NOBODY'S CHILD

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Nobody's Children Everyone's Problem

By Kathie Neff Ragsdale
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There are more than 34,000 of them in the United States, including 1,085 in Massachusetts and about two dozen in New Hampshire.

They live in institutions with bars on the windows, or in private homes where they know they cannot stay. Sometimes, they live in hospitals, or in temporary group settings with other youngsters like them. Slightly more than half are boys. Many are minorities. Practically all were abused or neglected.

They are kids who can never go home again because the courts have decided that "home" is too dangerous a place.

And no one else will take them.

They are the forgotten children of the foster care system -- the ones between the ages of 11 and 18 whom many prospective parents consider too damaged, too risky, or just plain too old for adoption or long-term foster care.

In a nation where would-be adoptive parents clamor for healthy, white infants, they go unclaimed and unwanted -- even though many of them have spent years trying to overcome childhood wounds so they can fit into a family.

But child welfare advocates say we ignore them at our peril -- that, over time, nobody's children can become everybody's problem.

Without the influence of a stable family life, studies show, those who spend their childhoods kicking around in assorted temporary quarters are far more likely in later life to engage in society's most costly ills: drug abuse, alcoholism, homelessness, prostitution.

All because they grew up without a real family.

"At some point, it becomes a social issue, a moral issue," says Francyne Fuller, resource coordinator for Casey Family Services, a private agency that helps find long-term foster homes for children in state care.

A teen's life in foster care

"John" is one of the forgotten children. As with the other youngsters in state care whose stories are told in this series, his real name is being withheld at the request of his social workers.

Twelve years old, with a head of cowlicky hair, a few freckles sprinkled over his nose and a dimpled smile, he was bounced between his mother's and grandmother's homes as a young child until he became a ward of Massachusetts five years ago.

These days, home is a curtained-off bedroom on the third floor of a residential children's home where the cheerful murals on the walls and the Beanie Babies spilling from his shelf stand in stark contrast to the barred windows and the antiseptic smell that hangs heavily in the halls.

Neglected and abused in his mother's home, John went through a succession of foster homes, hospitals and residential settings before coming here, his 11th placement since he has been in state custody. Most often, he was removed from foster homes for discharging his anger the only way he knew how -- physically. He was hospitalized three times for treatment of aggression.

"When people tell him to do something he doesn't want to do, he'll swear, he'll throw things, he'll hit," explains his social worker. "But he's improved a lot on his outbursts. In the last year, his behavior has improved significantly."

Still, such behavior -- or the fear of its possibility -- prevents many prospective foster or adoptive parents from considering an older child like John.

"At that point, they've been in the system a while and have a lot of emotional issues," says Haverhill resident Darlene Trask, 41, who with her husband, John, 50, went through foster care training before deciding they would prefer to adopt a young child. "It's a little more difficult to acclimate in a family environment."

Trask says she was particularly jarred during the training sessions by questions about how she would handle the remote but real possibility of coping with a child who sets fires, or who might harm small animals.

Her decision? She couldn't.

More teens, fewer homes

Placing a child in a permanent home has become more difficult in general because the number of children in need has increased in recent years even as the number of available homes has dwindled.

The total number of children requiring foster care has gone from a low of about 260,000 in the mid-'80s to about 565,000 now, a 115 percent increase.

Child welfare workers point to factors like domestic violence, illicit drug use and alcoholism as some of the reasons. Alcohol and drug use alone are factors in the placement of 75 percent of children nationally, according to the Child Welfare League of America.

"It's common for us to execute search warrants (for drugs) and find children in the home," says Sgt. Robert Quinn, field supervisor for the New Hampshire State Police Narcotics Unit, reflecting the experience of police agencies throughout both New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

Meanwhile, the number of American families willing to take in a foster child has dropped by roughly a third in the last decade -- from 150,000 to 100,000 today, according to the National Foster Parent Association.

The need is so dire that President Bush and his wife, Laura, have launched a new initiative to encourage Americans to adopt children in foster care. More than 130,000 American children of all ages are waiting to be adopted, according to the White House.

Why the decline in available homes?

