

## Shannon and Ross story

When Shannon Smith and Ross Stencil first started dating, Ross was certain he'd like to have children. But it's not the kind of thing you bring up on a first date – and besides, as gay men, they had both grown up thinking that wasn't a possibility for them. "I'm very pragmatic," said Shannon. "I was living in the reality of the fact that being gay, we'd never be able to get married or have children."

But of course, they did marry after same-sex marriage became legal in Connecticut in 2008. Living a country life in Morris, with a dog, chickens, and 4 cats, they started seriously discussing parenthood. Once Ross came across some information online about fostering and adopting, the couple had taken the first step on a journey that would lead them to Louis and Giovanni, who have transformed their lives.



They contacted the Department of Children and Families, where "everyone just treated us like parents," said Ross. They went through the rigorous training and screening required for foster and adoptive parents, had a home study, answered many probing questions, and were finally licensed as foster parents. Both men still get emotional when they talk about the day five years ago that they received a text from a DCF social worker telling them they had been selected to parent two little boys, brothers who were 5 and 3.

After the text, they prepared a bedroom for the arrival of two little boys, filling bookshelves, buying stuffed animals, receiving practical gifts like bedlinens from friends.

"We had seen a picture of them – they were as cute as can be," said Shannon. And when Louis and Giovanni arrived for their first weekend visit, "They made it easy," said Ross.

The boys came to Ross and Shannon's home at the end of one school year and the beginning of summer. Ross became a stay-at-home dad, which he loves, and Louis and Giovanni started a new school in the fall.

His dads describe Louis as observant, very loving and stubborn. He's a diligent student and plays the trumpet. Giovanni is the class clown and a social butterfly, happy and buoyant. He is the one most likely to come back from playing covered in dirt. Both boys are involved in Scouting, which has been an important part of Eagle Scout Shannon's life.

In July of the following year, Shannon and Ross legally adopted Louis and Giovanni. "We all wore matching ties, and our church family was there with us in court," said Shannon.

"When you foster and adopt, you learn more about love," said Ross. "You have this love with your spouse, and then when you bring a child into your family, you have a new and different kind of love."

"What it is is having a life with another human being who adores you and fights with you and helps you be the best person you can be, while you try to help them be the best person they can be," added Shannon. "We can't remember what our lives were like without them."

**If you are interested in fostering or adopting, please call – 1-888-KID-HERO**