

CITIZEN ACTION FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE A STUDY IN THE POWER OF COOPERATION

Back in 1976, there wasn't a whole lot of money available for the "extras" children need to experience "kiddom" in America. Child welfare agencies provided the basics. But it was the church groups, civic organizations, etc. that provided the extras. I was interested in learning about how an idea has lived and blossomed over the past 23 years and so, I spent several hours in Athens County recently interviewing Mrs. Kay Wheeler, a retired school teacher, foster parent and Treasurer of the Foster Parent Association and Mr. Jerry Vickroy, Food Service Manager and current President of the Association. What I learned from these two dedicated individuals underscores the importance and power behind community activism and a family-centered, neighborhood-based approach towards service delivery.

In Athens County, in 1976, a concerned citizen and a group of foster parents got together to create opportunities for children in care. With blood, sweat and tears, a small group of civic minded concerned citizens got together to establish a New-Used Clothing Shop hoping that the income generated would help pay for prom night, school pictures, music lessons and the like. 23 years, 4 moves later, the New-Used Shop is still going strong with the Athens County Foster Parent Association as the brain behind its success. What this group of committed individuals have developed will simply blow your mind, it did mine!

Today, the Foster parent Association New and Used Shop of Athens County maintains a paid staff of five with an additional 3 workers funded through the Athens County DHS: OWF Subsidized Employment Program and an additional 16 to 130 hours a month of staff time provided by the Athens County DHS Worker's Experience Program. This is quite an operation. The Shop is a block long and is divided into clothing, books, equipment for children (beds, car seats, etc.); electronic equipment, sports equipment and household items. In 1999 the Shop's net profit was \$133,261. Seventy percent of the profits are put into what is known as the Children's fund and the remaining 30% goes towards the Foster Parent Association. Take a look at the list of supports that are provided to children in foster care as a result of these dedicated and committed citizens.

- Each child in foster care gets up to \$250. per year for whatever s/he may need.
- Each child receives a gift of \$25 for their birthday each year.
- Foster parents and the children in their home get first dibs on all incoming merchandise.
- Special requests are considered above and beyond the annual \$250 for each child.
- The Association's Shop pays \$100 towards senior pictures and \$50 towards the cap and gown. Each graduating senior can access up to \$150 for prom night.
- Foster parents can get anything their foster children need at the shop for free. The only stipulation is that the foster parents be members of the Association.

- The Association's Shop provides \$500 scholarships each year for two years for emancipated foster children that are going to a college or technical school and up to \$300 per month towards living expenses.
- Any foster child emancipating from the system gets \$200 towards setting up their apartment.
- Special nights out for the foster parents are provided by the Association's Shop.
- Special events for the children in foster care and the foster families biological children are planned and paid for throughout the year including a big holiday party, Easter party, camping, pool and skating parties, etc.
- The Foster Parents Association send between 12 to 16 foster parents to the annual National Foster Parent Convention each year.
- Each foster parent has access to up to \$250. to off-set any damage incurred to their home as a result of having foster children in their home.

While the Foster Parent Association fills a very important need in the lives of children and families, it provides low-income citizens with opportunities to purchase goods that would be otherwise unaffordable all the while contributing to the Athens County economy. In addition to all of these incredibly supportive financial gifts and activities provided to foster children, the Shop provides free clothing and items to women and families who are accessing local social services (e.g. Battered Women's Shelter).

If you want to know more about how a concerned group of citizens can turn an idea into a quarter of a million dollar business, contact the Athens County Foster Parent Association through their New-Used Shop located at 9 West Stimson Avenue, Athens, Ohio 45701. ▪