One reason is that fewer families now have a stay-at-home parent who can care for a foster child. The percentage of mothers with out-of-the-home jobs, for example, has gone from about two-thirds in 1990 to nearly three-fourths a decade later.

But there are other, less obvious explanations, not the least of which is the process of becoming a foster parent in the first place.

Many states, including Massachusetts, have tightened the requirements and security checks on prospective foster parents, as have many private placement agencies. And that has been a turn-off to some couples who were contemplating foster care.

"Whether you're fostering or trying to become an adoptive family, it is the most heart-wrenching, personally invasive, intimidating process I've ever been through in my life," says Darlene Trask who, like all prospective foster parents in Massachusetts, went through a state-approved 8- to 10-week training course, home visits and a criminal background check. New Hampshire requires a 21-hour course, plus a home inspection and background check.

"They make you fill out paperwork like you wouldn't believe," she adds. "They'll go into not only your personal background, but your family background. They'll check for alcoholism in the family, any mental instability, and you worry that that might be held against you even though it's not you personally. You feel someone is personally dissecting you and a stranger is telling you whether you're going to be a good parent or not, controlling whether you can go forward with this process or not."

Several prospective foster parents dropped out of their training group because they found the process so rigorous, Trask says.

Though he could provide no numbers, Michael MacCormack, a spokesman for the Massachusetts Department of Social Services, acknowledges that his agency lost some prospective foster homes when it imposed stricter guidelines and background checks in the late 1990s.

Background checks and working moms aren't solely to blame.

The main reason is that almost no one wants a teen.

Of all the youngsters in state care nationally, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 83 percent of those who get adopted are 10 or younger.

No one wants an older child

The Trasks changed their "primary focus" from foster parenting to adopting, and would now prefer an infant or toddler because "even though we're older, we still wanted the experience of having a newborn and growing with the child and having all the nuances of the life cycle," says Darlene Trask.

She says she and her husband have not turned their back on the possibility of foster parenting, but if the child were older, "I'd have to know the background."

Changes in both federal and state laws in the last few years have streamlined the process for terminating the rights of abusive and neglectful parents, freeing more children for adoption. Many of them have gone to homes that might otherwise have taken in foster children.

The federal Administration for Children and Families said in March of this year that recruiting foster parents has became increasingly difficult "since foster parents adopt approximately two-thirds of available children from the foster care system. This means that available placements in existing foster homes are continually decreasing as foster families add to their families through adoption, making less space available for new foster children."

While no studies have been done on the subject, international adoptions may well be cutting into the number of available foster homes, as well. In the last 10 years, the number of families who have adopted children from overseas has increased 113 percent, according to the U.S. State Department -- from 9,050 to almost 20,000.

Even among families willing to take in a foster child, some just flat-out refuse to take a teenager.

A 1993 survey of current and former foster parents by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, found that 44 percent of foster parents were unwilling to take teens.

The federal Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System, a division of the Department of Health and Human Services, has also found that fewer than two-thirds of available foster homes are used at any given time. A report from that agency suggests that the underutilization is because families are reluctant to take in adolescents or children with special needs.

While foster homes are not going unfilled in Massachusetts, the forces of supply and demand mean that foster parents have their pick of children -- and many choose younger ones.

"The number of homes without a child is negligible," says MacCormack of DSS. "When people come, they tell us what kind of child they want and we immediately fill it because there's so much need."

Though he could not say how many of New Hampshire's 900 licensed foster homes lack a child, Joseph Arcidiacono, deputy director of the state's Division for Children, Youth and Families, said "generally it is more difficult to place an older child. Most people want younger children rather than teenagers."

Wanting, working to be part of a family

Like John, 15-year-old Robert is a child who has yet to experience life in a healthy family.

The lanky basketball player and dirtbike champion with the Afro-style haircut is easily as tall as most of the prospective parents who might consider taking

him in. Soft-spoken, with a shy smile and eyes that avoid direct contact, he looks like he would not know what to do if he was hugged.

Still, he exudes a sweetness that belies his history.

As a young child, Robert witnessed and experienced abuse so traumatic he refuses to talk about it. His mother spent part of his childhood in jail, and he was removed from her home because of her drug addiction when he was 8.

