

## Fostering Love

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When foster parent, Mechele Negovetic looked out of her window and saw her 8-year-old foster daughter dressed up in a fairy costume and running around with a baby doll, she knew the initial struggle had been worth it. The Negovetic family had made the decision to open their hearts and home to children in need and their first, Alice\*, had come in as a child who behaved like a teenager – worldly wise and unwilling or unable to play children's games. Mechele's birth daughter, also eight, had been looking forward to a sister - someone to play Barbie with and with time, effort and love Alice became that sister: "it really touched me and I knew then that it had been worth it, she had dropped back down to her real age and we could see that the girls had bonded."

That was six years ago and since that time the Negovetics have taken on the long term care of four children ranging in age from two to 14 as well as providing respite care for other children. All four children have 18-year wardships and that, says Mechele "means forever."

"We wanted to help children here in our own back yard...we had the sense that it is overlooked in Australia because we tend to think of children in third world countries as needing help but when we started to hear about what was happening around us, we just got really passionate," says Mechele.

Their philosophy with any child who comes into their home is to give them one hundred per cent commitment: "with fostering, if you know children will go back to their parents – you can block a bit of your heart to protect yourself but when we went into this we decided that we were going to give our hearts fully and if that child goes home, we may break ours but that child is secure. If they don't become yours while they are with you - they feel it. When they leave, you will be fine but they will be scarred."

She readily admits though that in those first few months, as the family dealt with the demands of ensuring that their own child felt secure, as well as making the foster child feel part of their family, that there were tears as she wondered whether she had made the right decision.

"My daughter went from being an only child to having four siblings and that is a lot to ask of anyone – to share your mum and dad, your possessions, your home: your life. She even shares her grandparents and her uncles and aunts because they have all accepted these children as our own."

All these years later though, she says her own child has blossomed into a very sensitive girl, who understands when her friends are hurting and is able to talk about issues. "It has made her a better person," says Mechele.

Also along the way a four-year-old boy with severe ADHD (described as almost beyond help), has been transformed into a polite young man who has twice won the citizenship award at primary school and a six-month-old baby, with a broken leg and broken ribs who was “floppy and lifeless” is now a talkative two-year-old, full of life and personality.

There have been many moments where Mechele thought she was in over her head but hard won wisdom has taught her that consistency and love will win out. “There are a lot of challenges and you have to know whether the child has come from neglect or abuse...either way there will be issues that you will have to deal with but you just have to look at each child individually,” she says.

“Luckily children wear their hearts on their sleeve and you can see in their eyes when they are happy. You can pick up on where their damage points are and their sensitive issues and it is just about giving them time and love. The biggest gift is to see the change in a child and to see them become good people with a future.”

Fay Alford, Director of the Foster Care Association of Australia says WA has a huge shortage of foster carers with current figures indicating a shortage of around 1000. The association is an independent body, funded by the government, who advocate for and provide support for carers. She sees it as sign of the times that increasing numbers of children are unable to go home to families where drug and alcohol abuse is an issue.

Once you become a carer, says Fay, there is a lot of support both from The Department of Child Protection, who provide social workers, placement and education officers and the Association who can assist with care plans and provide practical help through their clothing and recycled furniture store. A 19-hour mandatory training course prior to becoming registered, covers competencies involving the ability to work in the best interests of children and being able to work alongside the department. The main requirement though, says Fay is to have a big heart.

“You have to have an openness to be able to accept children for who they are and accept that you can’t change the circumstances they have come from,” she says. “A lot of the kids that we see in care bring a lot of baggage; they may have been witness to domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse and it is about being able to work through that and help the kids grow.”

Fay and her family have fostered nearly 90 children over 26 years. She has two “home grown” children and three, who came as babies, have stayed on to be a permanent part of the family. They have, says Fay brought her unimaginable joy.

She has also experienced the “utter despair” of having to give up a child nurtured virtually from birth to a beautiful three-year-old. The baby came to her as an emergency placement, premature, very sick and not expected to live. Three years later a relative came forward wanting to take the child and subsequently refused all contact with Fay. “She would be ten now,” says Fay “but she got to be ten because we put the work in. She survived because we loved her unconditionally – we adored her. This is the heart of

fostering - they ask you to love this child and then give it up. It is the biggest ask in the world.”

The first option with children who come into care says Fay is always reunification with family. She believes, however, that legislative change is needed to get permanency plans in place a lot quicker when that is not looking viable. “You can’t wait around forever for the family – there has to be a cut off for the child’s sake.”

Says Fay “fostering can be a hard thing to do. It is not a job because you don’t get paid but you do it because you have a love of children - that is the bottom line. It doesn’t matter if a child is in care for one day – they will always remember being helped out.”

\*child’s name has been changed

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