

A Familiar Face, A Familiar Place



Kinship provider Victoria and her son.

Most adults could not imagine becoming an instant parent to six children but that is exactly what happened to Victoria when she received a call from DCF informing her that her five nieces and nephews, ranging in age from one to sixteen years old, were in need of a kinship placement. Before getting that call, it was just her and her nine-year-old son in the house.

While she admits she went through a range of emotions holding that phone, she ultimately said she did not hesitate to open her home to her young relatives.

"It's just me and my son. When I got the call I was a little shocked. I went through a lot of emotions."

It was sudden. She asked when they were thinking about bringing the children to her house.

"They said TODAY. And I was like okay I have to go and get ready for five kids to come into my home so I'll see you later," Victoria laughed.

Research supports the idea that kinship care—where children are placed with relatives or close family friends—often leads to better outcomes compared to traditional foster care placements with non-relatives.

"They basically asked, 'would you be willing to take your five nieces and nephews...some of them...all of them...whatever you're able to do?' I said yes, I'll take all of them because we're not splitting them up."



The cousins out and about.

Better outcomes are achieved through kinship due to factors such as increased stability, fewer disruptions in their education and social lives, minimizing trauma because of those existing relationships, and an increase in likelihood that children will achieve permanency.

Victoria had a relationship with the two older children. She did not know the three littles - a two-year-old and a set of one-year-old twins.

"I felt like that was going to be the harder adjustment with the little ones. The older ones knew me already and knew what to expect."



"The Littles" playing in the yard.

Victoria explained why she did not hesitate when she got that call and why she was adamant that the children not be split up amongst other non-kinship foster homes.

"In life, all you really have through everything are your siblings. It was important that they stayed together and see that, no matter what challenges come along, we're together and we're going to do it as a family. No ifs, ands or buts."

When they first came to her home, Victoria said that the older kids would put each other down and she made it her mission to reshape their understanding of sibling relationships by improving the way the boys - her son and his two older cousins - communicated and

supported each other. By shifting their usual patterns of interaction, she wanted to build a more positive and beneficial environment for everyone.

"They would take their anger out on each other. They would fight a lot."

It got to a point where Victoria had to tell them, "We don't do that. You guys are supposed to build each other up and support each other."

Victoria said, because of that, she was going to work with them to change the narrative. That was one of the hardest parts of adjusting to the new dynamic in the home.

"The older boys came in set in their ways. It was a huge challenge trying to shift their mindset on how to be versus how they're used to being."

Another major adjustment? Victoria said, although she had experience caring for her own son as an infant, it was different for the younger children because of their age and unfamiliarity with her as their caretaker.

"With the littles, the hardest adjustment was getting to know them. They're used to their mom and they were like who's this new person?"

Victoria said she had to lean on the older boys to help with the bonding between her and the littles. Victoria's biological son also rose to the challenge.



Victoria's older nephews pose together for a photo.

"[My son] had a relationship with the older boys. Having them come into our home, he was okay with it. He's easy-going and always there willing to help. I had to teach him how to set boundaries because he's just so quick to be helpful and empathetic, so I had to teach him to put himself first when necessary."



"The Littles" getting used to their aunt and their new surroundings.

Victoria admits that was hard too. Her son was an only child, and he too got an instant set of siblings overnight. But her son is very independent and took it upon himself to teach his cousins how to do things around the house like prepare a quick bite to eat or do their own laundry.

"They were like you're younger than us you don't know. I had to intervene a couple times and say 'he knows what he's doing so let him show you.'"

Victoria said that friction went back to their learned behavior of putting each other down rather than building each other up. She took the time to instill in the older boys that 'hey, we're here to help each other.'

She wants them to take that with them whether they remain under her roof or are reunified with their mother.

"My hope is that they see there is another way to do life. There's no need to be so negative. I want them to realize that, no matter what you're doing, you can always find the good in it. I want them to continue on the path I'm trying to set for them to be successful."

Given the initial growing pains, developing her relationship with the littles and seeing the turnaround in the older boys, Victoria said it has been chaotic but fun.

"Having the littles at my feet while I'm cooking and the boys are upstairs playing, it's chaotic but it's fun. It's chaos, but it's organized chaos, so it's fun," she said.

Despite the organized chaos and some of the bumps along the road, Victoria would encourage other potential kinship providers to "do it."

"There are ups and downs. And those downs, they hit really hard but at the end of the day just do it. The easy part of all this is just loving them and knowing you played a vital role when they needed you the most. That outweighs all the bad days."



Victoria with her son at the Renaissance Fair.

And potential kinship care providers will not be alone. Victoria had the support of Rosemary Perez-Soto, a DCF Foster Care Division social worker, along the way including transporting the children to school, daycare, sports and other activities.

Of what is required of a kinship provider like Victoria, Rosemary said it is pretty simple.

"It takes [Victoria's] commitment, love, patience and a whole lotta formula and pampers!! Vicky from Day 1 was all about what needs to happen for all 5 nieces and nephews to stay in her care."

Rosemary said she has seen the children thrive in their aunt's care.

"She never imagined herself being a relative caregiver to her nieces and nephew [however] she has provided a very loving and structured environment. She ensures they are available to visit with their parents. During my monthly visits I have observed how attentive she is to each child, especially the 'The Littles.'"

Welcoming her nieces and nephews into her home, watching them grow and become a closer family unit is what brings Victoria the most joy.

"It's the relationships and how they've grown more. I was just their aunt before. How they look up to me now, they have a different perspective of me than just coming over our house on a Saturday to hang out. They see they can count on me. That's been great, having our relationship bloom in different ways."

"For the littles, it's getting comfortable with me, getting to know me, and watching them grow and learn and develop. And creating that relationship with them where they know who I am. That's something that will continue on when they go back to their mom. Whether or not that happens, at least I know I played such a big part in their life that one day they'll know."