

My Thoughts: Caring foster family came at just the right time

However, the number of older children and teens in need of such a life-changing experience far outstrips the ranks of parents who are willing to help.

By Kaylee Allen, Special to The Commercial Appeal

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I arrived at their front door five days before Christmas. I was 17, one of the "older" foster children that you hear about. I felt like I had nothing and no one.

And I didn't expect much from John and Beverly Berryhill, the Youth Villages foster parents who had agreed to take me in just before the holiday.

My life had been one disappointment, one rejection after another. My volatile mother asked me to leave her house when I was 14. I spent a few weeks living in homeless shelters and on the street. My dad took me in, but then he left to take a contractor job overseas. I dropped out of high school at one point and was home-schooled so I could take care of my sick stepmother while my dad was away. Eventually, I ended up in the child welfare system. There was nowhere else for me to go.

I struggled in foster care. Most people don't realize how hard it is to be a foster child. You always feel temporary. You never know how long you're going to stay in one place, in one school. Older foster children, like me, have often had to fend for themselves or parent younger siblings. Forced to grow up fast, we miss out on many of the joys other kids know.

When you're a foster child, it's easy to be angry.

So there I was on the Berryhills' doorstep. I didn't expect anything from them, and from the first day, they offered me everything.

My first surprise was discovering so many presents for me under the Christmas tree. Everyone in the family had known I was coming and had gotten me presents. There were gifts for me from grandparents, from aunts and uncles, just like for the Berryhills' other children. It was the beginning of one of the best years of my life.

I was a senior in high school, and the Berryhills made sure I had a senior year filled with great memories. It was the year of my biggest birthday party, and the year I got to drive my own car.

When I was asked to the prom, it became a major family event. The whole family went to the mall to help me pick out a prom dress. Their daughter did my hair, and helped me get fixed up for the night. It's a magical memory for me.



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I have a collage of photos that tell the story of that year. There are photos of my birthday party, the prom, graduation parties and finally my high school graduation. I was accepted to college, and the Berryhills both took off work one day to help me move into the dorm.

When I met the Berryhills, I had expected just another foster home. Instead, I found a family who cared about me -- and will always care about me.

I'm married now, but I still have my house key and a place to come home to every Christmas.

There's a desperate need for more foster parents, particularly for foster parents who will help older children and teenagers. People become foster parents for many reasons. The best are like the Berryhills; they are foster parents because they feel a deep, personal calling to help children in need.

I'm so grateful they came into my life at just the right time. They gave me so much just by treating me like their own child. I don't know if I would have become the positive young woman I am today without them.

If you feel a calling to help children, this is Foster Care Awareness Month, a perfect time to learn more about foster parenting. There are hundreds of older children, like I was, who need a little boost toward adulthood. You can do that for them.

Kaylee Allen is married to a member of the U.S. Air Force who will deploy to Afghanistan this fall. While he's away, she hopes to complete her training as an emergency medical technician.

For information about becoming a foster parent, contact Youth Villages at youthvillages.org/foster or (888) 699-8543.

The Commercial Appeal publishes "My Thoughts" columns of up to 800 words in Sunday Viewpoint. If you'd like to submit a column that tells a personal story or comments on a news topic, e-mail it to columns@commercialappeal.com. Include the writer's home address, daytime/evening telephone numbers and a few sentences of biographical information. For more information call (901) 529-2319.