

Opening Hearts — and Homes — Through Foster Care

Ellen Corrales of Churchill, Pa., was working at a Pittsburgh nonprofit social services agency when she learned of a young boy named Landon whose case pulled at her heart strings. The 10-year-old — whose father had been incapacitated in a terrible accident and whose mother had abandoned him — was alone in the hospital awaiting a four-organ transplant.

She and her husband already had filled out paperwork to become foster parents. As the parents of an adult special needs son, they felt compelled to care for Landon, even though they were told he would likely die.

“When I saw his profile, I knew what we had to do,” says Ellen, 60. “If he died, he would die loved with parents by his side.”

Filling a Vital Need

Ellen was very much aware of the vital need for foster parents. Currently, there are nearly 400,000 children in foster care across the nation, including 14,000 children in Pennsylvania. Some children need a temporary home before being reunited with their families, while others need a permanent home. She felt inspired to leave her job and take in children through [UPMC Western Behavioral Health at Mon Yough’s specialized foster care program](#).

“I felt I could affect change better by becoming a foster parent rather than sitting behind a desk,” says Ellen. “These children need families and homes. They need people who have their backs and can show them that they are valuable, they belong in this world, and they are loved and needed.”

A former Peace Corps volunteer who had spent two years in Central America, Ellen speaks fluent Spanish. Because of that skill, she and her husband have fostered nine Hispanic boys since 2019. For all except Landon, Spanish was their native language.

“I figured it’s a good way of putting my language skills to use,” says Ellen.

Support and Training

Ellen and her husband went through training and certification with UPMC Western Behavioral Health at Mon Yough’s specialized foster care program. In addition to placement and matching services, the program provides a wide range of support services, including individual and family trauma-based therapy, crisis intervention, parenting guidance, and behavioral support.

Besides speaking fluent Spanish, Ellen also has worked as an autism specialist and mobile therapist. Although she is uniquely qualified, Ellen says the most important skill for a foster parent is the ability to love.

“What children need is love and you need to be willing to love unconditionally,” she says. “Foster children often bring a multitude of experiences that are not all wonderful. Some have experienced death, trauma, neglect, or abuse. You have to be willing to open your mind to learning new ways to tackle these issues and to help them heal.

“Thankfully, Mon Yough’s specialized foster care program prepares you well for what to expect. And they provide support when you need it,” Ellen adds. “You don’t have to walk the foster parenting road alone.”

Providing Love and Guidance

The Corrales’ foster care journey began with Landon in April 2019, followed two months later by an older teen. Although Landon died the following November without ever leaving the hospital, the couple took turns spending hours with him every day.

While many foster parents are hesitant to take in older children, they have welcomed into their Churchill home eight boys ranging in age from 15 to 18. They currently share their home with four boys — two age 16 and 19, and two age 18 — plus their adult son, who requires nursing care.

Over the years, Ellen has worked closely with the team at Mon Yough to ensure the boys receive the care they need, including counseling and therapy. She takes them to doctor appointments and court hearings, and doesn’t hesitate to advocate for them at school.

“You have to be able to stand up for your foster children. It validates them. It shows them somebody cares enough to fight for them,” says Ellen.

But Ellen says much of what they provide is a stability, structure, and life lessons. She looks over their homework to make sure the boys understand what needs to be done. Everyone has chores and responsibilities.

“I do a lot of teaching them about what’s expected and I do a lot of talking. Having conversations with your kids is vital,” says Ellen. “My job is to prepare them and help them be as successful as they can be. That means teaching them what is and isn’t appropriate — what is expected of them, not only in our home but in society.”

Making a Difference

While foster parenting is challenging, it’s also rewarding to be able to make a difference in a child’s life, says Ellen. She relishes the progress each child makes while adapting to a new culture and language, graduating from high school, and for some, even attending college.

“Everybody deserves a home. Everybody deserves to have a family — even if it’s for a short period of time,” she says.

“As a foster parent, you may not see the impact of what you’re doing right away, but these children will benefit from your care for the rest of their lives. Giving them that love and showing them that someone has their back makes all the difference in the world.”

To Learn More

For more information about UPMC Western Behavioral Health at Mon Yough’s specialized foster care program in Allegheny County, please call **412-580-6607**. For Westmoreland and surrounding county services, please call **412-215-7101**.