

# CHS in the News



## Small network of foster families provides comfort and love

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The College Park home of Christina and Brad Cowherd is constantly bustling – but that’s to be expected when you’re caring for seven children.

Christina and Brad, who have five biological children between 13 years old and 9 months old, recently took in two foster children, bringing their total child count to seven.

“It’s loud, chaotic, fun and wonderful all at the same time,” Brad said. “Everybody gets along great, and they’re just like brothers and sisters.”

According to Embrace Families, a local state-designated child services agency, there are nearly 1,900 children currently in foster care, yet the need for more stable foster families is great.

“The day you say, ‘We have a bed open. Send me a child,’ there are enough children that they’re going to send you a child,” Brad said. “Orange County is in desperate need of newer foster parents.”

The Cowherds became increasingly familiar with foster care through their church’s prolific charity involvement with local childcare, foster and adoption agencies.

They decided to “try out” foster care nearly three years ago through an agency called Safe Families for Children that coordinates a more temporary child placement program.

Their biological children responded favorably to the shorter-term foster children, and – to date – the Cowherds have cared for a total 13 foster children.

“Initially, we thought, ‘Oh that’s great for some people to do, but that’s just not for us,’” Christina said. “As we became more knowledgeable about it, we started to feel like we were called to open our home in some way.”

After hosting a few children, the Cowherds transitioned to longer-term fosters after seeing how it was a positive influence on all children within the household.

“With this many small kids, everyone has a job,” Brad said. “Our son, Joshua, he’s got a lot of sisters that can tell him what to do. And he loves taking care of babies.”

The two young girls they’re fostering are relatives of a former employee at Infusion Tea, a College Park restaurant and tea house which the Cowherds own and manage. After their first long-term foster child, a friend of the employee’s family approached them and asked if they’d be willing to foster the children, who were already in the foster system.

There are much more similarities than there are differences when it comes to loving and caring for foster children as well as their own, and it just feels natural, Brad explained.

“Parenting the children is all the same whether they’re our kids or someone else’s kids,” Brad said. “Loving the kids is the easy part, and you’re already doing that with your kids as an instinct. You know that part. What comes with the foster kids is all of the government rules and going to court and having visits and such.”

The processes to deem a family and home suitable to accept foster children were fairly easy to accommodate and meet, Brad said. There also were a few weeks of classes to familiarize the families with legal protocol and formalities.

“The agencies have rules, but you get to know them and then you modify your house to meet their rules,” he noted. “The truth is, most people already are already fine and are going to pass their home study with flying colors.”

The steps begin with having an open heart and simply reaching out to either Embrace Families or Children’s Home Society of

Florida, said Sharon Shoemaker, a foster family recruiter with Children's Home Society of Florida.

"After orientation, you will begin a foster parent training called PRIDE, and classes are 4 to 7 weeks, depending on which classes you choose," explained Shoemaker, who has nearly three decades of experience. "You'll participate in a very thorough home study, which includes background checks, home visits and support in getting your home ready to welcome children in foster care. We will help you complete the necessary requirements to license your home."

Whenever feasible, the goal is to make amendments and fix whatever challenges are making the child's home unsafe for them. Ideally, foster care is temporary, she noted.

"It's important to note that nearly 75% of children involved in the foster care system are there because of fixable family issues," Shoemaker said. "Untreated mental health challenges, domestic violence, addiction, lack of parental support or role models, lack of parental education/knowledge, and/or lack of access to or knowledge of community resources that can help families meet basic needs."

Shoemaker emphasized that a variety of situations could render a child eligible for placement within the foster system, and so there are many opportunities for foster families to step up.

"Across the board and specifically in Central Florida, there is a desperate need for more foster families — especially for sibling groups, teens and kids who identify as LGBTQ+," she said. "Children are placed in foster care when it is no longer safe for them to live at home due to abuse, abandonment and/or neglect."

There also are even more special circumstances, such as serving as a transitional foster family for children with refugee status like Courtney from Orlando. [We have omitted Courtney's full name to protect her family's and her current foster child's privacy.]

Courtney worked for six years at Bethany Christian Services, a nationwide agency that works with the Office of Refugee Resettlement and connects children with a wide variety of transitional statuses. Her experience in the industry paired with her and her husband's experience teaching English abroad for a couple of years quickly led them to develop empathy for these children and become transitional foster parents.

"I think a big reason why we started doing it was just feeling very overwhelmed with everything that's happening in the world and wanting something that's tangible that I can do every day,"

Courtney said. "I can love a kid every day, and I can take care of a kid and feed a kid. That's I think, a big part of what pushed us to needing to do something."

Although she and her husband don't have children of their own, they're planning to eventually adopt through the foster network.

"When we first started talking about fostering to adopt, we just weren't ready for kids just yet," Courtney said. "This is really our first time being parents."

Since becoming a foster family last March, Courtney and her husband have hosted nine children. During the time the children are with the transitional family, case workers are verifying the families and homes within the U.S.

"The goal is to get them as quickly as possible to their family members," Courtney said. "We want them to have a safe spot for their transition to their next spot and make it so they're not traveling every day and they're not having to worry where food is coming from."

All their children have had a wide spectrum of ages and personalities, but it's still important to help them preserve their childhood and feel cared for, she said.

"We try to make it that the kids can feel safe and have the ability to play and just be a kid," Courtney said. "So, creating hobbies for them is like my favorite thing to do. We even taught one of our boys to skateboard, and he got to take it with him, and he loved it."

The wonderful memories and developing a genuine bond with the children can sometimes make the "goodbye" at the end of a foster child's stay bittersweet, Christina explained.

"The foster cliché is, 'Oh, I couldn't do that because I wouldn't want to get too attached,'" she said. "But, that's really our job. It's to get attached and teach a child how to attach so that when they go to wherever they're going, they can have healthy relationships as they grow."

If you're interested in becoming a shorter-term foster parent through Safe Families for Children, please visit [safe-families.org](https://safe-families.org) and use the website's "View locations" feature to connect with the Orlando chapter. Those interested in something more long-term can visit Embrace Families at [embracefamilies.org](https://embracefamilies.org) or Children's Home Society of Florida at [chsfl.org](https://chsfl.org) to start the process. Bethany Christian Services also offers traditional foster care opportunities in addition to their transitional refugee child care opportunities at [bethany.org](https://bethany.org) via the "Help a child" tab.