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feature

FRAGILE FAMILIES:



BY BRIA BOLTON MOORE

A SNAPSHOT OF FOSTER CARE IN OKLAHOMA

While many Oklahomans in their 50s are preparing for retirement and enjoying grandchildren, Shelley and Edward Keefner spend their days changing diapers, swinging at the park and helping with homework. The Tulsa couple serves as foster parents to five young girls—ages 2, 2 ½, 4, 6 and 9.

“Foster care had never crossed my mind,” Shelley Keefner said. “I’m 55 years old, so I never would have dreamed that I’d be doing this at my age.”

But, in 2013 when the Keefners learned that Edward’s 2 ½ year-old granddaughter was removed from her home, becoming a kinship foster family was an easy decision. It wasn’t long before the Department of Human Services (DHS) asked if they would be willing to become traditional foster parents as well and care for two other pre-school-age children.

“It’s funny, because when the call came in, my husband took it, and he said, ‘Sure, bring them over,’ and I didn’t even know who he was talking to at first,” Keefner said.

Becoming a traditional foster family meant Shelley would leave her job and they would move to another home with more bedrooms, but it was another simple decision. After all, there were children who needed a safe and loving home. Fast-forward a few years, and the couple has fostered 10 children, and they are now in the process of adopting the five girls they’re currently fostering.

The children cared for by the Keefners are five of thousands of children in foster care in Oklahoma. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 10,555 children were in foster care in 2013, the highest this number has been since 2008 when 10,595 children were in care.

Oklahoma has seen foster numbers rise and fall over the last decade. From 2004 to 2007, the number of children in foster care stayed steady in the 11,000-range. “In Oklahoma prior to 2007, the framework of practice, management and leadership within Child Welfare Services could be described as regulatory and compliance based, not focused on family preservation,” according to a document released by Oklahoma DHS in January 2015 entitled “Historical perspective on events affecting the numbers of children in foster care.” The emphasis was on risk management and adherence to policies. “As a result, Oklahoma removed children

from their families at a higher rate than the national average and the state’s foster care numbers remained disproportionately high.”

Then, in 2007, Oklahoma approved new Child Welfare Practice Standards with priority on family preservation and relationship building. Oklahoma saw a shift in the number of children in foster care: 10,595 in 2008, 8,712 in 2009, and 7,857 in 2010.

Meanwhile, in 2008, the Children’s Rights Organization filed a class-action lawsuit against the state’s foster care system, and between 2005 and 2011, there were “several highly-publicized deaths of children who were known to the child welfare system.” The document shares that these events created a “foster care panic” in Oklahoma and led to a rise in the number of children placed in foster care from 2011 to 2014: 8,280 in 2011, 9,134 in 2012 and 10,555 in 2013. Foster care panic is described as “an overreaction of the entire system to renewed scrutiny and has been documented in several states where highly-publicized child deaths have occurred.”

The lawsuit was settled in 2012 and resulted in the Oklahoma Pinnacle Plan, an improvement plan for child welfare services, which includes steps to reduce the number of children in foster care and provide greater home-based services, with a focus on family preservation.

While the number of children in foster care in Oklahoma has been increasing since 2010, there’s hope for change.

“In the latter part of 2014, although the numbers fluctuated somewhat from month to month, overall the number of children exiting from care surpassed the number of children entering care, resulting in a reduced number of children in care,” said Charlotte Kendrick, LCSW, program administrator-protection & prevention with the Oklahoma DHS.

In January, Oklahoma DHS announced it will close Tulsa’s Laura Dester Shelter and Oklahoma City’s Pauline E. Mayer Shelter, which serve as temporary placement for abused and neglected children until child-welfare workers can find foster homes.

“Fewer children are coming into state custody, and more Oklahomans have stepped up to become foster parents over the past six months, which has allowed us to place more children directly with families,” said DHS Director Ed Lake in a January 30 letter to shelter staff.

The letter also said the number of children in the shelters had decreased by nearly a third from a year prior in January 2014.

“We have to adapt as the child welfare

BECOMING A FOSTER PARENT: RESOURCES

For more information on foster care, contact the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (DHS) at 866.612.2565 or visit okdhs.org. The following agencies also have information on fostering a child.

