



On any given day in Wisconsin, 8,000 children are in need of foster care. What does it take for them find a safe home? A legion of local families willing to open their doors and institutional support to guide them to the new beginning they so desperately need

By Emily Leas
Photographed by Tyler Robbins



Walking up to the home of JoMay and Rick Lacrosse in Oxford, Wis., there are few signs that four teenage boys live here. Even though it's a rainy Sunday, one would expect the sights and sounds of a home overrun with teenage testosterone—a driveway filled with cars and bikes, windows releasing the sound of reverberating bass, or perhaps video games roaring with explosions.

Instead, the Lacrosse home is quiet. Clean. Organized. Only the ping-pong table on the screened porch hints that someone other than a middle-aged couple resides here. And as this couple opens the door and settles in to tell their story of foster parenting, it becomes clear that this environment was created through countless hours of education, tears, arguments and hugs. Because after fostering 15 teenage boys over the last four years, Rick and JoMay have learned a few things.

"It's like running a business out of your home," JoMay says as Rick chuckles.

"And in the end you hope you are producing a good product," he finishes for her.

Running this business takes a daily team effort. Rick works full-time in Madison and JoMay shuttles the three foster kids



currently living with them to the usual extracurriculars: after-school activities, jobs, youth group. Mix in therapy appointments, doctor appointments, home visits with biological families, and visits from case managers, and it's no wonder Rick comments that JoMay works harder today than she ever has.

It's a labor of love, JoMay admits. But getting to this point, she adds, has been a long time coming.

"I moved to Oxford when I was 18, and next door was a family doing foster care," she says. Inspired and intrigued, she held onto her interest in foster care even though her first husband wasn't keen on the idea. Fast forward to years later, after having children of her own and going through a divorce, she met Rick.

"When Rick and I started dating, we talked about our dream jobs, what we wanted to do with the rest of our lives, and I told him I've always wanted to do foster care," she adds.

When they married in 2008, the couple suddenly had seven children between them, most of whom had already left home. Rick's youngest son, a senior in high school, lives with them in Oxford, the last of their blended brood at home.

JoMay admits she wasn't ready to take the plunge into the world of empty-nesters. So when most people start thinking about downsizing as the kids move out



into the world, JoMay and Rick began the journey toward becoming licensed foster parents.

Ask them why, and both JoMay and Rick have simple answers.

"We're both big believers in giving back," says Rick, who volunteered with the local EMS, fire department and as the deputy coroner before scaling back to have more time at home.

"And because it makes me appreciate my own childhood so much more," JoMay says tenderly. "I want to show these kids that there can be a better life out there."

The Lacrosses began exploring foster parenting in 2007. The neighbors that introduced JoMay to the life of a foster family had worked with Community Care Resources (CCR), a private agency based in Middleton that licenses foster homes around the state. JoMay and Rick contacted CCR and quickly discovered that making the decision to open their home was just the first step.

On any given day in Wisconsin, there are 8,000 children in foster care, according to the Department of Children and Families. Each of these children are placed into one of 5,100 licensed foster homes through a county agency, like the Department of Human Services in Dane County, or a private agency, like CCR.

The parents who take them in are as varied as the children themselves. Young, old, single, married, full-time workers and stay-at-home parents. Requirements on age and home situation vary by agency, but all require one thing from those who apply: a willingness to open doors, hearts and minds.

“Most of our families are experienced [parents who] have launched four or five kids of their own,” explains Renee Wilberg, clinical supervisor with CCR, whose agency mandates parents be at least 25 years old with one stay-at-home parent.

But no matter how much experience a

family has in child-rearing, training is still required. Beyond the paperwork, background checks and personal references, CCR’s initial two-year licensing certification requires 40 hours of training before placing a child in the home.

As the foster care coordinator who licenses homes for the Dane County Department of Human Services, Dawn Douglas sees the challenges in securing foster care providers every day.

“In Dane County, there are 223 kids in foster care,” she explains. “Right now we have 187 foster homes licensed through DHS, but it’s never enough.”

Even with the constant demand for licensed foster families, Douglas’ office still sets the bar high.

“It’s not a slam dunk that you’ll become licensed. As part of the pre-screening, we assess the parents’ mental and physical health, and make sure that economically they can support themselves without the foster care payments,” she explains. What they hope to find, she says, is something many of the children have been lacking in their lives.

“Overall, we’re looking for stability,” Douglas says.

Three months passed between the time the Lacrosses received their license in November 2007 and when they had a foster child placed in their home. In February 2008, when a 15-year old boy from Southeast Wisconsin made the trip to Oxford with the Lacrosses, their first foray into foster care began.

“He had long hair, and during the car ride home he would lean his head forward so his hair covered his face anytime we would talk to him,” Rick recalls.

“I kept telling him that I like to see people’s eyes when I talk to them,” JoMay continues. “By the end of the day he had his hair pushed back.”

“He was a good kid,” Rick says, looking at JoMay, remembering that first experience.

Since then, the Lacrosses have only fostered teenage boys.

“We almost can’t have enough families because the needs of the kids are so diverse.”

Renee Wilberg



“Once there’s a teenage boy in the house, it’s a better fit to have other teenage boys,” explains JoMay. After raising five boys of their own between them, they have the know-how to navigate the basics of life for young men.

As the stories begin to pour out, JoMay and Rick become more animated. There was the artist they tried to encourage by letting him draw on the walls.

“We didn’t do that again,” laughs Rick. They quickly discovered his talent for cutting hair and redirected his ambition into what became an in-home barbershop.

Then there are the numerous times boys would sneak out the second-story window to roam the streets, only to realize that the nightlife in Oxford, a town of 607 people, is much different than in a place like Milwaukee.

Through all of the challenges, the triumphs shine through.

