

Sandee Herrington and Steve Volaric with their kids—Isaiah, age 3½; Sondra, 6; and Gabriel, 9—alongside the vintage camper that they use for outings (and also for just hanging out).



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FULL

HOUSE

The foster-care system brought the Herrington-Volarics together; commitment and love made them a forever family.

Photographs by Ilona Szwarc



“They handed me this swaddled peanut, and that was it.”

SANDEE HERRINGTON heard her phone ring late on a sweltering September day in 2007, but she couldn't pick up. She was busy rallying her fourth-grade class for one last lesson. After the students left their Hamilton, New Jersey, school for home, Sandee looked at her phone and realized that the call was from Janet, the placement coordinator she and her husband, Steve Volaric, had been working with since signing up to be foster parents about a year before. New to fostering—and to parenting in general—the couple quickly discovered that they became deeply attached to the kids in their care, even though those kids had short stays. “We fell in love—we couldn't help it,” says Sandee.

Many kids in the foster system need only temporary care, while some need permanent homes—and that status can change. Regardless, says Steve, “these are your kids to keep safe.

It's hard to switch gears and let them go.” After a couple of experiences with short-term placements and heartbreak, Sandee and Steve, ages 34 and 36 at the time, told Janet that they would prefer to take only kids who would most likely need adoption. They wanted to build a family. So a call from Janet could mean only one thing: that their baby—the child they could keep and raise and love forever—could be on the way. Says Sandee, “My heart jumped.”

Yearning to adopt

Sandee's pull toward adoption began when she was not much older than her students are now. While other middle schoolers in her Florida hometown plastered their walls with posters of favorite

bands, Sandee tacked up news stories about a woman who had adopted kids with disabilities from Russia. When she and Steve began talking about children, “adoption was our plan A,” she says.

The idea of foster care came later. While Sandee was watching the TLC series *Adoption Stories*, an ad aired about foster kids who needed permanent homes. “We liked the idea of giving kids already here, in our neighborhood, a home,” says Steve, an acoustical consultant who works with architects on everything from hospital helipads to Broadway theaters. Says Sandee, “I called the 800 number, and in a few days an intake caseworker was sitting on our couch!”

The couple learned that, in New Jersey, about a third of kids taken into state custody are never reunited with their families, because the parents can't change course. For this reason, caseworkers do “parallel planning”—searching for a potential adoptive home where kids can stay even as work is done to reunify the birth family. If the court has to terminate parental rights, the foster family, ideally, is ready with a permanent home.

Sandee and Steve immediately started the process. Over the course of a couple of months, there were home visits, during which various people would pop in. “A licenser came to make sure that our paperwork was in order. Someone else pulled out a tape measure,” says Sandee. “They also checked to make sure the house was safe and made us put locks on the basement and attic. They even checked that our pets were up on their vaccinations.” (Sandee has been fostering dogs since college, and she and Steve have taken care of at least a dozen over the years; their forever pets are Beauregard the Boston terrier, Hugo

the American bulldog, and Harry, a Jack Russell mix.) There were background checks and employment verifications and fingerprinting. Still, it was all easier than Sandee had expected: “For the first few visits, we dressed conservatively and made sure the house was perfect. But, honestly, you don't have to be June Cleaver. They just care that you can provide a warm space where kids will be safe.”

The couple were encouraged to discuss and convey exactly what type of situation would be right for them. Many caseworkers say honesty is what makes for the most successful relationships. Sandee and Steve asked for a child under five, any race or gender; but they knew that with two full-time jobs they wouldn't be able to meet the needs of kids with a serious disability, so they were frank about that.

Welcome, Gabriel

On that September 2007 day when Sandee hit play on her voice mail, the message from Janet described a 10-month-old baby boy called Gabriel. Sandee melted when she heard his name. “That's what makes it real,” she says. “It's like, ‘Gabriel, *hmmmm*, that's my kid.’” The message included certain important information: The mother was on trial and would be unable to raise him; there were no relatives to take him in; and the current foster parent was not interested in adoption. Sandee

and Steve had three weeks to prep. They bought a soft rug for what would be his room. (Gabriel was already crawling.) They hung funky curtains and spelled out G-A-B-E in fabric letters on the wall. The foster system is not cut-and-dried, though, so the couple's excitement was mitigated by fear. “We were just plain scared we'd lose him,” says Sandee. Biological family comes first, so if the mom's situation changed unexpectedly or placement with a relative became viable, that could alter things. Being a foster parent calls for “leaving your preconceived notions at the door,” says Sandee. “It's all about doing what's best at that time for the child.”

When baby Gabriel arrived at the house, the couple's fear was overwhelmed by love. “The caseworker handed me this adorable boy with startling blue eyes,” says Sandee. Then she set down a few bags of clothes, a bin of toys, and a letter from the previous foster mom detailing his schedule and food preferences—and soon left. “It was surreal. We were like, ‘Where are you going?’” says Sandee. The official adoption took time, but Gabe was theirs from that moment on.

Welcome, Sondra

As the family settled in, the caseworker would call with short-term foster placements, which Sandee and Steve declined. But when Gabe was three, they were called about a baby girl who needed a permanent home right away. They said yes.

