

BOTH SIDES NOW

by Gregory M. Simpson, ACSW, Deputy Director, Hartford Division

The Vermont Division's Gay Palazzo has been on both sides now. In 1987, she and her husband, Tony, attended foster parent pre-service training led by the division's then-resource coordinator. Today, 16 years later, Gay is the resource coordinator.

During the training process, "we were as naïve as could be," Gay begins. Initially, she and her husband provided lots of respite until Daniel, age 8, was placed with them in 1989. "Waiting was difficult, but respite was harder. Providing respite means you have to be entertainment chairmen," she jokes.

The 8-year-old boy whom the Palazzo family added in 1989 is now a 22-year-old ex-Marine. Gay shares that the experience of foster parenting means, "... Your whole life is changed. The rewards are so many, and the little steps are really important, too. It's been rewarding for everyone in our family. Our kids' essays for college – in terms of major life event – were when Dan came to our family."

Now, Dan lives in an apartment attached to their home and attends Vermont Technical College where he intends to major in computer science. He also clerks at the Veterans Administration Hospital in White River Junction. The Palazzo's other son, Andy, 27, is married, with one son (Gay became a grandparent in February), and lives in New Hampshire. Daughter, Gina, 24, resides in Salt Lake City.

Asked to reflect on the challenges of foster parenting, Gay smiles and says, "You just can't sign them up for Little League and leave them there – you have to be more playful." Having parented two birth children, she contrasts that "everything takes much more attention to parenting skills – you need to be more specific about everything you do."

This leads her to advise new foster parents that "as you listen to orientation, workshops, the home study – talk to your partner. You need to discuss along the way so little things don't build up. If you're single, you'll need to develop support among family and friends to help you.

"As a foster parent, I would say I interacted well with the social workers," Gay remembers, "but I felt they knew everything – that they had all the answers, and now (she pauses, smiling)... I have even more respect for them. I realize they don't have all the answers, but they never stop learning, adapting and trying to help parents in all kinds of situations. I really respect the way Casey has encouraged the family to bring the child into their home and feel accepted as part of the family."

Gay has attended every Casey foster parent conference since 1987. "It's a wonderful way to interact with other foster parents – it's really an asset. I'm amazed at how such diverse people can be good foster parents." She feels that one important quality is "the ability to slow down and parent a child – accepting that a large portion of your time is in repetition and teaching."

In 2001, Gay successfully interviewed for the position of division administrator. When Vermont's resource coordinator left, Gay began performing some of those responsibilities. She liked it so much she assumed the job full time in January 2002.

In both roles, she has made use of her undergraduate degree in journalism and economics from the University of Rhode Island.

As resource coordinator, “I try to be the parents’ advocate and bring out their perspective on things. I’m trying to help the foster parents know what is going on at Casey so when the tough times come along, they won’t feel so alone.” She encourages foster parents to support each other. To facilitate this, she publishes a monthly newsletter and serves as staff liaison to the Casey Foster Parent Leadership Team. This forum was developed to share information and discuss topics such as respite or transitioning from foster care.

When asked what makes a good Casey employee, she uses one word: flexibility. “You don’t have to know the social welfare system, but you have to be able to learn, care, and listen.”

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