Multiple foster home placements followed, as well as time in group settings or hospitals, as Robert acted out his past abuse on others, did poorly in school and occasionally attempted to harm himself. He told his troubles only to a stuffed cat a social worker once gave him.

But, like many children awaiting homes, he has struggled to change his behaviors, his present social worker says. He has worked with therapists, agreed to medication, improved his grades, experimented with new ways of responding to others.

"My mother told me, don't trust no one, so I didn't," he says, studying his shoes. "Now, I'm learning to trust, by getting to know people. I trust my social worker, myself, my teachers ... I can trust when people do what they say they're going to do."

His preferred activities remain solitary ones -- painting still lifes, reading, listening to rhythm and blues, shooting baskets -- but he says he wants to find an adoptive or foster family because "I want to have someone I can ask for advice."

Of Latino background, he grew up speaking English and would prefer an English-speaking home in the Merrimack Valley, where he is from.

He muses about what that family should know about him first.

"I'm quiet, very quiet," says Robert, who now lives in a group residence for children. "For the first two or three weeks, I'd be very quiet. Then, when I got the hang of it and started trusting more, I'd get to my issues -- my past, the future, what's going on right now. It takes me a long time to trust people, but when they start to trust me, I trust them."

"Denise," 16, has also been waiting for a home for years.

A biracial child with dimples, corn-row hair and braces, she is characteristically direct about the reason she is in state care.

"My mom was a crack addict and didn't take care of us and her boyfriend was no help," she says. "I took care of my brothers and sisters. I did the

shopping and the cooking and the cleaning while she was sniffing and sniffing."

After being taken from her mother when she was 6, she lived briefly with an aunt, then moved in with her father.

"He couldn't control his temper and when he got mad, he was like throwing knives and stuff," she says of that time. "He was hitting his girlfriend and hitting me. He flipped out about the smallest thing. They filed a 51A (a law mandating that mistreatment of children be reported to the state) on him for neglect."

After that, Denise says, it was "foster home to foster home to foster home to foster home." She has also lived in two residential facilities and a coed group home, and now lives in a residential center for children.

"I want to be with a family because I used to have a family and I don't anymore," Denise says. "The perfect family for me would be ... I don't want a mom and dad, just a mom, but if I have to have a dad, I will. Somewhere where I fit in. All the foster family homes I've been in have been white people. I'm biracial, half black, half white. I just want the experience of being with a black family, black or biracial.

"I want pets, kitties and doggies, hamsters. I want my own room -- a little privacy, for once in my life."

Asked the best thing that's ever happened to her, Denise says, "I couldn't tell you."

The worst? "My whole life," she says.

Still loving their parents

Denise has not seen her mother for 10 years, but sees her father regularly for day visits. Even if she moves in with a family, she says, she wants that relationship to continue.

"I'd rather have long-term care," she says. "I don't want to be adopted because I love my daddy."

Her sentiments are not uncommon.

Many foster children with continuing ties to a birth parent say they would prefer permanent foster care to adoption because they fear losing contact with that birth parent -- even when the parent has been abusive or neglectful.

John is one.

He and his birth mother hold hands as they sit on a couch outside his room, talking about why they can never live together again.

"I know I can't take care of him the way he needs to be taken care of, emotionally, physically," his mother says. "I have a mental disorder. I'm disabled. There are triggers that set off certain behaviors, severe depression. It takes a lot for me to take care of me.

"I love my kids, don't get me wrong," adds the mother, who has also surrendered two other children to the state. "I had my kids for a while. There was neglect, some abuse. It took so much for me to humble myself and look in the mirror ..."

John shakes his head as she talks, and says he doesn't remember some of the incidents she describes. He slides off the couch onto the floor and looks away, as if to separate himself from the conversation.

But he grows animated again when asked what he would like if he moved in with a family.

"My own room," he says. "A snake, a lizard and a fish tank with a little stingray in it. A cat. I'd like two brothers, one about 8 or 9 and the other 13 or 14. And a younger sister, so I can teach her how to behave. I'd like a Playstation ... and a big back yard near a baseball field."

