



There are a lot of different types of families and ways to provide a loving home to a child. Peggy O'Neill knows this well after raising her two children, Erin and Sharnell, and providing foster care for more than 15 children in the past eight years. Recently, she also adopted Shea, a seventeen year old who came to her through the foster care system in 2006.

Peggy has lived and worked in Livingston most of her life. After nursing school, she worked for a year and half at Warms Springs before coming home for a job at Livingston Memorial Hospital in 1977. Since then, she has worked in the emergency department, medical/surgical, OB, hospice, employee health, and infection prevention. "I have pretty much done it all," she says. "But I chose to pursue the infection prevention position for the education opportunities and chance to develop new skills." She has served in that role for the past five years.

Peggy's interest in foster care started a long time ago as well. "I took classes for foster care about 25 years ago," she recalls. "It just didn't work out for me at the time.

Building a Family through a Spirit of Caring

Then, in 2000 I became interested in trying again." Just as she was starting the process, Peggy was diagnosed with breast cancer and had to put it on hold. But it wasn't for long. By the summer of 2002, she was taking classes, and she had her first foster care placement in the fall.

She quickly found that teenage boys were the best fit with her household, which worked out well since teenage boys are often difficult to place. "I needed kids old enough to let themselves in the house if I wasn't home," she explains. "And, there was a lot of tension with my teenage daughter when there was another girl in the house." Most of her placements were long term, and usually the ultimate goal was for them to be reunited with their families.

"It can be really heartbreaking when you are sending a child home after they have been with you," Peggy says. "But being a foster parent is also very rewarding." It is a huge commitment. "There is a lot more involved in being a foster parent than you might think," she adds. "It is really a 24 hour a day job with a lot of responsibilities. It doesn't leave a lot of time for other pursuits."

Still, Peggy says she would do it again in a heartbeat, and her next placement will be coming to her soon. "One day I might step back and just do short term respite care so I can pursue other interests, like developing more resources for foster families in the area, but not yet." She is very passionate about fostering and would encourage others to consider being a foster parent because there is such a need. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, nearly 3,000 children enter the foster care system in Montana each year.

"I really believe these children are innocent victims," she says. "They are not in the situation they are in because of anything that they have done. Being a foster parent can be a rocky road, but in the end it is rewarding and certainly gives you an opportunity to give a lot of love."

Good to Go Physicals

Livingston HealthCare encourages 12-17 year olds to get a "Good to Go!" annual checkup. The 30-minute visit covers requirements for school sports, summer activities, and camps and includes a physical, growth check, and education with a healthcare provider. Call 222-0800 to make an appointment today. The cost is \$50 and discounts are available. Find out more at www.livingstonhealthcare.org