

Villages don't get better than this

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It takes a village.

To Angela Gifford, executive director of Village of Hope CDA (Coeur d'Alene), those words are more than a rallying cry, or a book title. It's the foundation of her entire operation.

And it's a big one.

Village of Hope provides support and resources for more than 250 child-foster families, and Gifford's "village" includes social-worker support, practitioners communications experts and a healthy number of volunteers. The heroes are the foster parents who have big hearts, but not always the capability to host foster kids with a wide range of problems.

"Everyone can do something," Gifford says. "The kids in foster care in North Idaho are our kids, and they need us to step up – each and every one of us. Not everyone can, or should, be foster parents or work with kids, but everyone can do a little something to support those that are doing it – bringing dinner, tutoring a child, providing diapers, helping prep curriculum, raise awareness donations. There are so many ways to be the village."

As Gifford says, there's nothing easy about caring for foster kids – many of whom are victims of abuse. Some troubled kids bounce around to multiple foster homes, going through a string of bad situations. But Gifford's "village" and social workers do not quit on the kids, or the families.

There are success stories. Meet Katelyn Miller of Rathdrum and Tabitha Norris of Post Falls.

On Christmas Eve of last year, Katelyn took in a newborn boy (Sonny), and it was not for a short-term placement. She's had experience working with foster children, which inspired her to say "yes" to welcoming Sonny. Katelyn's 8-year-old son, JJ, was excited about getting a baby brother, but there were many things to work out.

"They said for me to bring a car seat," she said. "How am I going to get a car seat? And clothing? What kind of formula is he going to be on? What special needs will he have?"

But Katelyn wasn't doing this alone. The Village of Hope was there to address all those issues and even provide a crib months later.

"The Village of Hope has been amazing," Katelyn said. "I'm so glad I answered the call on Christmas Eve, and he's healthy and safe. He lights up my life in ways I never expected."

Tabitha Norris and her husband, Paul, had a challenge of a different sort. In June, they adopted a 17-year-old boy from South Idaho who had bounced around foster homes for more than a decade. And Tabitha has plenty of challenges of her own with advanced stages of Muscular Dystrophy.

“I think that has given me a huge heart for kids who are struggling with trauma and disabilities themselves,” she said. For her son, named Raymond Paul Norris, he now has stability in his life and a mom and dad who care.

Raising a teenager is not easy in any scenario, but Tabitha says the rewards far outweigh the challenges. Raymond is being home-schooled during his senior year and enjoys basketball, baseball and rock climbing.

“He’s so joyful – so bouncy and fun,” Tabitha says. “He has changed our lives. He is our hero.”

The Village of Hope has been with Tabitha and Paul through the entire journey, Tabitha says. “They have gone above and beyond, always asking how they can support us.”

Officially, Raymond has “aged out” of the foster-care system, but he’s now working as a junior volunteer with Village of Hope.

Gifford gladly celebrates success stories, but they are not typical in her world. She sees social workers who are overworked, foster parents who do not have enough training and families that are at risk.

“North Idaho has not caught up to offering affordable housing, and families are losing health coverage for their kids,” she says. “These families are at risk and we need to be doing more on the prevention side. We work with families to help kids overcome trauma and set healthy goals, but there are so many other odds that are stacking up against them.”

Gifford is correct. She has a nice “village” in place, but there’s much more that needs to be done.

Chuck Malloy, a long-time Idaho journalist and columnist, is a writer with the Idaho Nonprofit Center., a program of The Idaho Community Foundation. He may be reached at ctmalloy@outlook.com