

RAK MAGAZINE

RAISINGARIZONAKIDS.COM

MAY 2017

HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY!

What kids want
their moms to know

RECOGNIZING "NON-MOMS"
IN YOUR CHILD'S LIFE

GIRL SCOUTS open new
Parsons Leadership Center

COULD FOSTER PARENTING
BE RIGHT FOR YOU?

Phoenix Municipal Court Judge Cynthia Gonzales
and daughter Winter Warnicke (12)



A photograph of a woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, smiling and holding a young child on monkey bars. The child is wearing a pink long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans. The background shows a playground with red monkey bars and a sandy ground.

SECOND IN A SERIES ABOUT FOSTER PARENTING IN ARIZONA.

ARIZONA'S CHILDREN IN FOSTER FAMILIES, LOVE TRANSFORMS

BY SHERI SMITH | PHOTOS BY RICK D'ELIA

Becki MacLay Gilbert plays on the monkey bars with her foster son (18 months) in a playground near her home

GILBERT COUPLE BECKI AND BRETT MacLay always knew they wanted a lively household, and that's exactly what they got.

Their children — 9-year-old Chloe and 6-year-old twins Landon and Brennan — fill the days with plenty of activity. But that's not all. The MacLays also are a foster family, which means that on the day I met them, their family included two wonderfully rambunctious toddlers: an 18-month-old boy and a 16-month-old girl (their identities are protected for privacy reasons).

The MacLays and I must have looked pretty silly that bright, sunny morning as we tried to conduct a serious interview while two adorable “walking teddy bears” stole our pens and climbed in and out of our laps. But I wanted to see firsthand what foster care was really like, and there it was in front of me: Wild, messy and fun!

HOW DOES FOSTER CARE WORK?

Kris Jacober is a foster-care expert. She is president of the Arizona Association for Foster and Adoptive Parents and executive director of the Arizona Friends of Foster Children Foundation. A mother of three biological children, Jacober also has been a foster parent for 15 years. So she has vast experience as both a supporter and a provider of services.

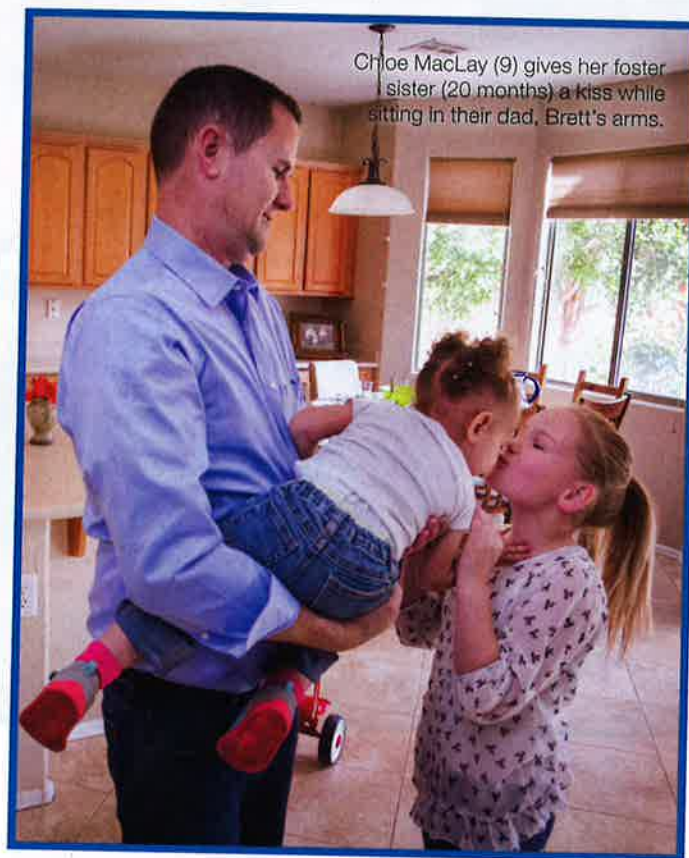
Jacober describes the process: A child comes into “the system” — the term used to describe foster care — when a state caseworker investigates a report of child endangerment and determines that removal of the child is necessary due to negligence or abuse. If no family member is available to take the child in, a call goes out to foster families to find available beds that meet the criteria for the child needing placement. (Licensed foster families can be specific about the children they're willing to accept, including their age, race, gender, behaviors and disabilities.)

If a foster family can't be found, the child is sent to an emergency shelter or group home. This often is the case with siblings, whom the system tries to keep together, or older children for whom it often is difficult to find placement.

The goal of the Arizona Department of Child Safety is to have a child placed within four hours of removal from the home.

For many years in Arizona, there weren't enough beds, even at emergency facilities, for all the children coming into foster care, and some ended up sleeping in state offices. Although these makeshift quarters seem to be a thing of the past (at least for now), Arizona's foster-care system — with more than 17,000 children in its custody and fewer than 5,000 licensed foster families — still is bursting at the seams. Placement rarely occurs within the four-hour window.

Once children are placed in a home or shelter, they remain “in limbo” until it's determined whether they can be returned to their biological families.



Chloe MacLay (9) gives her foster sister (20 months) a kiss while sitting in their dad, Brett's arms.

“Reunification is always the end goal,” Jacober says.

In the meantime, biological families receive services and counseling and are granted visitation rights. Caseworkers, attorneys and the courts oversee the process in hopes that the necessary steps can be taken to ensure that a child can be returned home safely.

