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Foster Parenting

Interview with Ann and Margaret

- Richard: Hello I'm Richard Fox, welcome to Messages of Hope. I was surprised to discover that there are approx 40000 children in Australia needing care. Around 40% of those are under the age of 4! And approx 40% of those are in foster care. Today Celia Fielke is talking with Ann, a mother with 4 children still at home, and now also a foster parent. And also Margaret, a placement support worker for Lutheran Community Care's foster program in South Australia. Stay with us to hear about the unique struggles and joys that come with foster parenting.
- Celia: Ann and her husband Anthony have been involved in foster care since 2011. Along with their 4 boys who are still at home, they also care for babies and children up to the age of 5. So I guess to start with Ann, what motivated you to become a foster parent?
- Ann: Well having 4 children of our own, and we've always loved children and we'd seen our friends, and families, and neighbours that have fostered, and had kind of watched them from a distance for a while. It's a pretty scary thing to jump in to but after watching them we thought, "I reckon we could give this a go. We'll just start with some short term, or respite or something, and see how it goes," and you know, 4 and a half years later here we are. (laughter)
- Celia: So what's the short term and respite?
- Ann: A short term is anything up to 2 years but generally the short term ones we have, have been 3 to 6 months. We also do emergency care, which is anything from a night to a couple of weeks or sometimes, like the little girl that we have now, it was one night and that's 16 months later (laughs).
- Celia: So sometimes it's a bit hard to predict. How do you cope with that? You know, when you don't know how long you're going to have them for?
- Ann: I think you get used to it. For the very first one it's like, "Oh, ooh, w-w-will she be here next week or won't she ..." And after a while it's kinda like, "Well we just love them while they're here, and enjoy them while we've got them and you've got to accept that it's in the plan, and you don't know what the plan is."
- Celia: What plan is that?
- Ann: Well, hopefully it's God's plan. That's what we hope for. But sometimes Families SA's plan, and the plan that you think should be are a bit different. (laughs)
- Celia: Now you mention Families SA. They're the South Australian government body responsible for children needing care. They work with organisations like

Lutheran Community Care who recruit foster parents. Every state has similar organisations. Margaret, perhaps this would be a good time to fill us in on the bigger picture from your perspective as a support worker for Lutheran Community Care.

Marg: The whole system's a bit like a jigsaw puzzle with the child in the middle, and the child's best interest's are what we're all working for. So there's the birth family, who may be working to either have the child returned, or to be in that child's life in a more positive way than it has been. And then there's a social worker, who's there to support the birth family but particularly the child, and the foster carer, they do the 24 hours a day care with Lutheran Community Care supporting them. And psychologists that may be involved, occupational therapists. It's sometimes quite a group of people who are concerned about the child and working together to map out the best way ahead for the child.

Celia: So you're basically the advocate for the foster carer?

Marg: That's it. We recruit and train and assess potential carers and then once you're approved you start getting phone calls.

Ann: The next day!!

Celia: So Ann what would you say are the joys of foster parenting?

Ann: Some babies that we've had have come to us very blank, with no reactions to see and seeing them over a period of months, turning in to a regular kid full of fun and able to smile, and able to make just babbling noises that you would expect at a much earlier age, but you know, to see their growth really come along at a great rate of knots, once they're in a safe, happy place, is amazing, you can't take that back. That's awesome.

Celia: That's great but how do you work with those babies that are initially unresponsive?

Ann: It depends on the kid. All the kids are different. Some of them won't be held and you know it's more of matter of being near them until they're kind of used to you. It might take a few hours, it might take a few days, it might take a few weeks, but eventually ... (laughs) We haven't had one that hasn't got used to us yet. With some of them we have had to work really hard. Others are just like a big sponge. It's like they've been waiting for someone to open the door and let them out so that they can do all of those things that you expect children to do. To be loving, and happy, and smiling. It's just that they've not had the opportunity to, you know, they had no reason to smile, and be happy.

Celia: How do your 4 boys react to foster children coming and going?