Asked what the family should know about him first, he says, "I'm a smart kid. I'm a big kid, tall. I like mathematics. I like science. I'm a science whiz. I like electronics. I'm humorous, kind of stubborn. I'd give myself a nine out of 10."

But when -- or if -- John is able to move in with a new family of his own remains uncertain.

In the meantime, he, like Denise and Robert and the thousands of other American children in need of permanent homes, will remain in residential centers, group homes, temporary foster homes or other interim housing -- their childhoods suspended, their lives on layaway.

"The good points of being in residential are, you have kids your age you can talk to," Robert says. "The good points of being in a family, I wouldn't know that much about it."

Who's to blame

The foster care system itself may also be partly to blame for the backlog of older kids needing homes.

A report released earlier this year by the Office of Inspector General, the federal oversight agency, chided state welfare departments for failing to focus on recruiting families willing and able to care for the most challenging children.

It said those departments are "spending a lot of time and money licensing foster family homes which may never receive a child because these families are unwilling to accept adolescents, sibling groups or children with severe psychological and medical needs."

The report recommends focusing efforts on hard-to-place children, using successful foster parents to help in recruitment efforts, examining licensing standards to identify barriers to recruitment and developing partnerships with churches to heighten awareness of foster care needs.

Perhaps the biggest deterrent to foster parenting is the job itself -- one that entails working with some of the nation's most damaged children for long hours and a basic pay of about $13 to $25 per day. Foster parents often live with back-to-back crises, children who hit, or who run away, and -- unless the home placements are permanent -- the repeated sorrow of saying goodbye to youngsters they have come to care about.

The task is so daunting that as many as 60 percent of new foster parents quit within the first 12 months, according to the National Foster Parent Association. A 1996 survey by the Child Welfare League found that just over half of foster parents who quit did so because of a problem with the child.

Older children pose special difficulties because the longer they have been in the system, the more likely they are to have what psychologists call attachment disorders which -- though not insurmountable -- make it more difficult to bond with would-be families.

Even older kids -- those without scars from emotional or physical abuse -- pose challenges simply because they are teenagers and require added attention, extracurricular activities, phone time and cool clothes and accessories, even as they test their independence like most adolescents.

Still, many parents who take on the challenges say the rewards -- often small and long in coming -- outweigh the hardships.

"You can't see the big picture for a long time," says Rosanne Payne, 40, of Haverhill, who has been a foster mother to one teenager for six years. "It's seeing little tiny spurts of growth or spurts of humanity or kindness and love. You know that's something they wouldn't have gotten."

The Statistic Who Wasn't

By Kathie Neff Ragsdale
Monday, August 19, 2002

Gary Zerola has a personal interest in the grim statistics about what happens to former foster children who never found permanent families.

He knows he could have been one of them.

Instead, the handsome 31-year-old is a respected Boston lawyer, best friend to Lawrence favorite son Socrates de la Cruz, and one of People magazine's 50 most eligible American bachelors -- alongside the likes of George Clooney, Ben Affleck and Tiger Woods.

"Nomar (Boston Red Sox shortstop Nomar Garciaparra) asked me why my picture was bigger than his," Zerola says of the July 2001 magazine spread that generated 4,000 letters and forced him to change his phone number.

It's a far cry from the life most would have predicted for the self-described near-thug from Lynn who lived in more than a dozen foster homes -- far more than the 31/2 that the average foster child in Massachusetts or New Hampshire experiences -- after his father left his mom with seven children when Gary was 3.

It's also a far cry from what happens to many others like him.

"More than half this country's prison population are former foster kids, and 45 percent of homeless people," says Zerola, who -- with de la Cruz -- founded One for the Kids, an annual fund-raiser to benefit children in foster care.

He cites no source for his statistics, but several studies have resulted in similar findings:

r A survey of foster youth by the University of Wisconsin found that, 12 to 18 months after leaving foster care, 27 percent of the males and 10 percent of the females had been incarcerated, a third were on welfare, 37 percent had not finished high school and 50 percent were unemployed.

r A national study likewise found that half of former foster youth were unemployed two and a half to four years after leaving foster care, and other studies have found that three in 10 of the nation's homeless are former foster children.

r Other surveys have found high percentages of former foster kids who have sold drugs to support themselves, become pregnant at a young age or spent time in jail. (See separate boxes.)

