

## Honoring Those Who Serve Resource Parent Interview

Few things in our lives can provide as much meaning as being a resource parent. No other job allows you to parent kids who often have no one else. Nothing else gives the opportunity to help a family by keeping their child safe until the parents get things together. Often, the community does not give enough appreciation to resource parents for their valiant efforts, and it may seem to some that the challenges outweigh the benefits. But actually, for those that know, resource parenting is worth it all because of its foundation on beautiful relationships of reciprocity between kids and resource parents. Relationships where kids and parents help each other, when resource parents challenge themselves to meet the needs of the child, and the wondrous nature of children—their resilience and ability to overcome all obstacles—provides more than enough reason to carry on with the efforts that resource parents make every day.

DCFS is grateful to have many outstanding resource parents. Three of our parents are featured in this article. Resource parents Gloria Riley, Gwen McWilliams, and Nicole Doyle perceive the many challenges and rewards they experience as resource parents as learning experiences that have helped them become who they are today.

Gloria Riley has been a resource parent for 18 years, has had approximately 40 children in foster care in her home at different times, and she is the legal guardian to two teenagers who first came to her home as foster youth. Mrs. Riley is proud of her teenagers' accomplishments and recognizes how their strength and resilience has helped them survive their experiences, be on target to graduate high school, all the while being good kids who are into the usual teenage stuff.

Darius, age 17, and Queenstone, age 16, both came to her home as young children. Along the way, her kids have had their own difficulties at times. One of her sons required intensive treatment, and she sought the help he needed and did not give up on him during challenging times. Her unwavering commitment to her child demonstrates the beauty that is her outlook on resource parenting, which is also part of the advice she gives to other resource parents: "Try not to take the kid's behavior personally, get support, [and] don't try to do it alone." Much of Gloria's own strength and resiliency comes from her faith in God and prayer, and she realizes that there is nothing wrong—it is a strength, actually—to seek help from others in order to be the best resource parent possible.

Children should be, whenever possible, with their parents and families. Mrs. Riley has strived to work hard with parents in order to help them during the reunification process. She remembers a child whose father was working hard towards reunification but was struggling to make a connection with the Child Welfare Worker, and Gloria helped the process. The child eventually reunified with the father, and the father occasionally contacts Gloria to this day. Such successes happen largely because of Mrs. Riley's outlook on resource parenting. To her, it means resource parents are involved "in the child's life by caring about them, staying connected with each other, connecting with resources to get support, and receiving training."

Gloria Riley first became interested in becoming a foster parent after learning of the lack of African American foster families. She was concerned and motivated by this to become involved in order to help kids in need. Nowadays, in addition to parenting, she is a PRIDE trainer, speaks at Resource Parent Orientations, and works at the community organization Family Paths as a Community Advocate. She often counsels foster parents about being a foster parent, what they should expect from the system, and on the need for permanency for children.

Nicole Doyle and her husband, Kevin, knew a few years ago that they were interested in becoming foster parents and possibly adoptive parents. Nicole remembers the PRIDE training as a great experience. After they were certified, the first call from DCFS was for Joey. Nicole recalls that placement did not occur at that time, because the county had decided not to move Joey. However, she remembers believing that wasn't the end of her family's involvement with Joey, and after a few weeks went by the county called again. After the Team Decision Making meeting and pre-placement visits, Joey moved in. The adoption was later finalized, and she and her husband continue to work "really, really hard every day about being the best parents" they can to him.

Mrs. Doyle remembers relying on expert advice and support from Gwen McWilliams, Joey's former resource parent, after Joey came to live in their home. She, too, recognizes how all resource parents cannot do it without support. The Doyle's are a team, and they strive to work together to resolve problems and continually "pause, shift, and regroup" to adjust to Joey's ever changing needs as he grows, and Nicole recognizes that outside support—be it other resource parents or community organizations—is essential to ensuring that resource parents are able to meet the needs of the children they are caring for.

Mrs. Doyle recommends that resource parents be patient ("because things don't go as planned"), and she believes that communication with other resource parents and the Child Welfare Worker is invaluable. Nicole believes that resource parents should not "stay quiet about things," because if you "talk about it, you will find a path." She perceives the system to be dynamic, and solutions for what kids need can be found if parents are willing to open up and talk about their problems with others.

Gwen McWilliams became a foster parent about 18 years ago, and along with her husband Robin, they have fostered 57 children, adopted two with plans for a third adopted child, and have three biological children. Mrs. McWilliams is a wealth of knowledge on what it takes to be a great resource parent and how to help kids who come from troubled experiences. Not only is she a full-time mom, but she also works as a Family Advocate with Lincoln Child Center and as a support resource for caregivers through a program called Project Permanence, which seeks to provide services to keep children in permanent homes rather than institutional care. In addition, she is the CARI president, a PRIDE trainer, Vice President of the Foster Parent Association, and also sits on an advisory board for Children's Hospital and Research Center Oakland.

Through it all Gwen and her husband, a “dad of all dads” who encourages his kids to pursue education, realize what resource parents need to do in order to be in the position to care for kids the best they can. She emphasizes that everyone should be open with each other and up front about the challenges associated with resource parenting. “If you are going to go into this work, be open to the challenges. Be forthright, [and] make sure that you go into it for all the right reasons.” To Gwen, this means “being non-judgmental” and realizing that a resource parent’s role is to “strengthen other families, and to support their needs, to help parents to get their children back,” or to help kids get into permanent homes if reunification is not possible. Being adopted herself as a child, she knows first hand what it means for children to benefit from a loving adoptive parent. She had a wonderful relationship with her adoptive mother, who passed away six years ago.

Gwen has been so profoundly affected by her kids that she “can’t imagine her life without them.” She recognizes how her kids “have helped her to be who she is” and they have done so with their “energy and their zest for life,” and their “wanting to explore, to be.” She speaks with pride about her son Demetrius, who took the initiative to enroll himself in a mentoring program that provides groceries to needing families.

Mrs. Riley, Mr. and Mrs. Doyle, and Mr. and Mrs. McWilliams may seem to stand out from others. But they also are—just like many other resource parents—people who know what it takes to raise healthy kids. They realize the importance of receiving training and for getting the support they and the youth need. They also all cherish the gift each youth has brought to their lives. “The kids have been so much joy, because they have helped me be a better person,” says Mrs. Riley. And Mrs. Doyle describes their three year old, Joey, as “the best part of everyday for us.” But of course, when your child says “daddy” for the first time on Father’s Day, as Joey did to his dad Kevin, it is hard to resist the charm.