

PEOPLE: Foster Family Week honours those who help our children

Making a difference

NOREEN O'LEARY
CORRESPONDENT

For 20 years, Cathy and Robert Williams have opened their hearts and their home to children in need.

The local couple work as foster parents, caring every day for kids who are searching for a family to call their own.

"We wanted to help other children and help make a difference in the world," Cathy said. "We had always dreamed of having a large family, and this seemed a really great way to do it."

The Williams first pondered the idea of fostering when a friend began to encourage them to get involved.

After about three years of contemplating the idea, the couple contacted the Metro Children's Aid Society and haven't looked back since.

In their 20 years of fostering, the Williams have cared for 27 children, mostly from York Region. Currently, the Williams have five boys in their care, ranging in age from 12-17.

The couple provide long-term care for their children and have had some kids stay as long as 14 years. Some foster children have even continued to board at their house after their stay was complete.

"You stay involved as long as you're needed, and sometimes longer," Cathy said.

Cathy said one of her greatest pleasures is watching a child adjust to her family and to her home.

"You know you have made a difference because a child starts

to bond and rely on you," she said. "They stop trying to do everything themselves."

The Williams say it's important to give a foster child a sense that they have a say in things. Their foster children are given the option of referring to the couple on a first name basis or as mom and dad.

"Most usually start with Cathy and Rob, and then adopt mom and dad as they feel comfortable," she said. "It's a wonderful feeling because then you know you've definitely made it."

With three children of their own, the Williams admit the early days of fostering weren't always the easiest.

"It's hard because your own children have to start sharing their parents," said Cathy.

"The eldest could be the eldest for a week and then lose that position. You have to be really sensitive to your own children's emotions."

Now that their children have grown, however, the Williams say the kids are extremely understanding of what their parents do and why. The couple's youngest child, now 26, lives at home, and according to his parents, is very helpful.

"Quite often he's our support," said Robert. "The kids just love having him around."

The Williams continue to keep in touch with many of the children and quite often they use someone's birthday as an occasion to come together.

"That's the nice part of staying in it for a long time," she said.

The Williams say foster parents need a lot of energy and strength both physically and

emotionally. She said as foster parents, she and her husband have to remain very patient and firm, yet extremely flexible.

"There are times when you have to keep changing your ways to meet a child's needs," Cathy said. "Just because it works for one doesn't mean it's going to work for another. Each child's personality is their uniqueness."

The Williams said they love the agency involvement and contact with professionals regarding the fostering of a child.

"One of the things we really try to do is to make sure we bring everybody on board with us, so that we all work as a team," Cathy said. "We all give support to one another."

This week marks Canadian Foster Family Week, a way of recognizing families like the Williams for their tremendous efforts.

"I truly think (foster parents) are very wonderful people," said Myra Hurst of the York Region Children's Aid Society. "They perform such a wonderful task for the community and for families in York Region. But there is always a need for more foster parents, she said."

"When we remove a child from their home, we have to have a place for them to go," she said. "The society performs a strict screening process which includes home studies, orientation sessions, and police checks, before placing a child."

For more information on how to become a foster family call the society at (905) 895-2318.



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

Gathered around foster mother Cathy Williams are clockwise from left: Richard, 17; Paul, 12; Anthony, 13; James, 16; and Brad, 14.

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Labour unrest affects concert

NOREEN O'LEARY
CORRESPONDENT

This year's Stouffville Student Music Scholarship Concert is looking for a little extra support.

The concert, sponsored by St. James Presbyterian Church, is performed each year in support of Stouffville music students.

According to St. James member Gayle Atkinson, attendance will be low this year due to the lack of teacher participation in extra-curricular activities. In past years, all Stouffville area schools have participated, however this year Atkinson says there may be only three or four schools involved.

"We will be continuing even though there is labour unrest," Atkinson said.

"We're trying hard to make a bad situation better."

Atkinson said although school involvement is low, she hopes the concert will still make money for local

schools.

To date, the concerts have raised \$11,800 through the sponsorship of service clubs, local businesses, and collections taken on the nights of the concerts. The money provides scholarships, buys instruments, and equipment for Stouffville area schools.

Atkinson estimates each school's music department has received about \$3,000 from the proceeds.

This year's concert will feature individual vocalists and instrumentalists, small choral groups and bands, and small dance groups performed by students from throughout Stouffville.

Atkinson is asking for parents, friends, and music lovers to come out and support the event.

The concert will take place at 7 p.m. on Oct. 30, at Stouffville District Secondary School. Admission is free, but donations will be accepted.

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