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Allendale's specialized foster parents are transforming kids' lives



Leyda Garcia was adopted by Andy and Janice Greenawalt, thanks to Allendale Association's specialized foster care program.

Courtesy of Lekas & Levine P.R.

Case number N4390503. That's what Leyda Garcia was known as when she entered the Illinois child welfare system at the age of 12, a victim of domestic violence, sexual abuse and neglect.

Today, having overcome depression, anxiety and an ulcer at 14, Leyda is a cum laude student at University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. She's also the newly-adopted member of Long Grove's Greenawalt family, who began fostering her through Allendale Association's specialized foster care program in 2013.

Along with Leyda's sharp mind and determined spirit, Andy and Janice Greenawalt's loving, carefully-guided support helped the young abuse survivor grow into a thriving, compassionate young adult; one with a bright future and will to help others.

"We had raised our children," Janice Greenawalt said. "But as empty-nesters, we weren't done. We felt we could support a child whose family was struggling and in crisis."

While it's difficult finding foster homes for children, period, (in Illinois, 15,000 foster kids are wards of the state), it's especially difficult to recruit families comfortable taking on children with extensive psychological and behavioral needs. That's what "specialized foster care" is.

Janice already had several years of volunteer experience with foster youth under her belt when she and Andy took the plunge. In addition to 10 DCFS-mandated training sessions, Allendale provided the Greenawalts with supportive weekly home visits, counseling and 24/7 crisis support, all key components of Allendale's specialized foster care program.

"There is a desperate need for more families who are willing and able to open their homes and hearts to children – children entering the system with more acute, complex needs," said Jason Keeler, president/CEO of Allendale Association, the Lake Villa-based not-for-profit that's been caring for children in crisis for 120 years.

Keeler knows firsthand about the joys and challenges that foster families experience. His parents fostered more than 20 children and adopted five, in addition to their three biological kids. His mother became an expert at caring for babies born addicted to cocaine; a mentor for overwhelmed, at-risk moms; and a coach for new foster parents.

"Since I was 8 years old, my understanding of 'family' was defined broadly; it wasn't limited to biology," said Keeler, a licensed clinical social worker with more than 25 years in the field.

His family experiences shaped his career path early on as he saw how his deeply traumatized foster siblings could overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Studies show that many adults think about becoming foster parents, but don't think they have what it takes. It takes about two years for a person to move from the contemplative stage to becoming a licensed foster parent (itself a 3 to 9 month process).

Foster parents can be single or married, parents or childless, have a career or stay at home. They can come from all cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. At Allendale, they do get to choose their foster child, although the staff helps ensure it's a good fit.

According to Chief Psychologist Pat Tagliano, PSYD, who manages Allendale's specialized foster care program, the public needs to know that "foster kids are resilient. Given time and a consistent forum to work through their circumstances, they can advocate and see themselves through to achieving their goals."

According to Leyda, who had eight foster placements before the Greenawalts, "The best advice I could give a foster parent would be to listen to the child, recognize their emotions and help them feel comfortable. The way the Greenawalts did that with me was through sharing our cultures."

So Leyda, who had never met a Jewish person before Janice, learned about Judaism, while teaching her foster family about her Latino culture. She cooked Puerto Rican meals for them, they attended Puerto Rican festivals, and the family eventually vacationed in Puerto Rico.

And as Leyda was completing her freshman year of college, Janice said, "We asked Leyda to consider adopting our family." She accepted.

While not all foster relationships have such a happily-ever-after conclusion, even temporary foster parents have the power to help transform a child's life.

Statistically, foster children have an uphill climb. Only 50 percent graduate high school. Only 4 percent graduate college, something Leyda -- with her 3.50 GPA and major in social work -- is determined to do. She's beating the odds, and more children can, too, with the help of more specialized foster parents.

To learn more about fostering, visit www.Allendale4Kids.org or contact Allendale Association's Specialized Foster Care Department at (847) 356-3322 or email FosterCare@allendale4kids.org.

A foster care orientation meeting for interested families is scheduled for March.