


Letter carriers who open their houses and their hearts to foster children



Letter carriers care for their communities in many ways, from collecting food for the hungry with the Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive, or raising money and volunteering for the Muscular Dystrophy Association and other charities, to rescuing people in danger on their routes. Letter carriers are everyday heroes. They quietly and humbly contribute to making the lives of others better. It's no surprise that some carriers have found another way to give back—by acting as foster parents. This is the story of two letter carrier families who care for vulnerable children in their homes.

Debbie and Jeff Knowlton balance letter carrier careers with caring for their own four children as well as foster children. The carriers, married 18 years, still work in the same station in the town of Bowling Green, OH, where they met and still live with three of their four children (the fourth has grown and left home). Both are members of Toledo, OH Branch 100.

Though they've already reared four children, the Knowltons had a reason to take in more.

"My mom was in the foster system back in the day," Debbie said, so she

wanted to be a foster parent. In her mother's time, it was more common to place children in group homes, but today, foster parents like the Knowltons bring children in need to their own homes to provide as much stability and care as possible.

Since 2017, the Knowltons have hosted eight foster children—two unrelated infants and two sets of three siblings. The first set, two boys and a girl, aged 5, 7 and 9, respectively, stayed with the Knowlton family for eight months. The second group, two girls and a boy, consisted of a newborn boy and his sisters, aged 2 and 5. They stayed for a few weeks before returning to their home, but they had to come back for an additional six months because the parents still weren't ready to resume their family life. The Knowltons took in the two single infants, a boy and a girl, in overlapping stays; the longest for a year and a half.

"There aren't a lot of foster families that take sibling groups," Debbie said. She and Jeff each grew up with five siblings. "We both come from big families, so we know how important it is to be with your brothers and sisters."



Before they could care for foster children, the Knowltons went through a thorough screening and training process to get a license from their county. There were criminal background and financial checks, a home check and fire safety inspection, extensive training and many forms to fill out. The process took six months.

The role of most foster families is to care for children removed from their homes temporarily while their parents handle the issues that caused the removal, such as drug addiction, abuse or neglect, and get permission from a judge to take them back. “It gives them time to deal with whatever issues they have,” Jeff said.

Foster parents have all the same responsibilities as permanent parents, and the tasks can add up. The Knowltons took their foster children to school functions and sports as they had done with their own children. Sometimes, the children also needed to go to counseling sessions to work through trauma, or to the doctor. “A lot of them aren’t up to date with their vaccinations and immunizations and doctor visits,” Jeff said. The couple managed to do it all while working letter carrier schedules.

The Knowltons made the foster children feel like their own family members. “We always include them in family fun days,” Debbie said, taking them to play on indoor trampolines, roller skating or a Chuck E. Cheese restaurant.

Maintaining stability is important for foster children, the Knowltons said. The goal is to keep the children in a normal routine at the same school, with siblings still together. The children keep in touch with their parents, first by visiting the children

at the foster parents’ home, and then through short visits or overnight stays at the parents’ home, until the parents (or parent) are ready to take them back and a judge approves.

Every once in a while, though, children can’t go back to their parents. The Knowltons were prepared for that.

“We also put ourselves down as an adoptive family” for any foster child who needed a new family permanently, Jeff said. They wanted a child in that situation to have as stable a childhood as possible instead of going to multiple foster homes.

Even though they haven’t adopted a foster child, the Knowltons consider them a part of the family forever. “We tried to help them be part of our family and just know we would be there for them,” Debbie said. “We’re with these kids for the rest of their lives if they need anything.” They still see some of the children who went back to their parents, especially the baby they had for more than a year. “We

Jeff (l) and Debbie (second from r) Knowlton and three of their children





still see him on weekends for a few hours,” she said. “His mom wants him to see us because we bonded so long.”