How did Zerola escape their numbers?

By being placed, at the age of 14, with foster parents Robert and Millie Bowes.

Life until then had been "sort of day-to-day," says Zerola, who entered foster care because of his mother's "health problems," which he will not discuss. Because social workers had at first hoped to reunite him with his birth family, he was not freed for adoption. Multiple foster placements followed.

"You wake up in the morning and you don't know if that's the day you're going to a new home, or a new city, or if that's the last day you'll see those foster parents," he says. "I felt like I was a bad kid."

He had several run-ins with the law as a boy -- often after he got into fights when someone made a crack about his family, or about the less-than-stylish clothing he wore as a foster child.

"I was angry at the world for a long period of time," he says. "But there's only so long you can blame how miserable your life is on your circumstances before you start taking responsibility for your own life."

The Boweses, he says, taught him how to do that.

"It was supposed to be for the weekend, and I stayed until I was 26," Zerola says of his time with the family. "I got my bachelor's, master's in management, and law degree, all from Suffolk (University)."

What made them different from the other foster parents whose homes he had stayed in?

"They cared," he says, after a pause. "They truly cared. It took me probably 10 years to realize that. They truly cared about my health, my well-being, my life, my success."

It also helped that the Boweses understood his reluctance to show affection, and his continuing attachment to his birth mother.

Millie Bowes, the oldest of seven children, was herself adopted because her birth mother could not afford to raise her. She did not meet her younger siblings until she was about 40.

"That kind of helps me in regard to these kids and their emotions," she says of older foster children with lingering attachments to their birth families.

Her husband, a child of the Great Depression, spent his summers apart from his parents helping to work his grandparents' farm in Plympton, Mass. "So he has had a taste of that separation," she says.

Over the years, the Boweses, with six biological children between them, have opened their doors to several older foster children.

"Everybody loves little kids so they can cuddle and kind of form them into their own ideas," Millie Bowes says of foster parents who choose younger children. "But kids who are 15 have basically been through the gamut of horror ... My feeling about it is, these kids have been through hell and they deserve to have a normal lifestyle."

Still, she acknowledges, living with, and loving, an older foster child is a challenge -- "a day-to-day emotional roller coaster" -- and Zerola was.

"I would say for the first four years, he was basically pretty untouchable with regard to hugging or that emotional thing you would do with your own child," she says. "He changed his attitude when he was 18 and had to make a decision whether to stay or leave, and he opted to stay. At that point, there was a tremendous difference in his attitude toward us as a family. It just escalated from there and turned into something really wonderful."

Along the way, Bowes says, she formed strong opinions about what works when dealing with an older foster child.

"You need to be a little bit laid-back, you have to pick your battles," she says. "You need to deal with them on a one-to-one basis. You need to be able to focus some of your energy, even if you have other children in the home, you need to be able to single out that child when it's necessary."

House rules should be agreed upon, she adds. Children should have a say in their own lives.

"Respect means a lot to these kids because they really haven't gotten it through the years," Bowes says. "You need to be open and discuss things with these kids, not just demand that they come into your way of thinking -- just keeping a gentle thumb on everything they do and their whereabouts."

Her ideas parallel the suggestions of the National Resource Center for Youth Services at the University of Oklahoma. It recommends that foster parents considering teenagers be willing to establish a give-and-take relationship, mutually agree on house rules and remember that teens may not be looking

for a traditional parent-child relationship as much as for guidance and support as they make their own decisions.

Zerola says such strategies worked for him.

"They've truly saved my life," he says of his foster parents. "They just never gave up on me. In a way, I felt like I was a fighter in a ring, going up against the heavyweight champion called life. I looked in the corner at my coach Bob and my manager Millie to say 'let me throw in the towel and give up.' They wouldn't let me. They said, a true champion goes more rounds."