“We had a boy that came to us from a gang-infested area,” Rick remembers. “He came home from his first day of school here and said it felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He didn’t have to look over his shoulder, didn’t have to worry anymore.”

Physical and mental abuse, neglect, financial trouble and special medical needs are just the beginning of the list of reasons children enter foster care. For those like the Lacrosses, who are tasked with creating a support network for these kids, it’s an eye-opening experience every time a child joins their family.

“Their thinking and understanding of normal is much different than our understanding of normal,” says JoMay. “They didn’t get to be a kid. They are angry but they don’t have the tools to work past that anger.”

As foster parents, the Lacrosses need their own tools to handle children who come to them with exteriors as hard as granite masking fragile personalities. Beyond licensing foster homes and placing children in them, that’s where organizations like CCR and DHS play a vital role.

Inside the toolbox the Lacrosses receive from CCR is a plan for each child based on trauma-informed care, which teaches foster parents and case managers how to see life through the eyes of each child they care for. This platform, implemented by CCR in 2010, is also used by DHS in Dane County.

Paulette Wijas, also a clinical supervisor at CCR, explains the process of employing this method from day one.

“Every child, every foster parent and every case manager receive a trauma-informed care plan,” she says. “We’re trying to understand how they got to where they are. How can we help them function better?”

Wilberg adds that the first step before placement is conducting a trauma assessment. “This helps us determine what [the child] views as traumatic in their background,” she explains.

CCR is starting to see the rewards of implementing this program. Wilberg notes that case managers say they get fewer crisis calls, and foster parents comment on how much calmer it is in their homes.

Douglas’ team at the county level uses this same platform, offering training to parents in these techniques throughout the year.

“As an off-shoot of the training, we have a monthly support group run by foster parents,” she explains. “DHS supplies the meeting space and snacks, and the rest is done by the foster parents. It’s very beneficial as a way for them to network and share what’s working and what’s not.”

The Lacrosses take advantage of as much training and networking as they can



squeeze into their schedules. One of the biggest lessons JoMay learned from both the formal training and the training that happens in her everyday life, has been to re-examine the parenting techniques she used with her own kids.

“With my own kids, I had a base. I raised them from age zero,” she explains.

“And my own kids know what certain looks mean, and sometimes those looks mean, ‘don’t even think about it,’” Rick says.

With their foster kids, the couple agrees on the greatest challenge: the lack of time. Most often providing a short-term home for kids, a foster parent has a small period of time to get to know a child’s behaviors, moods, and not if they’re going to push the boundaries, but when and how far.

“I feel like in the last year it’s started clicking,” says JoMay with a smile. “I’ve learned not to react. Sit down, breathe, count to 10. It truly does work. It allows me to be calm and address the situation instead of escalating it.”

CCR’s Wilberg and Wijas make it clear that these challenges aren’t meant to be faced alone.

“We want to make sure parents know that they will get the training, education and support they need,” says Wijas. With CCR, that means a network that includes on-staff child psychologists, case managers and trainers who help keep a foster parent’s tools up-to-date.

At Dane County’s DHS, Douglas’ role is to act as the bridge between a child’s case manager, the foster family, birth family, legal system, BadgerCare and the host of other agencies providing support.

“In some families, there are four foster children, which could mean four different case managers and four different birth families,” she explains. “I serve as that bridge to help [the foster parents] navigate this network.”

The support is there to guide, but both agencies agree that foster parents not only need to be compassionate and loving, but also invested, patient and willing to be educated.

Another resounding theme with both public and private agencies? “We always need more licensed homes,” says Wilberg as Wijas nods emphatically in agreement.

“As unique as every youth is, we need families that are [just] as unique to meet the needs of those particular youth,” Wilberg explains. “We almost can’t have enough

The Statistics

The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) collects case-level information nationwide on all children in foster care for whom state child welfare agencies, like the Department of Children and Families in Wisconsin, have responsibility for placement. The numbers below are from fiscal year 2010.

9.4

The average age of children in foster care

25.3

The average number of months children spend in foster care

51

The percentage of foster children who were reunified with parent(s) or primary caretaker(s) upon exiting foster care

254,375

The number of children in the U.S. who entered foster care in 2010

See the full report at acf.hhs.gov

families because the needs of the kids are so diverse.”

Douglas has noticed a shift in the length of time parents stay licensed, which keeps the demand for new foster homes high.

“There used to be more homes licensed for many years,” she says. “Now a couple of years is more common. A family may adopt a child, move, change jobs or just need to take a break.”

Four years in, and the Lacrosses aren’t sure they will ever get tired of fostering. JoMay admits there are days when she feels like she’s split in a million pieces trying to address the diverse needs of every person in her home, but she recalls a lesson she learned that helps her through every day.

“I was at a class two years ago and was venting about how frustrated I was that nothing I was doing was getting through to the kids,” she says. “The teacher reminded me that it’s not my job to fix everything right now. She said we’re planting seeds.”

Rick emphasizes that if you’re looking for instant gratification, this isn’t the role for you.

“Sometimes, months after the kids return home, we’ll get phone calls thanking us for everything or apologizing for giving us such a hard time,” he says.

It’s in those times that JoMay and Rick know they’ve done something right. The seeds they planted are taking root, and a new chance at life is sprouting.



Interested in Learning More?

Visit these local resources

Community Care Resources

View stories from current foster parents and get more info on the support CCR provides. communitycareresources.com

Dane County Department of Human Services

Find dates for informational meetings and applications to begin the pre-screening process. danecountyhumanservices.org

Department of Children and Families

Visit DCF to find contact information for the foster care coordinator in your county. dcf.wisconsin.gov

Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center (FCARC)

Find information on myths and misconceptions of foster care, as well as general information on becoming a foster parent. wifostercareandadoption.org