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## Winsted woman sacrifices her time, energy nurturing children with medical issues

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WINSTED — Keondra Dillard claimed one tiny line for herself on the June calendar in her townhouse kitchen, to write "wedding anniversary 3 yrs" on the 20th. Almost every other day is filled with doctors, surgeries and other appointments for four children.

At 25, Dillard is a foster mother with a special focus. She became a foster parent at 21, the youngest age possible, and soon signed over most of her time and energy to care for children with serious medical needs. She provides a temporary home to the youngest, sickest children who might otherwise have to live in a hospital while waiting for a permanent family.

Briana, 14 months, was born weighing less than two pounds and suffers from chronic lung failure. Kevin, 21 months, goofs around like most little boys, but a neurological disorder makes his muscles rigid and difficult to use.

Caleb and Caden, 22-month-old twins, were born prematurely and struggle to eat. Caleb, who also has kidney problems, has grown because of a feeding tube but doesn't walk yet. Tiny Caden, who often spits up immediately after eating, is getting a feeding tube at the end of the month.

Aside from a few knickknacks and a Mother's Day card high on a shelf, the living room in Dillard's townhouse is children's territory. Colorful plastic toys are stored next to medical equipment that helps Briana breathe. An overstuffed chair with a stethoscope draped over the back doubles as a changing table.



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Dillard, 25, became a licensed foster parent at 21, the youngest age possible. Now she cares for, clockwise from left, Caden, Kevin, Caleb and Briana. Below, Dillard attempts to feed Caleb in her Winsted home.

"There are kids everywhere, and yeah, you've got to watch where you're stepping. But they're happy," Dillard said on a recent afternoon, as Kevin and Caden, grinning, scooted around the kitchen linoleum on a squeaky-wheeled toy fire truck.

Caleb crawled quietly on the carpet and Briana napped upstairs, hooked to a ventilator and monitors that would blare like a fire alarm if she struggled to breathe.

"These kids," Dillard said, "they don't deserve any less."

It is not typical for a foster parent to have as many children who are as young and sick as Dillard does. The Department of Children and Families' general guidelines are a maximum of three foster children in a home at once with no more than two younger than 2 or with medical needs.

But to keep the twins together, Dillard asked to take them both and was granted an exception.

A registered nurse by trade, foster parenting

has become Dillard's full-time job. She has cared for about 30 children of different ages and backgrounds, though most are very young. She receives a monthly stipend from DCF, which for a child with medical needs is about \$1,200 a month.

Many babies who come to Dillard's home were born prematurely, or to drug-addicted mothers. Some are developmentally delayed, unable to walk or feed themselves at the age a healthy child can. Others must be held close and rocked gently through the screams of withdrawal.

These are the children most people will not take, said Wendy Bonola, foster and adoptive services supervisor for the DCF office in Torrington. There are 37 foster parents in Litchfield County. Fewer than 15 volunteer to take sick children. Statewide, there are 4,100 children in the care of about 3,500 licensed foster homes, of which only 218 take children with medical needs.

Dillard's mother died when she was 12, and her grandmother raised her in Winsted. She was attending Northwestern Connecticut Community College, working toward her nursing degree, when she first became a foster mom. She said she felt a strong instinct to bring children into her home and decided on foster parenting when she was 18 or 19.

She was always very maternal and enjoyed babysitting, said her grandmother, Regina Nelson. But Nelson also believes there is more to it than that. "In one of our many long conversations we've had, she said, where would she have been if I didn't raise her and hadn't been there to take her in when her mother died?" Nelson said.

Nelson, who works as a nurse, is trained to care for each sick child so she can help in an emergency. But she told her granddaughter she would need to get her own apartment to be a foster mom.

"I'm 68 years old, I've been there, I've done that," she said. "I'm ready for some peace and quiet."



The only reason Dillard didn't get her foster license exactly on her birthday was because it fell on a Saturday and the department was closed. She went the Monday after instead.

Dillard took in her first foster children, two brothers, while living in her first apartment, a two-bedroom in Winsted. About a year later, she began dating Corey, the man she married.

"I told him very early on, 'I intend on doing this my whole life,'" Dillard said. "And he accepted it, because I wasn't going to change my mind."

Even though date night is usually takeout or renting a movie, Corey, who works as a carpenter, said he's never wished for anything else. "It was a little odd in the beginning, but I ended up getting used to it," he said. "I just deal with it. I don't sit there and think, 'Oh, I'm not going to the movies or I'm not going out.' I would keep everything the same."

Dillard started caring for healthy children who could attend daycare while she was at work. After getting married, she and Corey, 30, worked opposite shifts so someone could be home with the children. But she took leave from her job last year because the children she wanted to care for required so much attention.

Dillard believes her role is to help the children thrive and become strong. "Seeing a child who has been so sick, at death's door, growing and thriving, is just wonderful," she said.



They call her "Mommy."

Like most mothers, Dillard apologizes for a messy house, even though aside from some toys on the floor and a plastic grocery bag of diapers on the front stoop waiting to be taken to the trash, everything down to the paper towels is kept in a designated place.

Dressed simply in jeans and a navy blue t-shirt, in bare feet, Dillard is masterful at stepping over and around the children. She wears small glasses and no jewelry except her wedding ring. Her hair is cropped short in a no-fuss style.

In 10 minutes flat, she can change three diapers and put the three boys down for an afternoon nap. A quick squirt of hand sanitizer, and she wakes Briana from her nap.



The children get medications 11 times a day — at 7, 8, 8:30 and 11 a.m., and at 2, 3, 4:30, 7, 8 and 11 p.m. and at 3 a.m.

Each child has a thick, color-coded binder with his or her medical history and contact information for doctors and specialists that Dillard sends to their permanent homes.

She has stacks of photographs and always gets doubles so she can send one copy with the child and keep the other. Photographs of Briana show her as a newborn with a children's oxygen mask that covered almost her entire face.

Dillard makes everyday tasks with a house full of 1-year-olds sound easy. Shopping for groceries? One cart for the children and another for the food.

Nelson recalls folding a basket of laundry for her granddaughter once, and when Dillard thanked her, she said it would help her get to bed earlier than night. That might be the closest her granddaughter has ever gotten to showing any sign she was tired, she said.

"Her calendar — I look at it and I don't even want to read it," Nelson said. "It makes my head swim. I tell her, 'After a day with you, I have to go home and take a nap.' I am in awe of her."

For other foster parents, Dillard is a role model and all-hours adviser.

"When I get a foster child with a new medical issue, especially the drug-exposed babies, if I'm having difficulty figuring out how to soothe this particular child, often times I'll give her a call," said Bonnie Wheeler, a foster mom in Winsted. "She'll come right over and help me, even if it's something as simple as swaddling the baby tighter."

"Lots of people would be so intimidated and run in the other direction," Wheeler said. "But she's like, 'OK, let's see what we can do.'"

The Dillards are adopting Kevin and someday one more foster child. Dillard doesn't want Kevin to think that every child who comes into their home eventually leaves. She and her husband also want to have children someday.

But they will always be foster parents, Dillard said.

Children with medical needs typically stay in a foster home longer than healthy children. Kevin and Briana have been with Dillard since birth and the twins for several months, since moving from another foster home. She has had children for as briefly as 18 hours. Some children come to her for a short time simply to give other foster parents a break.

Dillard doesn't really struggle to say goodbye to her children, because it means they have found a permanent home.

"You don't see people lined up outside to adopt children with multiple medical needs," Dillard said. "The Lord doesn't let them go until he has found a place for them."

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