



Theodorakis for NEWS

Spreading their love

Foster parents provide support to others making commitment

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It takes a special kind of person like Audrey Thompson and her husband, Farley, to care for foster kids.

Eight years ago, the couple took in a 6-year-old foster child after having four children of their own. Then they took in the foster child's five siblings as well - and now they try to find other parents who could provide a loving home, too.

The need is acute.

After a string of highly publicized deaths of children, New York desperately needs more foster families.

"There's a lot of kids that want the love," said Vanessa Guess, 50, who has been a foster mother to 7-year-old twins since they were born to a drug-addicted mother. "My father used to say, 'If you can take care of your children, you can take care of other people's children.'"

The Administration for Children's Services has 16,630 children in its care, 11,500 of them in foster homes. But hundreds of extra children have swamped the system in the month since Nixzmary Brown, 7, was brutally abused and killed, and the ACS is having a hard time matching them to ideal living situations.

"It's really child by child," said Jeanette Ruiz, the ACS' deputy commissioner for family permanency services. "It's not a question of finding foster homes. It's a question of finding foster homes that can match the children - or the groups of siblings."

The agency tries to keep children in their own neighborhoods so they can stay connected with their schools, friends and houses of worship. And when siblings are removed from their home together, the ACS tries to keep them together in a new foster home.

But some foster parents are reluctant to take in teenagers, although half the children in the ACS' care are 12 to 17. And the ACS has a hard time finding foster parents in some areas with room for several kids.

The biggest need for foster homes is in central and East Harlem, as well as parts of the South Bronx, but there are pockets of need throughout the city - from the upper West Side to southwest Queens. Potential foster parents can call the ACS' recruitment hotline at (212) 676-WISH (676-9474).

Thompson, 49, and Farley Thompson, 50, say they didn't plan on becoming such a large foster family.

"We didn't set out to get these six siblings, but it just happened - and are we blessed," Audrey Thompson said.

"You have to be committed and passionate and have a lot of energy," she said. "They will test you. They will see how far they can go. You have to earn their trust."

Audrey Thompson has helped organize a monthly support group meeting for foster parents in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. At last week's meeting, Audrey Thompson and Yolanda Hill, 33, provided a comforting shoulder as 20 foster mothers griped about city bureaucracy, revolving-door caseworkers, slow-moving Family Court judges and recalcitrant birth parents.

Despite the challenges, they said, they were devoted to the children in their care and found a special calling in giving a home to children who need one.

"It's not all been easy, but it's been worth it," Audrey Thompson said. "People want to be good. They want to do good." Originally published on February 21, 2006