

HELEN & TOM

CARER GOOD NEWS STORY 3



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Let me tell you about my family: My name is Helen, i'm an Aboriginal woman and I was a single mother raising my four children 'til I met my partner, Tom, six years ago. He was a single father with three sons who are 29, 26 and 22. I have twin boys who are now 26, a 22-y.o. son and a 15-y-o. daughter.

Then we have our foster son, who's 6. I met him about five years ago, while I was working in residential care in Adelaide. The older kids adore him.

I can explain how I got into foster care. I have a Certificate IV in Youth Work and I was employed with the Department for Child Protection in residential care. It was Christmas time, the other children had gone out for Christmas day with family or carers, except for this 9-month-old Aboriginal baby. He had no-where to go, no-one came to see him, he was alone. It broke my heart. I went home and cried myself to sleep that night.

I told Tom about what happened and he could see how much it affected me. It was Tom who suggested that we apply to foster this little boy. We knew we could make a difference to this child by providing a stable home environment along with the cultural identity he needed to flourish. We felt in our hearts if we didn't do something for this child, no one would. The baby could slip through the cracks in the system and become lost.

I was aware of some of the challenges that we would be facing with the department such as registration, assessments and clearances. Also the challenges that an Aboriginal family faces living in regional and remote communities. We thought we might have a better chance because of my training as a youth worker, with experience in crisis care and cultural identity. With my experience I could see us overcoming some of the challenges.

As I continued to work in Adelaide I kept a special eye on this child. I knew he came into care when he was about 3-month-old. He was able to come home with me when he was about 15-months-old. I was known as 'auntie'. When he was about 2 ½ years old he was reunified with his biological mother. That didn't last long - about a week. After he was returned to us I was 'mum'. He knows he has extended family with brothers, sisters and lots of cousins.

I have an unconditional love for this child. I have always had a big heart and I always had extra kids in the house when my children were growing up and extra family that would come over as well. We always had a house full of love and laughter.

HELEN & TOM (continued)

Sometimes I'm surprised with the lack of support from the department. Our foster son has a mental health condition that makes him a high-needs child. I realised when he was about 1½ that he needed his overall health reviewed because he was not meeting his development milestones. He was not walking or saying simple words.

I felt that no one in DCP was listening when I began asking for a developmental assessment, which could identify treatments that could benefit him. He was finally diagnosed at the age of 6.

We are in love with this child and as a mother who has worked with children with special needs I want to provide the best care and education possible. Especially as he is not my child, but I have been entrusted to raise him.

I was angry that I was unable to get the referral earlier for the right care for this little boy. I know if I'd gone to the right people I could have had his diagnosis a whole lot earlier. It had been a great strain on our family, not to mention the strain on the staff at childcare and kindy, due to his behaviour. I wanted the right supports to be in place for the start of his schooling life. Three and a half years is a long time to wait in the development of a child.

I felt that I was letting him down. I didn't want his development to deteriorate any more than it had already. I'm lucky I knew who to ask and where to go to get the information we needed. Otherwise this little boy could have missed appropriate mental health intervention that was required to make a difference.

We'll have ongoing challenges, one of which is the department. Sometimes I don't feel supported; there's a lack of respect shown to me and my family. I get frustrated, along with other foster families, when our opinions on care plans aren't taken into consideration.

We are approved to take care of this little boy. We know him better than anyone else. We know his favourite colour, favourite toy, favourite shirt, friends at school. I know when he needs help. I am focused on his needs, first and foremost. I try to do the right thing for his benefit. Through my experiences with the department, I know when I need to raise my voice to get things accomplished. I am a voice for him.

Another ongoing challenge is the developmental care required. We travel to Adelaide, a six-hour round trip, every three months with a child with special needs that doesn't cope with change in routine. We see the doctor in a nearby town which is almost a two-hour round trip. There is no such thing as 'just pop in.' The closest supermarket, chemist, medical practice, or hospital is a 30 min drive away.

HELEN & TOM (continued)

Another major issue we face is respite. We have no time away because our foster son has high needs. The other Carers in our area are at capacity. We have friends and family that can help so we can have a break for a few hours here and there. We struggle to get a weekend break. Even when we have a rough day, I love him and I'm glad we have him in our lives. I love him and can't imagine our family life without him. He is family, for the rest of our lives.

He will require ongoing medical attention. When he's an adult he might not be able to live independently. We understand that our boy might not be able to leave home then to lead a 'normal' life, but we will do everything we can to support him for as long as we can. He is our son and we love him.

The children have taught me to have an open mind. This was learned in the early days when I was working as a youth worker. Empathy and unconditional love. These children just want and need love.

The children have taught me to enjoy life. Until a year ago, we had children on weekends and school holidays for respite and emergency care. Over that last year we had 15 extra kids in the house, all with their own stories, traumas and behaviours, which could be very challenging for my family. We loved it. I also enjoy going back to work for a break on Mondays.

There are several things that are special about my family, such as personal strength and the strength we have as a family unit. All the kids are different, but they come together as one. I am very proud of them.

My children are understanding, loving, open-minded, respectful, and helpful. I don't have to point out for my children the person who is struggling with their shopping bags and a child, or the person with heavy bags. My children can see a stranger in need and offer their assistance. That warms my heart.

My heritage and traditions are special to me and my family. We don't look Aboriginal but we've grown up learning and embracing our beliefs and traditions; my father is Aboriginal, my mother is English. Both sides of my family were very large. My mother's family was affected by alcoholism. My father's family was affected by the stolen generation. He was fostered into a non-Aboriginal family growing up.



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I was surrounded by a lot of love and support, which is what we give these children who come into our home and our hearts.