TFI Family Connections

TFI Family Connections is a private not-for-profit organization that provides services and care for children and families. It holds Foster Care Recruitment Contracts with Oklahoma DHS, and helps support families throughout the foster care approval process, during placement and care of children in their homes, and helps provide an understanding of the child welfare system.

www.tfidfamiliesconnections.org

Staff is available throughout Oklahoma, including Broken Arrow, Ada, Coalgate, Copan, Enid, Lawton, Norman, Seminole, Yukon and Stillwater.

877.931.1069

Saint Francis Community Services

Saint Francis Community Services, Inc. (SFCS) is a community-based service provider embracing the Episcopal tradition of service. Child and family-based services include foster care and adoption.

www.st-francis.org

785.825.0541 or 800.423.1342

Choices for Life

Choices for Life Foster Care program is specialized in-home treatment for children and youth with multiple psychological, social, and emotional needs who can accept and respond to relationships within a family but whose special needs require more intensive care.

www.cflfostercare.com

918.248.4340

Tulsa CASA

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) are specially trained volunteers who speak for the best interests of abused and neglected children in the court system.

www.tulsacasa.org

918.584.2272

Cherokee Nation Indian Children Welfare

Cherokee Nation is looking for caring foster and adoptive families for our Cherokee children. Applicants can come from Cherokee tribal members as well as members of all federally recognized tribes.

www.cherokee.org/Services/HumanServices/ChildrenYouthFamilyServices

918-458-6900 ext. 7726 or 800-256-0671

SAFY – Specialized Alternatives for Families and Youth

A provider of therapeutic foster care services in Oklahoma.

800.600.7239

www.safy.org

Friends of Foster Families Inc

Advocates for the support, training and advocacy for foster and adoptive families

918.609.4442

www.friendsoffosterfams.org



feature

system changes,” said Kami Collins, executive director of Tulsa Advocates for the Protection of Children, which provides services at the Laura Dester Shelter. “We’ve been able to do that because there’s always a gap. There’s always something that needs support.”

Tulsa Advocates for the Protection of Children has cared for abused and neglected children in Tulsa County for 68 years in multiple ways, including providing educational and screening support at the Laura Dester Shelter and funding the Foster Family Resource Center. The resource center is a store near 51st Street and Harvard Avenue where foster families can shop monthly for clothing, car seats, books and other child-care essentials free of charge.

“Sometimes these kids are literally dropped on your doorstep with the clothes on their back, and so the resource center has filled a huge gap in the DHS child welfare system by just being able to provide that support to foster families,” Collins said.

Shelley Keefner and her children shop at the resource center. Four of the five children she is fostering are siblings who came to live with her without any belongings.

“They were in a home that was filthy,”

Keefner said. “The inspector that pulled the kids out said, ‘You can’t imagine what this place looked like. I couldn’t even find shoes and clean clothes to put on these children.’ It was February when I got them. It was cold, and he brought me this two-and-a-half-year-old in a diaper and tee-shirt—that’s it. No shoes, no nothing. If it weren’t for the resource center, I don’t know what we’d do. That place is a godsend.”

The resource center will celebrate its five-year anniversary in July. Maura Brown, resource coordinator for Tulsa County Child Welfare Services, said the number of foster families utilizing the center has increased every year: 903 in 2011, 1,913 in 2012, 3,043 in 2013, and 3,428 in 2014. In addition to providing necessities ranging from beds to bibs, the resource center also connects foster families to complimentary tickets to the zoo, Tulsa Drillers games, and other local family-friendly events.

“It’s a thankless job,” Brown said of the foster parent role. “I’m passionate about this place, because I see it as a way to reward foster parents and make them feel valued and important.”

“It’s thankless too because you go into this thinking these kids are going to be so

appreciative of everything you do for them, and they’re not,” Collins said. “They’re just kids, and they’re hurting kids, and you are not their parent.”

Although fostering can be challenging at times, Keefner calls the experience “very rewarding.”

At the end of 2014, the Keefners were one of 824 foster families in Tulsa County, and the demand for more foster families remains.

“I can’t stress enough the need for more foster parents,” said Katelynn Burns, communications manager with the Oklahoma DHS. “We can never have too many foster parents. If that day ever came, it would be a complete miracle. I would encourage anyone who is remotely interested in foster care to check it out.”

After opening her home to 10 children, Keefner’s advice to others contemplating fostering is to “go for it if you love children, but be very patient in the beginning. One of the greatest things about fostering is the unconditional love you get from these children even though it takes a little bit to get there, because some of them are a little skittish at first. I would do it and do it and do it and do it over and over again.”

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TFI Family Connections

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