

Chatham offers foster parent training

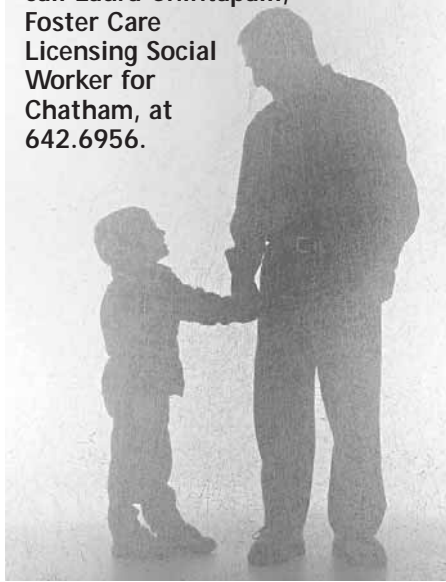
By Deborah R. Meyer

In Chatham County, there are a lot of children around us who are in need of foster homes. Jennie Kristiansen is the Foster Care Licensing Supervisor and the Adoption Services Supervisor for Chatham County Social Services. "We need foster parents who are willing to foster children of all ages as well as those who are willing to take in sibling groups. Over the past year we have had an increase of about 30 percent of kids coming into foster care. We've always had a need but now we have custody of 105 children and have only 25 foster homes," Kristiansen said.

Classes for anyone interested in becoming a foster parent start Saturday, September 20, and will continue on Saturday for 10 weeks. A list of the qualifications required to become a licensed foster home can be found at www.chathamnc.org. To speak to someone for more information, call Laura Chintapalli, Foster Care Licensing Social Worker for Chatham County, at 642.6956 or at laura.chintapalli@chathamnc.org.

The 30-hour training focuses on many different topics related to fostering and adopting. "I have people tell me often that they have learned so much about themselves and their family through the training and it was so worth being a part of it. We talk about how to help children turn the losses they have experienced in life into gains. The classes address the

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feelings and emotions children have and how to help children manage their behaviors. We also talk about how to help children form attachments and build relationships with people. Classes can really help people open up and ask questions that are making them hesitant to become foster parents. It is a great opportunity to assess how fostering will fit with their life and how the pieces go together," Chintapalli said.

She stressed that the first goal of the Department of Social Services is to make it possible for the child to return home to his or her birth family. But if the child cannot return, they need to find a forever family.

Kristiansen said that she feels fostering is one of the most rewarding and challenging things that one can

do. "Even if it is one child. You truly have an impact. Many times foster parents do not realize how they have made a difference. I have talked to kids who remember the little things that foster parents have done for them years before. You may have a child in your home who has never had dinner at a table, never had anyone teach them how to brush their teeth or clean up their room. Often they haven't had a foundation and they need someone to consistently provide them with love and stability," Kristiansen said.

In 2007, the State of North Carolina established the NC Reach program that allows for any child who is in the NC DSS foster care program on their 18th birthday or was adopted after their 12th birthday to receive financial assistance to pay for tuition, fees, room and board, supplies and transportation to NC public universities and community colleges. Chintapalli said the teens may not express their desire for parents but the desire is there. "I think every teen I've ever worked with has always wanted a family. They might be tougher shells to crack but so worth it," Chintapalli said.

Regardless of age, the goal for all children in the system is the same, to help them learn how to become healthy, productive adults. "A lot of them have come from homes where their parents were abused and neglected. We want to help them grow up to have their own children who don't have to be in foster care. Teens are

the ones who need the most help since they are the closest to crossing that threshold," Chintapalli said.

Want to help in other ways besides fostering? Give a suitcase or a whole set. Foster children need them. There is also a foster children's fund set up to take donations to pay for expenses like prom attire, yearbooks, summer camp, and school pictures, among other things. If people want to donate services, all ideas are welcome. Chintapalli and Kristiansen are working with a photographer to come in and take photos of some of the children.

Contact Kristiansen at 642.6976 or email her at jennie.kristiansen@chathamnc.org. Helping children who must be removed from their birth home can be heartbreaking but what keeps Kristiansen going is the amount of resilience children have despite the difficulties they face. "Lots of times they come with many needs because of the trauma they have experienced but it is amazing to see how they grow when given the opportunity to have consistent parenting. Working with foster families who do amazing work with kids who are tough, that keeps me going," Kristiansen said.

"Foster parents really do make a difference in children's lives. When you see that, it truly makes a great day," Chintapalli said.

Deborah R. Meyer is a Chatham writer. She can be contacted at 942.3252.

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