

Love wanted



- By [Matt Chandler](#) , Published Sun, Feb 5, 2017

Brandy Dulak and her husband Drew first considered taking in a foster child five years ago. The Grand Island couple has one biological child and, after adding another child through private adoption, the Dulaks felt they had more love to give.

“We are a Christian family, and we believe, as part of our faith, that we are called to take care of children who need homes,” Brandy Dulak said.

The Dulaks signed on to be foster parents and today are a family of seven, having adopted a brother and sister from foster care, while currently fostering a fifth child they are in the process of adopting.

In Erie County, the need for foster homes is great and the process to be approved is rigorous. Prospective foster parents must attend a 30-hour training program called the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting/Group Preparation and Selection Program (MAPP/GPS).

“Sitting in the training, our eyes were really opened to how many kids out there need homes, and we asked ourselves how could we limit it to just adoption,” Brandy said. Since fostering their first child, several of the Dulaks’ foster children have been returned to their birth parents. Known as reunification, it is seen as the ultimate success — but for foster families, it can be emotionally draining.

“If you’re going to care for them properly, you’re going to let them into your heart, love them 100 percent, and you’ll get hurt,” said Dulak.

The Dulaks have known the birth parents for their foster children and, in some cases, had positive relationships with them. In every case, she said they view the birth parents with compassion.

“We are all one bad choice, one unfortunate circumstance away from being in a position some of these birth parents are in,” she said. “None of these parents woke up one day and said, ‘I want to be a parent that can’t take care of my kids.’”

Lori Miazga is a home finder with Gateway-Longview, a non-profit agency that facilitates fostering children.

Miazga said that despite preparing foster parents for the reality of reunification, the loss they feel when a child is returned to the birth parents is very real.

“It is one of the biggest challenges of being a foster parent,” Miazga said. “To help with that, part of our training process focuses on grief and loss and we offer support to families after they have fostered.”

Miazga said the foster parent program is open to anyone, and the ideal foster parent doesn’t fit into a mold.

“You can be single, divorced, you can be a same-sex couple, you don’t have to own your own home,” she explained. “The ideal foster family has faced struggles and overcome those struggles.”

For Brandy and Drew Dulak and many other families across the region, their roles as foster parents have had a happy ending, but that isn’t always the case.

Rachel lives in Amherst and is a foster parent. She asked her last name not be used because she is embroiled in a legal battle. Rachel and her husband took in their foster daughter when the baby was just 12 weeks old, serving as her court-appointed guardians.

After two months with the baby, Rachel went through the process of becoming a foster parent. But after a year, the child was removed to be reunited with her biological siblings.

Her voice cracking, Rachel talks about the baby being removed from her care and the fight that has ensued to bring her home.

“It has been so hard, so devastating,” she said. She has kept the child’s room intact and continues to buy her clothes, faithfully hoping she will be returned to their home. To date, she and her husband have spent more than \$18,000 in legal fees fighting to get her back.

Melissa Cavagnaro is a partner in the Buffalo law firm Mattingly Cavagnaro LLP. She said the courts approach the majority of these cases with a plan to return the child to the birth parents or blood relatives.

“Foster care is intended to be a temporary situation, while birth parents follow through with a plan set forth to address whatever issues led to the child being removed from the home,” she said.

Cavagnaro said, in the eyes of the law, the County has an obligation to act in what it believes is the best interest of the child.

“The court views the right to parent your biological child as great,” Cavagnaro said. “Foster parents have limited options, especially if they have fostered the child for less than one year.”

Rachel isn't alone. The challenges families face while navigating the world of foster parenting are well-documented. Miazga and Cavagnaro advise parents to enter the process with eyes wide open.

But they also acknowledge that the rewards are great.

“For many of these kids, they may not have done very well in life in their present circumstances, and to see them adopted into these loving families is such a heartwarming situation,” Cavagnaro said.

Brandy Dulak said the opportunity to make that kind of difference in a foster child's life is incredibly rewarding.

“We fostered a little guy for nine months and then he was moved to be with another foster family to reunite with a sibling,” she said. “But in those nine months, he taught us so much and we loved him so much. The cool part is that he was just adopted by a wonderful family and we got to go to the adoption party and we still get to see him, so that is the ultimate foster success story.”

“These families are incredible and they give so much of their lives and their love to the children they foster,” Miazga said. “I would tell anyone who is considering being a foster parent that it is one of the most rewarding experiences you could ever have.”