

NORTH SUBURBS

'The best Mother's Day gift': A Brookfield couple has adopted their 17th and 18th child



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Nine-year-old Leah felt relieved and happy when everything became official on May 15 in a Waukesha County courtroom.

Leah and her stepbrother, Phillip, 13, were officially adopted into their "forever family" by Brookfield couple Lori and Dan O'Brien.

"Now, I never have to worry about going into another foster family," said Leah, who with Phillip has been in the foster care system since February 2017.

The two will have company in their new home.

The O'Briens have adopted 18 children and 26 children overall. This includes their three biological children, a nephew they raised, two kids they fostered until they grew out of the foster care system and their two current foster children. Their oldest is 41, the youngest is 9.

Ten of the children they adopted have high level autism while nine of them are currently living with them. Lori also said that many of children have had PTSD and emotional difficulties.

Lori and her husband plan on adopting one of the other foster children currently in their home, while the other one, she said, will most likely be reunited with their biological family. Then, they plan on being finished adopting.

On May 15, Lori O'Brien said nearly all of the 26 kids either attended the official adoption or checked in by Zoom.

"It was the best Mother's Day gift," she said. "It was amazing. We try to make them a part of the forever family, and this seals the deal. It is a big sense of relief."

Lori also has 23 grandchildren, and one great grandchild with another great grandchild on the way. She said she also fostered 12 additional children that she did not adopt.

"I love all the kids," said Phillip of his new family. "I am very happy. I am glad it is forever."

How do the O'Briens do this?

How can the O'Briens raise so many children under the same household?

"It takes a village," replied Lori.

Adopting and supporting the children and families she and her husband have raised can be considered "organized chaos," Lori said, but very rewarding because they are an extremely tight-knit family.

They also receive support from the community.

A group of community donors built their eight-bedroom home, coined "Heaven House," in 2010.

The couple also have parent helpers through an organization that supports families with disabilities to provide assistance when they and many of their kids are at home. In addition, some of their adult children help babysit and run errands for the family.

Lori's husband Dan added that it helps that he and his wife are on the same page. "There are a lot of challenges, but our hearts are in the right direction," he said.

Some of the children they adopted have post-traumatic stress disorder, Lori said, and many have emotional challenges. No matter what the challenge is, Lori said she treats each child as an individual. She also said she has taken numerous hours of training on these issues.

"I would not change this for anything," she said. "Don't be afraid," is her advice to others thinking of fostering.

"Everyone has a passion, and God has equipped my passion to help people who are disadvantaged," she said.

'All are achieving their success'

When a foster child first comes into the O'Brien's home, Lori said she loves seeing them change and grow. At first, she noticed the kids walk with their shoulders slumped, are often angry and are not as social. But then she sees them grow and act more confidently.

"All are achieving their success," she said. She said whatever goal the children have set for themselves; they have achieved them.

She recalls one of the kids she adopted could not read in fifth grade. Now, that child is in college. Another, who is high-functioning autistic, has been thriving working at Pick 'n Save where he bags, loads and does other tasks in the store. "He loves it," she said.

She also said that some of them have trade careers, and all are employed.

She said despite the additional challenges of getting placed with children when they are older and not getting therapy and services to help them sooner, they all thrived.

"We make up for lost time," she said.

Being a foster parent

Foster parents are always needed, said Oriana Carey, CEO at Coalition for Children, Youth & Families.

"We need people who are best for kids," she emphasized. "Fostering is being flexible, patient and advocating for a child in the school," she said.

To be a foster parent, one needs to be 21 and must pass a background check. A home study is also done where the prospective foster parents' income is looked at.

"Foster care is not a pathway to adoption," Carey said. "It is intended to help families while they are working on challenges. Reunification is the main goal."

Another goal is to help the child find permanency. "We don't want children and youth aging out (of the system)," she said.

For more information

For more information on being a foster parent, visit <https://coalitionforcyf.org> or call 414-475-1246 and ask for a resource specialist.

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