

# "All They Want Is A Little Love"

By Lisa Flower



Betty Ann, who over several years has been a foster mother to about 70 children under the age 5, holds one of the youngest in her arms. Photo: Contributed

**W**alk into Betty Ann's home and you immediately know this is a place that revolves around children. Betty Ann, a friendly and gregarious woman whose husband died a few short years ago, is feeding Thomas, a baby currently in her care. She lovingly feeds and burps him. Then Betty Ann lays him under one of those toys with the hanging colored objects while she explains why she is caring for babies at a time in her life when most people her age might prefer to be engaged in more leisurely activities.

"Children keep you active and young," said Betty Ann. "All they want is a little love."

Betty Ann has certainly immersed herself in caring for children in need. The children's nursery features a closet where she keeps children's clothes from size newborn to toddler. She gets donations from neighbors and buys other clothes when she finds bargains. Almost like a store, she has the clothes labeled by size and seasons so that she can easily locate them, especially when children arrive in the middle of the night. She stated that she immediately washes the children and gives them new clothing when they arrive at her home.

The neighborhood plays a big part in Betty Ann's fostering. Her direct neighbors assist her at times with daycare and donate toys and clothing. During the Holiday season the neighborhood had a Hanukkah party. They surprised her with a special "Willow Tree Grandmother" statue. The statue depicts a woman holding a baby that Betty Ann proudly displays in her curio cabinet. For Betty Ann, the gift is perfect because she has the children call her "Grandma Betty" so as not to confuse them with their own parents.

Betty Ann, who does not want her last name used for this article, is a foster parent for medically complex children in the care of the Department of Children and Families. And Betty Ann knows firsthand what it is like to face hardship as a child.

Betty Ann grew up in Maine and remembers having a difficult childhood that involved physical discipline and abandonment. She came from a large family in which she was

moved back and forth between family members for most of her life. She moved out on her own at the young age of seventeen. As a young woman, Betty Ann worked numerous jobs struggling to make ends meet. She worked in the restaurant industry as well as a taxi dispatcher. She remembers fondly how colleagues at the taxi dispatch service often helped her out when times were especially tough.

During summers in Maine, she worked with children in the local park as a counselor. Betty Ann felt rewarded by her experience and knew she wanted to continue to work with children in the future. When Betty Ann moved to Connecticut and ended up residing in Plainville, she found work at Stanley Works in New Britain where she was employed for 31 years. She got married and had one child.

Then in 2006, her life turned. Her husband, Eric became ill and died. Betty Ann no longer worked at Stanley and thought about possibly beginning a daycare business in her home. She remembers the home being empty and thinking that it would be nice to hear the "pitter patter" of little feet in her home again.

Betty Ann recalls one day thinking that instead of daycare, why not care for foster children as she had two empty bedrooms. She contacted the Department's 1-888-KID-HERO line and was licensed later in 2006. She decided that she preferred to care for children age five and under. She also agreed to be utilized as an emergency home, which entails caring for children that are removed on holidays, weekends and after-hours. "These children are so upset when they are removed under these conditions, they need a nurturing person to care for them," Betty Ann said.

Betty Ann is not just focused on the point when the children enter her home. Betty Ann is even more concerned about how they leave. She prides herself in helping children achieve permanency, whether it be through reunification, adoption or guardianship. She has made a conscious decision to not adopt herself. But she actively participates in all aspects of the children's transition to a permanent home. She has cared for more than 70 children, many of whom appear with their permanent families in photos displayed on her mantle.

One of her special memories is John, a special needs child who was placed with her for 10 months. His airway was very small and, due to problems with a prior intubation, he had great difficulty breathing. As a result, he almost died four times while in her care. John received a tracheotomy and started his rebound. Four months ago, he was successfully placed in an adoptive home. She still keeps in contact with the family and happily reports he is thriving in his new home and soon will have surgery so that he will no longer need a tube

Last month, Betty Ann was excited as she was planning a party for all of the children that were adopted and their families. She threw a cook-out with games for the families, foster care workers and neighbors. These occasions are very special for Betty Ann because she gets to see the children with their new families. She was especially happy to see John, who was strong and thriving.

Betty Ann believes that foster parent support is essential. She participates in a support group in the Department's New Britain area office. She says the group is essential to assist foster parents with the myriad of things that may emerge in their daily lives. They use the group forum to learn as well as to forge relationships. They all understand the role they play in the lives of the children and their families and build on this during the groups. Through these groups, they also negotiate for respite services when the need arises. She also attends a quarterly "Conversation with the Commissioner" where foster and adoptive parents provide input and recommendations to Commissioner Susan I. Hamilton, on important matters, including recruitment, retention, support, policies and systemic issues relating to foster care.

"My first concern is the children, and then the parents," says Betty Ann. "You hope that they can break the cycle."

Whether a child eventually can return safely home or not, Betty Ann is there to assist. Her dedication makes her not only an incredible foster parent, but a role model to others.

"I wish more seniors would get involved," Betty Ann concludes. "They should not be afraid. It is a life-changing experience".

*For information about becoming a foster or adoptive parent, please call 1-888-KID-HERO.*