

Media Clipping

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COVERSTORY

Hearts and homes



Becoming a foster carer is a daunting prospect, but those who have made the leap say they wouldn't change a thing. Sarah O'Connor reports on the need for more families.

Photograph by Sam Stiglec

Mary* is from Sudan. When she was five years old she was separated from her mother by a fire-bomb raid on

her village. It was a painful first step towards Australia. She came with a Sudanese family who lied and said she was their daughter and that she was eight years old. Having escaped war, Mary found new conflict, suffering abuse in her new home.

But Waverley Emergency Adolescent Care placed Mary in the care of Jody Crisp. They were together over weekends at first, but Mary is now Jody's adopted daughter, and out of danger.

There are just 279 active carers in the entire southern region of Melbourne.

At the same time, there are over 5500 Victorian children on any given day who cannot live safely at home.

It's harder to get any more specific than that. Foster parents are reluctant to be identified lest their wards suffer any further hardship. It is clear though that more carers are desperately needed, and while outsiders may balk at opening their home to an outsider, those who have done it say it's incredibly rewarding.

Jody Crisp still starts crying whenever she

Waverley Emergency Adolescent Care CEO Maureen Buck was focused on the happy ending. She said the pair was a great example of the connection that could be made between a carer and foster child.

"Mary, who came from such a difficult upbringing, has thrived under Jody's care," Ms Buck said. "We really want to get the message out that carers can make a big difference in the lives of young people."

Local couple Romaine and Peter know that firsthand.

They have looked after four-year-old James* for about two years, and he's now a permanent part of the family. The couple hope to encourage others to become foster carers.

Romaine fell into foster caring through her work with OzChild children's camps and has never looked back.

She and Peter initially fostered children needing emergency care, before making the transition to fortnightly respite and then becoming long-term carers.

"You don't have to be special," Romaine

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said. "It's just normal people opening up their house to give a child an opportunity and give a family a break."

Foster caring takes many forms. Parents can fit it in their existing lives, rather than changing life to fit fostering.

Carers can elect the kind of fostering they are able to do, how many children they can care for and what ages, and can stop at any time.

Foster Carers Association Victoria president Karen Dobby, who has been a carer for about eight years, encouraged people to just give it a go. She said there was nothing to lose.

Mrs Dobby initially talked herself out of foster caring. She feared the emotional strain of looking after a child only to hand them back to a home that might not be an ideal environment.

But she realised the help her family could offer foster children was more important than her own emotions.

"We all liked the idea of being able to do it but we were all nervous about it," she said of her husband and two daughters. "We kept talking ourselves out of it. But then we thought we're the adults, we can handle the emotion."

Mrs Dobby said those wanting to become foster carers could apply through community service organisations, such as Uniting Care and OzChild, and would then undertake thorough training.

Most children are placed in foster care through Department of Human Services court orders, but Mrs Dobby has also cared for children who were placed into foster care

voluntarily by their parents.

"Once we had a mum who called Anglicare and asked if they could help out. She was pregnant and had no family support," she said. "Another time it was a single mum who didn't have any family support and needed to go into hospital for a minor operation, so her child stayed with us for a few nights."

Peter said that with such a shortage of carers in the south-east, people should at least make the effort to discuss fostering a child.

"There are information sessions — just go along," he said. "You don't have to commit."

He also he wasn't sure about becoming a foster carer at the beginning. He worried about becoming "attached" to the child and then seeing them return home, but that became easier with time.

Now, Peter "wouldn't change a thing".

Romaine said there were support networks in place to make sure new carers had all the information they needed.

Each carer receives a case manager and 24-hour phone support.

"Once you do foster there are really good support networks in place," Romaine said.

** Names have been changed at the request of carers.*

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Foster care information sessions are being held on June 23, August 4 and September 13 at OzChild, 1536 Heatherton Road, Dandenong. RSVP to Marnie Grant on 8796 0000 or mgrant@ozchild.org.au