

Sisters with strong family ties bring foster siblings into fold

by Mary Schmich, *Chicago Tribune* 15 Nov 2015

Shortly before Thanksgiving in 2011, Angela Gooden went to Comer Children's Hospital to meet a 4-year-old girl. Gooden was 53. Her two daughters were grown. She had recently been laid off from her longtime job and, ready to do something new with her life, had been licensed as a foster parent.

When she got the call about a girl named Gabriella, who was in the hospital after being removed from her home, she and her husband went.

At the hospital, Gabby was shy at first but bold enough to grab Gooden's hand, and in the playroom, as the girl began to talk, Gooden thought, "This is a grown-up 4-year-old."

After a few more visits to the hospital, Gooden and her husband brought Gabby to live in their two-story brick home in the southern suburb of Lansing. A few days later, Gabby, whose ancestry is a mix of Latino, Italian and African-American, found herself in the midst of a big, boisterous African-American Thanksgiving. Her new family.

Once, early on, Gabby held her small, pale hand against Gooden's big, darker one to compare the difference in skin tone, but skin didn't stop them from coming to love each other. In an otherwise happy match of foster parents and child, there seemed to be only one problem.

"What do you want for Christmas?" Gooden asked Gabby on that first Christmas. "My brother and sister," Gabby said.

When the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services removed Gabby from her mother's home, they also took Gabby's younger brother and sister, Jose and Nadia. Gabby missed her siblings and missed taking care of them. Even at 4, she had made their bottles and changed their diapers.

Watching Gabby worry about Jose and Nadia, who were moving from foster home to foster home, Gooden had an idea. She mentioned it to one of her sisters, Kim Davis.

"I told Kim we should keep the kids together," Gooden said Friday, "and she said, 'Yeah, girl, but I don't know about Annette.'"

Annette Dorsey was their other sister, married for a long time, no kids. She and her husband had jobs and routines and they liked to travel.

"Did I want to change my life all the way?" Dorsey said Friday, sitting with Gooden in a Hyde Park McDonald's. "No."

But she thought about how she and her sisters and brother had grown up, with a working mother and a working father, in a South Side neighborhood where families were strong and neighbors took care of each other. What if she could help give Gabby and her siblings some of that security?

OK, she said. She'd try.

Two years ago, while Nadia went to live with Davis, Jose moved in with Dorsey and her husband. They fell in love with him.

"Her husband was ecstatic about it," Gooden said.

"Just to have a son," Dorsey said.

"Her husband was very professional, rigid," Gooden said. "Now he's like mush."

All three sisters had taken foster parenting classes, and Dorsey, especially, was grateful for the education. When she felt insecure – What to do about a runny nose? When Jose didn't want to eat? – she called her sisters.

"Girl," Gooden might say, "if he wants chicken nuggets and a piece of apple every night, give it to him, until he adapts to a new family, a new set of rules."

The circumstances that brought Gabby, Jose and Nadia into foster care don't need to be made public.

What's important in this story is that they have found homes with adults who are dedicated to them and who know the value of staying close to your siblings.

The sisters send all three kids to the same private school, and Gooden bristles when people ask why spend money on a private education. "Why not?" she said. "I would do it for my kids. I'm going to treat any child I've got like my own."

A few days ago, the sisters threw a birthday party for the kids, all of whom were born in November, a year apart. "We had a disco light," said Gabby, who is 8. She and Jose, who is 6, were sitting with Dorsey and Gooden, listening, sometimes talking. "We had cake!" said Jose, slapping the table to a disco beat. "And a trampoline!"

Gabby and Jose are outgoing, friendly, polite children with photogenic smiles, but the past lingers. A few weeks ago, Gabby had a nightmare that someone had come and taken her away from home.

When Gooden asked her what she wanted for Christmas this year, she said, "I want to be adopted."

On Friday, the day before National Adoption Day, Gooden and Dorsey will complete adoption papers for Gabby and Jose, and there will be a small party, with cake, for them and a few other families at the Daley Center. (Their sister, Kim, still hopes to adopt Nadia, who's 7.)

I asked Gabby why she wanted to be adopted. She didn't hesitate.

"To feel that I'm part of a family," she said. "To feel that I'm loved."

In Illinois, there are 1,000 or so foster children waiting for permanent homes. Gooden knows that children aren't for everyone, but she has a word for those who might be good foster or adoptive parents:

"People need to know these babies are out here," she said. "They don't have to be alone on Thanksgiving and Christmas. In life."