Robert Bowes, a lawyer who was counsel to the state Senate for 30 years, encouraged the young Zerola to develop his potential.

"They taught me that I could do anything with hard work and determination, and the value of an education," Zerola says of his foster parents. "Overcoming the odds takes a lot of help."

Zerola was de la Cruz's roommate in law school -- frequently coming to Lawrence on weekends so de la Cruz's mother could cook them Dominican food -- and both became research assistants for Judge John E. Fenton Jr. of Andover.

"He reminds me of my father," Zerola says of the judge. "He will not tolerate mediocrity."

After stints as assistant district attorneys in the Essex County District Attorney's Office, both Zerola and de la Cruz went into private practice, but have remained close friends.

"I learned a lot from Socrates," Zerola says of the former Boys and Girls Clubs "National Youth of the Year." "It doesn't matter how tumultuous your beginnings were. It matters where you're going."

But Zerola says it was the commitment of his foster parents that really gave him a chance in life.

"I think of a quote from the Rev. Jesse Jackson: 'This world has plenty of fathers. What we need is a lot more daddys,' " he says. "Although I had a father all my life, I didn't get my dad until I was 14."

Experts agree the best way to prevent former foster children from becoming taxpayer burdens or crime statistics, like the ones Zerola cites, is for families to step forward to provide what many of them have never had: a real home.

"They're easy to ignore," Francyne Fuller, resource coordinator for Casey Family Services says of foster children. "They're voiceless and faceless. But if

we don't reach out to them now and really believe in their goodness and potential, then we will pay attention to them later."

Zerola puts it differently.

"In the end you're not just helping these individual children," he says. "You're building a better and stronger community."

Bad Time Didn't Stop Mom From Opening Heart, Home

By Kathie Neff Ragsdale
Tuesday, August 20, 2002

Eight-year-old Bryanna Fae Payne can describe as well as any adult what it's like to live with a foster child.

When her foster sister, Marissa, now 19, arrived in their Haverhill home six years ago, the new arrival shunned contact with the family, ate in her room and made it clear she did not trust anyone in the household.

But Bryanna soon understood why.

"Mom used to explain that, for Marissa, love was like Charlie Brown's football," she says. "Lucy would always take the football away just before contact. For Marissa, that's how love was."

So it is with many foster children -- especially older ones -- social workers say. After years of again and again reaching out for love, only to have it yanked away, many develop a mistrust that only the most persistent -- and flexible -- of families can unlayer.

Bryanna's mother, Rosanne Payne, 40, has had Marissa for six years now. The fact that the young woman has stayed in her home well past her 18th birthday speaks of the bond they have established -- a situation rare among foster children who never found permanent homes.

But her first experience as a foster mother did not turn out as well.

In 1995, Payne was 33 years old and the mother of one child, Bryanna, then a toddler, when she contacted Casey Family Services, a private agency that helps find long-term foster homes for children under the care of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services.

She thought becoming a foster mother would allow her to stay home with her child, and give to a second child, all while earning a small amount of money.

In many ways, she was a typical volunteer. She was married at the time, as three-quarters of American foster parents are, according to Casey Family Programs, a national foundation providing services for foster children. She was slightly younger than average -- the majority of foster parents are 35 to 50 -- and, with her college degree, slightly better educated. The average foster parent has taken only some college classes.

Her motives, like those cited by most foster parents in a 1993 national survey, were more philanthropic than monetary. Based on the stipends foster parents receive, they would almost have to be (see related box).

But Payne was not typical in one regard: She was willing to take in a teenager.

She became a respite worker -- taking in a child for one weekend a month to give the girl's temporary foster parents a break. The visits continued for several months, while Payne became pregnant and gave birth to a second child of her own, Kendra.

Then, the troubled foster child's regular placement fell apart. Payne got a call from a social worker asking if she could take the girl in.

"So, I had a 6-week-old baby, a 19-month-old and a 13-year-old that was a runaway," Payne says. "She ran from me all the time. My husband would come home from work at 10 or 11 and watch Bryanna and I'd take Kendra and drive around Haverhill looking for her, sometimes stopping at the side of the road to nurse (the baby)."

