

## **COMMUNITY ESSAY: CHULA VISTA**

The joy and hurt of foster parenting

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**By Gloria Velarde**

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It saddened me greatly to read once again that foster children suffer from placement in substandard homes (“Difficult decisions, deficiencies – and death,” A1, Oct. 28).

I was more dismayed, however, that the Union-Tribune special report only focused on the poor quality of foster care, and not on some of the positive contributions that foster parents make to this system, with all its monumental challenges.

In order to make a difference, seven months ago my husband and I decided to do something about the very serious challenges in foster care – we became foster parents through an amazing organization, La Cuna, a foster family agency in San Diego that places Latino children (it works with newborns to age 5, and their siblings up to age 10) into quality homes. Through this agency, we were trained, guided and supported as we embarked on this journey. We now have in our home a beautiful baby who, as with the children in the article, tested positive for drugs at birth.

The impact this loving child has had in our family has been powerful. His presence has enlightened our local community and made many people aware of the impending needs of foster children. When we first received him in our home, our extended family members, friends and local community members showered him with gifts, cards and acts of immense kindness. Certainly, we were overwhelmed with all the outpouring of support. We just celebrated his first birthday, and his party brought more than 75 family members into our home.

Aside from all the positive experiences we've encountered, this journey has also been filled with obstacles and challenges for our family.

The point raised in one of the articles in the Union-Tribune report (“Wish to reunite a family can have fatal consequences”) illustrates a frustration we've encountered. Often, reunification (when a child is taken from foster care and returned to the biological mother) is sought far too quickly, with biological parents who are ill-prepared and unable to provide for the overall well-being of the child. I am glad the county has a special process for cases identified as high risk. Major decisions such as overnight visits should be accompanied by accountability for the safety of the foster child.

Many reasons may exist to explain why 80 percent of those who have been incarcerated have been in the foster care system, and perhaps rushing to reunify foster children with unfit biological parents may be one of the contributing factors.

Stronger legislation should exist in our state to provide foster parents with greater rights into the decision-making process involving our foster children. My heart goes out to those who are running Child Welfare Services without enough resources. It is incredibly painful to have such an intimate view of the effects of very limited resources on very young foster children. I understand that doing the right thing in the name of the children would require an increase in resources to the newborn-to-age-5 foster population. Let the legislators work on this.

As foster parents, negative stigmas have also been overwhelming.

On a weekly basis, I may take my foster baby to an assortment of health care appointments, medical service visits and visitations with his biological mother. And while many people are supportive of us in our new role, many are quick to roll their eyes and assume that we've become foster parents "for the money." For the record, foster parents receive reimbursement compensation for the room and board, clothing, personal needs, recreation, transportation, education and incidental supervision of the foster child. That monthly check is deposited in a special account we opened for our foster child, earmarked for his education and advancement.

The rude remarks, comments about being "paid to do this" and the constant question of "How many other foster kids do you have?" are hurtful – but they are the harsh reality of the stigma we encounter as foster parents.

I wish there were more articles that gave light to the fact that many of us become foster parents for the fulfillment of having another child in our lives whom we could nurture and provide a better life. There are foster parents who want to make a difference in our society – and we do this by taking the responsibility of fostering, nurturing and guiding a child who would otherwise be set aside in the margins of our community.

Articles should give light to the sacrifices being made, the constant love and quality of care that is provided by so many of us, and the difference we can make in the life of one child, thus impacting an entire world.

I'm an elementary school teacher, my husband is a business owner, and together we've raised two successful boys of our own – one in his third year in college and the other in high school. This experience has touched them deeply and transformed their views of the world. We now have a beautiful baby in our home, and articles such this one only heighten the negative stigma that we encounter as foster parents.

I do appreciate shining a light into the grave problems that exist; however instead of blaming, let more of us do something to help provide loving care for our most vulnerable children and stop the typically silent crisis affecting the very young who are in foster care.

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■ Velarde, a native San Diegan, grew up in the South Bay and received undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of San Diego. She has been an elementary school teacher in San Diego County since 1992. She is now working part time from home on educational issues in order to spend more quality time with her foster child and family.