On a chilly spring day, Steve met a caseworker at the front gate of the family's home. She passed him a carrier with five-week-old Sondra bundled inside. He brought his new daughter into the warm house, where Sandee and Gabe were waiting. "We were just bowled over," recalls Sandee. "From the time she was tiny, her smile was infectious."

The Herrington-Volarics fell into a happily hectic routine. Sandee and Steve took as much time off as they could. And they worked hard to secure day-care and preschool spots. Both Gabe and Sondra learned to walk on the Persian rug that Sandee had scored on eBay. Sandee and Steve relished everyday moments—"giving the kids their baths, reading to them at bedtime, tucking them in," says Sandee—and built a swing set in the yard. "We were just so happy to be a family," says Steve. With two little kids, three old dogs, and a couple of demanding jobs, it was time to close their doors for a while.

Welcome, Isaiah

When Gabe was 6 and Sondra 2½, the phone rang again. As with the life-altering call heralding Gabriel's arrival five years before, Sandee couldn't pick up. This time, though, the situation didn't wait. "I hear over the loudspeaker at school, 'Ms. Herrington, please call your husband when you've finished your meeting,'" says Sandee. "The social worker had called Steve to say that Sondra's biological mother had just had another baby," a little brother to Sondra. "His name is Isaiah, he's two days old, and did we want him?" Steve and Sandee understood the importance of keep-

ing siblings together, but that's not the only thing that swayed them. "I was thinking, He's a little Sondra!" says Steve. "No way could we say no to that." It was like an unexpected pregnancy, a happy surprise to embrace.

With only hours to prepare, Sandee reached out for help. "We had just given away the baby stuff six weeks earlier," she says. She phoned her friends and their friends, and magic happened. "It was like, 'Wonder-team, activate!'" she says. The house filled with stacks of onesies and fleece pajamas, tiny pants and sweaters, little socks, and bottles and pacifiers. Three hours after hearing her name on the intercom, Sandee was heading home from the hospital with an infant: "They handed me this swaddled peanut,

and that was it." Before long, their little one, Isaiah, earned a nickname that has pretty much replaced his given name at home. "I was watching a Chicago Bears game and realized the coach, Lovie Smith, looked like Isaiah," says Steve. "I was like, Lovie...Lovie," nodding first to the TV, then to his son. "He's so sweet. It suits him."



Love is all you need

Sondra, now six and remarkably self-possessed, joins her parents at the dining-room table and begins leafing through her "Life" book. As she points out half-siblings, aunts, uncles, and her tiniest self, it's clear that she has perused these pages many times. "See, she's tall, like me," says Sondra of her birth mom. Each Herrington-Volaric kid has at least one book documenting his or her earliest days. All are well versed in their pasts and presents, and they have even met some biological relatives.

For anyone on the outside looking in, it's that history that can cause concern. Sandee speaks frankly, addressing the hesitations of some regarding the foster system: "The worry is that you will get a terribly damaged kid." And of course many foster kids will have suffered neglect, abuse, or exposure to drugs. Sandee and Steve were told that both Sondra and Lovie were exposed to drugs. "We were warned to watch for seizures in the early days," says Sandee. "But we've had no problems. These two are

BUT WAIT—THERE'S MORE...

Sandee and Steve recently learned that two older siblings of Isaiah and Sondra who had been placed with their father now need a home. The family has set up a crowdfunding site to get their place up to code so that they can be that home. To learn more or donate, visit gofundme.com/makingspace. If you want to learn about becoming a foster parent, visit childwelfare.gov or adoptUSkids.org.

whip smart and have so much joie de vivre. Studies I've read show that drug exposure isn't causing the kind of long-term delays expected."

Gabe has learning challenges, but they have nothing to do with drugs; he was eventually diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum.

It helps that Sandee is a teacher certified in working with children who have learning differences. "We know how to help him," she says. "That's a powerful thing we can give our son."

For Sandee and Steve, being able to offer that sort of guidance, structure, and support to kids who might not otherwise have gotten it is the whole point. "It's not about money or classes or piano lessons," says Sandee, who grew up in a family without much money but recalls her childhood as idyllic.

Joy and silliness abound at the Herrington-Volaric home, as evidenced by the parties that the family threw when each adoption was finally (finally!) official. It was two years, 10 months, and one day for Gabe (not that anyone was counting). Sandee describes the celebration: "Back then, Gabe [3½ at the time] loved everything purple, pink, and sparkly, so we had a princess party. He wore a purple tutu with an AC/DC T-shirt." Sondra's party happened on a warm April day in 2011; nearly a hundred friends and family members came. "Sondra loved to throw herself on top of her big brother and pin him," says Sandee, "so we called her our Luchadora," which inspired a Mexican-wrestler theme (mariachi music, hot-chocolate cupcakes). When it was Lovie's turn, Sandee and Steve chose clowns and acrobats and a bouncy castle. "We really were a three-ring circus by then," says Sandee, who sports a circus tattoo that pays tribute to the happy chaos of their life. "We decided to lean into it." ■