

Rigdon family helps youth reunite with their own

Jean and Charshel Rigdon of Hartford are old timers, and not afraid to admit it. They have been foster parents for 45 years. It's a career that stretches back to an era before DCFS existed.

The Rigdons began their fostering activities in 1961 when they were affiliated with the Madison County Juvenile Probation Court. At that time, since there was no state agency to handle child welfare issues, individual counties took on this responsibility. In the early 70s, following the establishment of DCFS, the couple "transferred" their license and continued juggling the responsibilities of raising two children of their own, Charshel's full-time employment, and Jean's on-going advocacy work on behalf of DCFS youth and other foster families.

Although they are currently licensed for three children, for many years they were authorized to accept up to six placements.

"They tried to keep me full," said Jean. "It was hard sometimes to say no, but I learned."

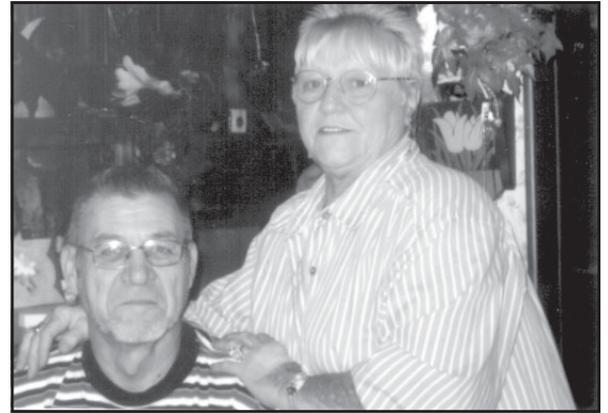
The Rigdons have always considered foster children as part of their family. Vacations and outings were group events.

"Wherever we went, they went with us," said Jean. Normalizing family life for foster youth was an important part of life at the Rigdons. The youth even accompanied Charshel on his nighttime fishing trips on the nearby Mississippi River. "They loved it," said Charshel. "Most of them had never been in a boat or caught a fish."

Though today's foster children frequently present greater challenges, Jean feels that foster parents still have the same responsibilities.

"You have to let the kids know there are people who love and care for them," she said.

One of the intangible but durable rewards of fostering for the Rigdons has been knowing they made a positive impact on the children they fostered. Most of those youth are now adults with families of their own, yet they continue to maintain contact by phone or in person. "When kids come back and say how much they appreciated our efforts it makes it all worthwhile," said Jean.



Charshel and Jean Rigdon have been foster parents for 45 years.

Patience is oftentimes the key as most children in foster care are experiencing the trauma associated with separation and loss. Difficult behaviors are to be expected, but the Rigdons have always been prepared. "You have to focus on those small positive changes," said Jean.

As the Department prepares to focus on working more with birth parents when the goal is reunification, foster parents will be asked to assume a bigger role in the process. Given their decades-long perspective, the Rigdons have certainly seen the pendulum swing. "I think it's a good thing," said Jean. "Kids need to be with their own families and if foster parents can help make that happen, then that's what we need to do."

Independent living programs help youth cook up career as chef



Larry Abraham

Two years ago Larry Abraham was 17 and faced an important decision. He had completed a long stay in a residential treatment program, and was ready to leave. He decided to have his case remain open so he could continue receiving help from DCFS, including the Department's transitional living option as well as other educational incentives. In May 2005, Larry moved to the Catholic Children's Home LIFT program, a transitional living arrangement. At LIFT, youth live in their own apartments, but are housed within a larger building. They receive supervision, counseling, and life skills instruction, but are allowed increasing amounts of freedom.

Larry graduated from Alton Sr. High in May 2006 and, after a short summer semester attending classes at a community college, made another significant career decision. "I've always liked cooking," he said.

"My grandmother was a great cook and it kind of became my passion after I moved to LIFT." Larry decided to enroll in a three-year culinary arts program at the renowned Le Cole across the Mississippi River in Clayton, Missouri. "I hope to graduate,

travel to Europe and eventually open my own restaurant," he said. A variety of DCFS educational and transitional programs are assisting Larry in his efforts. Scholarships from the Department play a significant role, but Larry has also applied for financial aid from the school as well as other sources. In addition, he has been working two jobs, one full time at McDonalds and the other part time at a department store, to save money to purchase a car, which will be necessary to attend classes.

Larry cited the Southern Region Youth Advisory Board (YAB) as instrumental in assisting him in defining his goals. He has been President of the Board for the last three years, and believes that by consistently advocating for older youth in DCFS care they have played a large part in the Department's renewed commitment to services for older youth.

"We have 16 permanent members," he said. "The most of any board in the state, even Chicago."

Although the LIFT program is designed for transitional living, CCH has recently developed a true independent living program, which allows youth to live on their own in the community with decreasing levels of financial and emotional support. Larry has been identified as one of the first youth to enter the program, and is understandably excited yet anxious.

"The best thing about LIFT is the support you receive from staff and knowing that somebody's there to help you out," he said. "I'm really going to have to work on my money management."

Bessie Peabody, Southern Region's Education Advisor, has seen Larry overcome educational deficiencies, develop more mature personal relationships, and assume a leadership role in the YAB. She is confident, as are many others, that he can meet his goals.

"Larry learns well, accepts ideas, and puts them into use," she said. "I really believe he will do well in independent living and meet his career goals."

OUR KIDS

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Anyone can call the regional reporter with foster parent association news and schedules; local training notices; features on foster families and community members working for children; photos; and ideas for news articles or supportive services that would be helpful for caregivers to know.

Southern Region Foster Parent Advisory Council wants...you

The DCFS Southern Region Foster Parent Advisory Council held its final meeting of 2006 on November 1 in Mt. Vernon. The members reviewed and approved the Council's 2007 Foster Parent Law Implementation Plan, which was then submitted for grading.

