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Adopting a family

Redding woman becomes caregiver to three siblings

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REDDING -- Virginia DeCristoforo ended a 30-year search, finding the brother she was separated from when they were each adopted as children.

She considers the 50 years the two of them were apart a severe loss of familial love and closeness. That is why, when she heard about three siblings in the care of the Department of Children and Families, she offered to be their respite-care provider.

It was 16 months ago she first contacted DCF about being a caregiver. By February, the three children were living in her Redding home. On Sept. 19, she officially adopted them.

"I went through training classes, a criminal background check, a financial check, and had my home inspected," DeCristoforo said. "But in all that, I didn't train for hip-hop dancing, how to beat the kids at the board game Sorry or to understand all the current words kids use. I'm getting a real education."

Nicole, 13; Tyler, 12; and Stella Rose, 8, think of Virginia as their mother. And while there have been some behavioral issues, the four have bonded as a family, something the children needed and DeCristoforo revels in.

"Raising children is always challenging," said Gary Kleeblatt, a spokesman for DCF. "Children who have been in foster care can bring an extra layer of challenge ."%."%. The department realizes that and has programs and assistance for parents adopting in this situation."

It is a challenge to find a family for sibling groups, but about eight of every 10 sibling groups that come under DCF protection are kept together, Kleeblatt said. "We want to do better than that."

DCF declined to provide details on the chain of events that led the children to DeCristoforo's home.

"You just take it a day at a time and love and things will take care of themselves," DeCristoforo said.

Her children have dreams for the future.

"I want to go to Johnson & Wales University for a year and then go to France for a year to study," said Nicole, who plans to be a chef. Tyler and Stella Rose also plan to go on to college.

They have each opened a savings account for their education.

Meanwhile, "my new school is better than my old school," Tyler said. "It's pretty sweet living here."

On Nov. 17 from 10:30 a.m. to noon, the DeCristoforos will be on WNLK radio in Westport. They have been chosen as the voice of adoption for the state of Connecticut this month, which is National Adoption Month.

They will also meet with U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, R-4th Dist., to talk about their experiences as an adoptive family.

Adoptive families in Connecticut receive subsidies of \$8,836 to \$9,814 per year, depending on the child's age. The children receive medical benefits and may qualify for DCF's post-secondary education program.

Families can also receive help for emotional or behavioral problems from the Adoption Assistance Program.

In fiscal year 2007, DCF arranged 865 subsidized guardianships and adoptions, according to agency statistics.

For more information about adoption, call 1 (888) KID-HERO.