But within six months, the foster child had broken a rule that Payne considered inviolable.

"She crossed my line. She became aggressive," she says.

Payne called the 24-hour emergency number that Casey had given her and soon a social worker was on her way over to remove the girl from Payne's home.

"I wanted to give her one more chance," Payne recalls. "They reminded me she crossed my line. I wanted her so bad. I wanted to reach her. I talked to her. We cried."

The girl was taken to another foster home.

"Three weeks later, I got a call from the Haverhill Police Department saying, 'there's a little girl here who wants to come home,' " Payne says. "I had to tell them it wasn't her home anymore. I could hear her sobbing. It was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life."

But such an experience is unusual in a long-term placement, especially with an agency like Casey, which specializes in finding long-term homes for youngsters in state custody, or other private agencies like the Andover-based Hope Worldwide of New England. State agencies often turn to such private firms for help in placing children who can never go home (with a parent) to live.

Where the Massachusetts Department of Social Services or the New Hampshire Division for Children, Youth and Families must often find homes for children in crisis situations -- in the middle of the night, without full information on the child's history or needs -- "we have the luxury of taking our time to match a child with a family," explains Francyne Fuller, resource coordinator for Casey Family Services.

Most state agencies also have an initial goal of reuniting a child with the child's birth parents, if the abuse or neglect that led to removal from the home can be corrected. But that correction often takes time -- time during which the child in question may get moved from foster home to foster home because of behavior problems, family conflicts, overcrowding or other reasons.

A 1997 federal law, the Adoption and Safe Families Act, has helped by requiring that hearings on a child's permanent placement be held no later than 12 months after he enters foster care. That, like a similar law enacted in Massachusetts in 1993, has freed more children to be adopted or placed in long-term foster care.

But because there are still not enough homes for either, many youngsters -- especially the older ones -- find themselves languishing in temporary care or group facilities while they wait for someone like Payne to come along.

The Haverhill mother, who this year received a merit award for outstanding service from the Child Welfare League of America, was undeterred by her experience with the aggressive foster child. Within months, she had taken in another -- Marissa.

The then-13-year-old didn't like birthdays, or opening presents in front of other people -- "too intimate," Payne realized. So Payne started giving her gift certificates instead of presents.

She didn't like eating in front of others. Payne allowed her to eat alone in her room. She didn't like a lot of interaction.

"I support her by giving her a lot of room," says Payne, now a single mother. "All of a sudden I realized it doesn't matter how I reach the kid as long as I reach her."

That was six years ago and the changes have been slow but rewarding.

After she moved in with the Paynes, Marissa took up horseback riding and has won dozens of ribbons for her equestrian skills. She also started working at a pet store, and slowly moved up to her present position of manager.

Among her duties are raising exotic birds, and she often brings home fledglings that she hand-feeds every few hours during the night, waking herself with an alarm. She talks about them in ways her foster mother might appreciate, noting that one variety is known for being affectionate and that, with another, getting the bird onto one's finger without being bitten is about the best one can hope for.

Payne says Marissa "does show love and trust now. Whenever a problem comes up, she's right there saying, 'I need help with this.' For her to show her vulnerability is something."

Still, Marissa has never referred to Payne as "mother."

"I really wouldn't consider her a mother, more like a friend," says the 19-year-old. "She's someone who cares about me, someone who's there for me if I need something but who is also a pain in the behind. I don't really look at anybody as my mother."

Payne says she found it difficult when Marissa's birth mother, a recovering addict whom Marissa hadn't seen for years, attended her high school graduation. "She (Marissa) kept saying, 'Is my mom here yet?,' " Payne recalls. "Part of me wanted to scream, 'I'm here.' But I understand. And the biological mother was so gracious. She kept saying, 'thank you, Rosanne.' "

A more telling experience came when Marissa's grandmother, with whom she had spent part of her childhood, died. Payne accompanied her foster daughter to the services.

"At the funeral, she was surrounded by her biological family -- her mom, uncles -- and she was telling them about her life," Payne says. "And she said, 'yeah, my life started when I moved to Haverhill.' It was the most rewarding thing I've ever heard in my life."