Ann: We've had stages where Lutheran Care have rung and say, "Can you take a baby?" And I cover the phone and go, "Boys do you think we should get a baby?" They've all just gone, "Yes!" And then, "Is it a boy or a girl?" It's like, "Does it matter?" "No! When are they coming?" "In about an hour!" "Okay!" I mean sometimes they've been slightly less than excited than that but it's just pretty much become part of regular life here, babies come and go.

Celia: Do you see any special benefits for your boys because of the fostering?

Ann: I'd like to think that they're more aware of the fact that not everybody has a nice house to live in and families that love them and food and clothes as they

need. It's like, "Mum we need new shoes." Okay, well it may be next week, but someone will get you those new shoes. Anything that they need is provided whereas not all kids have that and I think that, well I'd like to think that they've come to a better understanding that not everybody's as lucky as us.

Celia: Margaret, can you describe the range of families that need foster parents?

Marg: There's many different struggles that families have and often it is mental ill health. Sometimes it's intellectual disability. Sometimes it's homelessness. So many difficult challenges that a family might have all at once and they just feel they can't cope and some people ask for their child to be put in to care while they get some help and sort themselves out. With others it might be drugs or alcohol, and that's often due to stresses in their own lives. And many of the birth families themselves did not have easy childhoods, and they are not well equipped to be parents. Some of them are very young parents who may be in their teens and they need somebody else to help them look after the child. So there's a huge variety. If we don't have enough foster carers they're looked after by paid workers and that's better than being abandoned or in an orphanage but it's still not ideal. A family is the best place to bring up a child and to care for them until a permanent home can be found. Sometimes that home is the foster home which becomes a permanent home. Sometimes a child will go to a relative when they've found a relative who's able to look after them and sometimes they return to the family when they've had adequate support and help and that's continuing, and the families get themselves together. And that's the best outcome.

Ann: Thanks Margaret. Now Ann, I'm interested to know what people outside of your family think about what you do as a foster parent?

Ann: Actually one of my biggest stresses is when people go, "Oh I don't know how you do it, you're such an angel. You're so special I could never do it. I would love them too much. I could never give them up." And that just makes me go, "Err. Do you not think that I love these children as much as possible? Does this not look like I'm loving them to you? What do you think I'm doing?" Um, that- Sorry. (laughter) I get a bit worked up! Cause it happens a lot. That's the main thing that people say. "Oh, you must just be an angel." No we're just regular people. We're just a regular family, it's just that this is something that we do.

Celia: You feel strongly about doing it.

Ann: I do. We feel very strongly. And I feel very strongly about the fact that you don't have to be special. We're not any more special than anybody else but we're more determined to give the kids a chance. At the end of the day the kids need somewhere to go and if we can do that, and yes we might cry some buckets of tears, at the end of the day, we've given them a start. We've shown them what love can be. We've shown them what a family can be. And if that costs us a bit, so be it.

Celia: So when it does come time to say goodbye to a child, how do you deal with that? I imagine it's pretty emotionally exhausting.

Ann: It can be quite exhausting. Um, like I said, we do cry. I don't hide that all. We do cry. I like to make a photo book for my babies. That's my therapy. And I write down what they did while they were here, where did we go, and what did you do, and what did you like, and here's a photo of you with this brother, and that brother. We sang these songs to you, and all that, and that's my

therapy. And then at the end I give a copy to the baby to keep. And we have a copy.

Celia: That's amazing.

Ann: I think knowing that God has our back and is walking beside us as we do our fostering journey is the only thing that can keep us going.

Celia: What would you like to leave people thinking, about foster care?

Ann: There's lots of kids out there that need somebody to love them. Some of them need you for a short time. Some of them might need you a little longer. If you can only give a weekend here and there, there's still kids that need that too. If you think there's any chance that you've got room in your heart and your home to help a child please go to an information session, talk to someone because the foster system is so overloaded. Like I said, if you can do a weekend, a month, you know, someone that's got a foster child that needs that bit of extra help or sometimes it's a grandparent that's looking after a grand child. Just that break of being able to have a weekend here and there is helpful to them.

Celia: Thankyou so much, I've learnt so much.

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