The Knowltons said their experience as foster parents has been demanding but satisfying. “You don’t realize how big the problem is until you’re actually in the system,” Jeff said. “It’s a rewarding experience to help the families stay together. They all become part of your family, one big extended family.”

“We know we have relationships for life with these kids,” Debbie added. “The reward is they got to stay together.”

Though they’ve taken a break from fostering to focus on their own children for a while, the Knowltons are still helping—they act as respite care parents, taking in foster children from other foster homes for short periods when their foster parents take a trip and the children can’t accompany them, or the foster parents just need a day off.

Carmel, IN Branch 888 carrier **John Huskey** and his wife, Kara, ended

up as foster parents because of a new house.

After John transferred from Texas in 2019 to reduce their commute times and to be closer to Kara’s family, the couple bought a spacious home in Indianapolis. The home was perfect for the Huskeys and Kara’s parents, who wanted to move in. The large house was a little over their budget, and came with a twist—once owned by a family with eight children, the house came with eight bedrooms, five-and-a-half bathrooms and numerous extra appliances.

As they zeroed in on buying the huge house, John said, “we told God that if he allowed us to have this house, we would use it for good.”

Their new home soon became a foster home when the Huskeys became foster parents and sheltered children in need. The couple had raised their own three children, now adults, so they knew what raising families entailed. Some of the foster children who came to them needed extra help just to live like a normal family.

After getting their fostering license,



Opposite page: John (second from right) and Kara Huskey (fourth from right) and family pose for a family photo during his daughter's wedding. Huskey's four foster children attended the wedding with them. (The foster children's and family member's faces have been obscured to protect their identities.)

the couple welcomed a group of four siblings, aged 14, 11, 11 and 8, who stayed with them for two years until they were reunited with their mother a few months ago.

Caring for these children turned out to involve more than just providing them temporary shelter, Kara said. "They really got to experience some things they would never have experienced if they hadn't been put in foster care," she said.

"From the start, they were pretty secluded and sheltered before they got to us," John said. "We got to do so many firsts with them." The couple recalled a trip to a children's museum, where the kids took an elevator for the first time. They knew what it was and how to push the button, but had never been inside one. "As soon as it moved, they all hit the floor," he said, confused by the sudden change in gravity. "They had never experienced the sensation" of movement in an elevator.

Their mother was in the country illegally, so even though the children were all citizens, the parents feared being caught. "They had been so secluded from the world that they were only allowed to leave the house to go to school or to go to the grocery store," John said. "They'd been raised in such a culture of fear, to be really fearful of the world." The Huskeys set about introducing the children to many new experiences.

Other firsts included going to a movie theater and to a restaurant, where they learned the ins and outs of the small formalities and manners involved with both. But the most important skill they learned, Kara said, was to get along like a normal family.

The Huskeys taught them to com-

promise, share and apologize when they were wrong. "Those are things we teach our children when they're really small. We do it automatically, part of parenting," she said, "but we realized these kids had never had parenting at that level."

Having a normal routine was a challenge for the kids, John said: "I think the hardest part for them to learn was structure." What the children thought of as too many rules were just daily requirements: "You get up, you have breakfast, you go to school, you have lunch, you eat dinner, you have family time and then you go to bed," he said.

The Huskeys haven't taken in additional foster kids so far, but like the Knowltons, they are helping with respite care for other foster families. In the meantime, they are still in touch with their four foster children.

John said the foster experience brought joy to him and Kara. "I knew it would be work to care for these kids, but it became really fulfilling that I could give the children a place to live and a warm meal. It was a blessing."

The Huskeys shared a fond memory about taking the children to the town of Santa Claus, IN, which, not surprisingly, hosts many Christmas celebrations. During their visit to the town, each child wrote a letter to Santa Claus and mailed it, and each soon received responses in the mail. It was the first letter in their names that any of the children had received.

"When the kids got their first piece of mail addressed to them, they treasured those," Kara said. "They held on to those pieces of paper. They felt like they had an identity in the world—they were a person." **PR**