth parents, arranging therapy appointments for kids who suffer from post-traumatic stress and making the rounds to pediatricians, dentists and specialists.

The Stockerts continue to consult with a doctor about Miranda's weight and size, still below average.

Yet Julie doesn't dwell on the thorny aspects of foster parenthood.

"It is rewarding. But we don't think of it that way. We didn't get into this to get pats on the back. We got into it because there's such a need.

"I don't think I'm a great person. But I'm capable of caring for and loving other people's children until they can do it themselves."

Creating a family

The Stockerts would like to have their own children.

"So far, we've been unsuccessful," Julie said.

"But there are lots of kids who need our love and attention. We'll take what God gives us."

Julie and Perry have been together over a decade, the first five years as best friends, then six as husband and wife.

"Working together for the sake of the kids," said Julie, "has made us stronger."

Money is tight, she admits.

Payments from the state don't cover the costs of clothing, diapers and baby food.

But the Stockerts manage, with help from members of their church and from other foster families, to provide what the kids need.

The Olympic Vineyard congregation in Port Angeles gave them their Chevrolet Suburban, and Julie runs a clothing closet for foster families in need of free items.

"I want to make up bundles so that when parents call and say, 'We just got a 6-month-old baby,' I can give them clothes, diapers and supplies."

The Stockerts have been saving for a special vacation with Miranda and Sarah.

To celebrate Mother's Day and their pending adoption of the girls, they've gone to Disneyland.

After they come home next weekend, the Stockerts will be looking for a new place.

Their landlord is selling the house they live in, so the family will search for something with at least four bedrooms, a yard and a dishwasher.

That list reflects the family's priorities.

"I used to freak out about the place being dirty," Julie admitted. "Then a friend said, 'You've got to decide: Do you want kids or do you want a clean house?'"

She and Perry chose the former.

"We believe every child deserves a chance at life, even if it's a second or third chance."

About the Author

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