



Full House

10 Loaves of bread, 10 dozen eggs and 35 loads of laundry all in one week... Life is not cheaper by the dozen for Melanie and David Stimmell who are parents to 12 children, but the rewards are priceless.

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Melanie and David Stimmell are the epitome of foster care parents. They've been in a kinship situation; they've taken in almost 50 foster children in 14 years; they've adopted a group of five brothers and are now working to adopt those boys' little sister. And they temporarily are fostering 1-year-old twins. And, did we mention they have four biological children of their own?

When the couple returned from their honeymoon 25 years ago, they immediately became guardians for their niece who was 6 at the time.

"We knew it was a calling right away when we took our niece," says Melanie. "We knew [foster children] needed a voice... and an advocate to fight for them.

We needed to be that voice."

When their niece returned to her biological mother three years later, the Stimmells wanted to experience the joy of having their own children.

"We always had a dream to have a big house full of kids, and now we do," says Melanie with a laugh.

Their oldest sons, Caleb, 22, and Jacob, 20, are in college and often take care of the younger ones when their parents need to get away. Their daughter, Elyssa, 17, has been the only sister in a house full of boys but that will soon change as the adoption for 1-year-old Gracie becomes final.

"Our youngest biological son, Elijah, is now 14 and has always had foster siblings," she said. "He was kind of born into

it because we had already started the paperwork to become licensed foster parents before I knew I was pregnant with him."

The Stimmells' own children also have a voice in whether or not the family will continue to foster. Each year, they take a family vote before they renew their foster care license. So far, it's always been a "yes." And, five years ago just before Christmas, the Stimmells' biological children voted unanimously to adopt a group of five brothers who had been in their foster care.

"Keeping them together was the greatest gift," Melanie said. "We believe, as does the State of Florida, that siblings need to be together."

In March, the family began fostering 1-year-old twins. It's that kind of openness that led to them being recognized as one of the two Best Supporting Families of the Year during the annual Central HALO (Helping and Loving Others) Awards event in late May. The Chris and Alicia Johnson family, featured in *Healthy Living's* January issue, also was recognized.

"The Stimmells are priceless to us – there is nothing that we ask of them that they are not ready to do – even taking in more children simply because the need is there," said Rosey Moreno-Jones, foster parent recruiter for Kids Central, Inc., the community-based agency that works with the Florida Department of Children and Families in the Fifth Judicial Circuit.

The greatest reward, said the Stimmells, is seeing all of their children grow into amazing people.

"I literally burst with pride with what they've all accomplished," Melanie said. "It's also a gift to see how compassionate our own children are—how aware they are of what their foster siblings have been through."

The Stimmells, who moved to Oakland from Lake County, feel blessed that they have friends and family to lift them up. She said it is important to

A GROWING VILLAGE

The village has become slightly larger since *Healthy Living* began the "It Takes a Village" series on foster care last January. Kids Central, Inc., reports there are now 197 licensed foster care homes in the Judicial Circuit as of June 15, up from 185 last December.

"We are fast closing in on 200 homes, which we have never hit before," said Rosey

Moreno-Jones, foster parent recruiter. "That will be a record for us and the Circuit."

Sixty of those homes are in Lake County, providing 132 beds. Moreno-Jones added that Lake County numbers for the first time are catching up to Marion County, which has the largest number of licensed foster care homes in the Fifth Judicial Circuit.

The need for more licensed care foster parents, however, also continues to grow throughout the state.

"Until child abuse is stamped out, we always will need loving foster homes. As one foster home opens others are closing, for good reasons, such as adopting, aging, and relocating, so the need for more homes never ends," added Nicole Pulcini-Mason, director of community affairs for Kids Central.

To learn more about becoming a licensed foster care provider, please contact Rosey Moreno-Jones at (352) 387-3424 or visit the Kids Central, Inc., website at kidscentralinc.org.

recognize other foster parents.

"I just want to thank all the foster parents out there," she said. "I think what they do and what they give needs to be applauded every day."

STIMMELLS BY THE NUMBERS

12

CHILDREN

3

SHOPPING CARTS USED PER GROCERY RUN

350

MILES DRIVEN WEEKLY FOR CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

35

LOADS OF LAUNDRY A WEEK

120

EGGS COOKED EACH WEEK

5

POUNDS - GROUND BEEF FOR ONE DINNER

2

GALLONS - MILK PER DAY

10

LOAVES OF BREAD PER WEEK

12

SEATS IN PASSENGER VAN

3

ONE-YEAR-OLDS CURRENTLY AT HOME

2

BRAVE PARENTS