In 2006, the Council managed to deal with the changes that arose from the region's reorganization, as some staff members of the council assumed job responsibilities that were not related to foster care. However, as staff roles become more clearly defined, the opportunities to develop stronger relationships between workers and foster parents will grow.

Foster parent participation and input into the Advisory Council is vital. Ideally, every field office should have a DCFS placement worker and a foster parent representative. Region-wide meetings are held quarterly at locations throughout the Region and are connected via teleconference. Additionally, every field office is expected to host at least one Advisory council site meeting during the course of the year. Some offices meet more frequently.

Foster parent representatives are eligible for mileage and child care reimbursement when attending these meetings. All those interested in becoming a foster parent

representative or actively participating in Council activities may call Michael Bollman, Council Co-Chair in the Fairview Heights office at 618-394-2137 for more information.

The first Council meeting of 2007 will be held on January 23rd at 10:30 a.m. in the Mt. Vernon Field Office. A schedule of meetings at local sites will be developed at that time. The year's schedule will be mailed to all Southern Region foster parents. This schedule will also be available in the next Our Kids regional edition of the newsletter.

Holiday happenings spread cheer to families around the region

Continuing a long tradition, staff in the DCFS Anna Field office again solicited donations from individuals and businesses in Union County and distributed them to families and foster children throughout the area during the Christmas season. Homemakers Karen Funkhouser and Debbie Jackson spearheaded the effort.

Lutheran Social Services of Illinois organized church members, individuals from the communities they serve and Pat's Kids to provide gifts to over 300 children served by LSSI's foster care and intact family programs. In addition, on December 8, 200 LSSI foster children and families enjoyed a Christmas party at the Herrin Civic Center.

The Catholic Social Services office in Mt. Vernon held their annual Christmas party for foster parents and children on December 2nd. Foster parents received a gift and the children had their pictures taken with Santa Claus as well as receiving a bag of seasonal "goodies." This year the Walgreen Distribution Center, St. Mary's of Mt. Vernon and St. Theresa's of Salem were among local businesses and individuals who contributed gifts and monetary donations.

Scott Credit Union again sponsored a Christmas Tree Angels gift program. Staff in the Belleville, Caseyville, Collinsville, and Edwardsville facilities decorated

trees in their lobbies bearing the names of children for customers and employees to sponsor. This effort was for DCFS wards as well as children in intact families involved with the Department. Children received at least one gift from their anonymous benefactor.

The Madison County DCFS Placement Team (Alton, Wood River, and Granite City) held a Christmas Party on December 7th at the Day Spring Four Square Church in South Roxana. A total of 80 foster parents and children attended the event, which featured a potluck dinner, a gift for each foster child, and an opportunity for children to have their picture taken with Santa Claus.

Southern Region Training Calendar

Important Information!

The DCFS Office of Training is realigning the training offerings across the state. Training for the regions is now coordinated by DCFS in Springfield. This shift includes many improvements to make it easier for caregivers to register for classes, track their training credits and participate in more classroom or Internet-based offerings.

The new schedules for In-Service training classes are being developed. When classes are confirmed, schedules will be announced on this page in future issues of IL Families Now and Forever. For more information call 877-800-3393.

DCFS Lending Library offers alternatives for education credits

The DCFS Lending Library can be used as a convenient alternative for obtaining approved training credit for license renewal. Licensed foster and adoptive parents can borrow materials for a two-week period at no charge.

The Lending Library catalogue highlights a multitude of books, audio cassettes and videos for self-directed training in parenting and family life, spanning 17 categories. Following are a few titles of interest:

Winning Cooperation From your Child

by *Kenneth Wenning, Ph.D.*

This book provides strategies for parents to help a defiant child develop behavioral and emotional control when provoked, teased, or frustrated. Credit: 2 hours

Taming The Dragon In Your Child: Solutions for Breaking the Cycle of Family Anger

by *Meg Eastman*

This book discusses how to determine whether anger is a normal expression of hurt, fear, and frustration, or if it is a warning sign of a more serious cycle of family stress. Practical answers about how to stop angry tirades and teach children to express anger responsibly are provided. Credit: 4 hours

Managing the Defiant Child

by *Russell A. Barkley*

Sometimes parents need to modify their own behavior in order to change their child's behavior. The day to day struggles of three families who have children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) are followed in the video.

Credit: 30 minutes

Common Sense Discipline: Building Self-Esteem in Young Children

by *Grace Mitchell*

This book provides you with information and strategies on successfully disciplining your child. You will learn to teach children to feel better about themselves and enable them to be "happy and confident" so they may not feel the need to act out. Real life stories are used as examples. Credit: 4 hours

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To borrow these or one of the myriad titles in the Lending Library, simply fill out the order form at the back of the catalogue. Send it to the DCFS Office of Training, Station 122, 406 E. Monroe, Springfield IL 62701.

To request a catalogue, call 877-800-3393. The catalogue is also available on the DCFS web site: <http://www.state.il.us/DCFS/docs/lendinglibrary.pdf>.

Lending Library Categories

- Child Sexual Abuse
- Children with Sexually Aggressive Behaviors
- Children with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Children with Behavioral Disorders/Emotional Disturbances
- Disciplinary Strategies for Difficult Children
- Separation and Visitation
- Drug-Affected Infants and Children
- Fetal Alcohol Syndrome/Effects (FAS/FAE)
- The Medically Complex Child
- The Child With HIV/AIDS
- Promoting Educational Success Through Improved Learning Skills
- Building A Healthy Self-Esteem in Kids
- From Foster Care to Adoption
- Child Development and Parenting
- Parenting Adolescents
- Families and Diversity-Parenting with Greater Understanding
- Children With Mental Health, Language and Physical Challenges