When reunification isn't possible, a child qualifies for adoption. How long the entire process takes depends on many circumstances, including how quickly caseworkers and courts can address individual cases. With the sheer numbers of kids for the courts to oversee, a child can spend months or even years in foster care. Many children, especially those who are older, remain in the system until they “age out” at 18.

WHY DO FAMILIES CHOOSE TO BECOME FOSTER FAMILIES?

Marcia Reck, director of foster-care and adoption programs at Child Crisis Arizona, says many parents become foster parents because they hope to adopt one day. Private and international adoptions can be extremely expensive; in contrast, there's no cost for a DCS adoption.

Other families, who don't plan to adopt the children they foster, simply are passionate about helping children in need.

“The thing you have to realize is that the children are in foster care through no fault of their own,” Reck says. “Reading (about) the kids' stories can make you burn out, but seeing the kids' growth and meeting these foster families will give you hope again. They are incredible people.”

The MacLays say adoption was the reason they began opening their home and hearts to foster kids — they adopted their twin sons when they were 3 — but there are other reasons why fostering children has become such an important aspect of their lives.

Becki describes it this way: “There is a moment, an awakening, and



The MacLay family, from left, clockwise, Becki, Chloe, 9, Landon, 6, Brennan, 6, Brett MacLay, and their two foster children say grace before Sunday lunch in Gilbert.

HOW TO BECOME A FOSTER PARENT

To be a foster parent in Arizona, you must:

- Be at least 21 years old.
- Be a legal U.S. and Arizona resident.
- Be physically, mentally and emotionally able to care for children.
- Provide at least five references who can speak about your parenting abilities.
- Be an apartment dweller, renter or homeowner and prove you're economically stable.
- Pass a fingerprint-based criminal-history records check.
- Take 30+ hours of foster-parent training classes through a qualified foster-home licensing agency, then complete a family home study and inspection. Note: Foster parenting is not limited to married couples. Potential foster parents can be married, single or cohabitating.

For more information on becoming a foster or adoptive parent, call the Arizona Department of Child Safety at 1-877 KIDS-NEEDU or visit azdcs.gov. You also can attend a free orientation for adults interested in foster and adoptive parenting. Find upcoming orientations and a list of foster-care licensing agencies at azkidsconsortium.com.

it happens differently with each child, but you see the fog lift from their eyes. They look at you and see you as someone who will protect them and take care of them. A switch flips, the light comes on and they're happy."

Brett agrees it's the children's transformation that makes it all worthwhile.

"I'll always remember when each one was brought to the house," he says. "One came still in her hospital gown with vomit all over her. Another, a 6-year-old, walked right up to us and said, 'Are you my new friends?' So brave!"

He describes one child who was thought to be autistic, because he wouldn't make eye contact.

"But many of the traits that others found frustrating at first were his best attributes," Brett recalls. "I remember how he learned to ride a bike. He was so determined."

It was hard for me to believe the two toddlers I met at the MacLay home were withdrawn when they first arrived. One walked up and greeted me with the tiniest, gentlest fist bump I'd ever received.

The lesson was simple: Love transforms.

THE LIFE YOU CHANGE MAY BE YOUR OWN

Marcia Reck teaches foster-care classes, which are required for licensing foster parents. She tells her students the one quality required of anyone who wants to become a foster parent is flexibility: "You can't be too rigid."

"It's the hardest thing you'll ever do," Reck says, "but it's also the most rewarding. I can't think of anything that would have the same impact as foster care and adoption."

The MacLays acknowledge it's difficult never knowing what's going to happen one day to the next, but uncertainty is part of life, whether we recognize that or not.

They say providing foster care has strengthened them as a family and helped them grow.

"Everyone always asks me how long we will have the kids we foster,"

Becki says. She always tells them: "I have them today. That's all I know."

One of the greatest benefits of providing foster care, Brett says, is the influence it has had on their other children.

"My kids have learned so much by doing this. To welcome a stranger into our house, they learn about service, they learn about love. It makes them better people."

As for saying goodbye when the kids leave, Becki asks, "Does it hurt? Of course it does, but you learn something new from each child. You learn to cherish your time with them. Besides, I wouldn't know these kids," she says as she hugs one of the toddlers, "if those other kids hadn't moved on and made room for them."

IS FOSTER CARE RIGHT FOR ME?

If you're considering becoming a foster parent, the first thing to do is contact a licensing agency and learn everything you can. Go in with an open mind, Reck recommends, especially about the number of kids and the ages you would consider fostering.

"The biggest need is for sibling groups and teens. Teens get a bum rap, but families with teens are often amazed by them. They are often honor students. They are super resilient."

Reck also reassures anyone who considers providing foster care that they aren't in it alone. Classes — at least 33 hours of instruction — are provided by the state.

"We want families to be as prepared as possible," she says.

Support is provided once the children are in the home, once per week for the first month and monthly after that. There are follow-up classes

"THERE IS A MOMENT, AN AWAKENING, AND IT HAPPENS DIFFERENTLY WITH EACH CHILD, BUT YOU SEE THE FOG LIFT FROM THEIR EYES. THEY LOOK AT YOU AND SEE YOU AS SOMEONE WHO WILL PROTECT THEM AND TAKE CARE OF THEM. A SWITCH FLIPS, THE LIGHT COMES ON AND THEY'RE HAPPY."

— Becki MacLay, Gilbert foster parent

and places to turn for help and advice. Other foster families provide a great network for support.

Even if you decide you can't be a foster family, you certainly can support one. In the following months, RAISING ARIZONA KIDS will shed light on other ways you can help — from respite care to adoption, from providing meals and supplies to mentorships, volunteer work and financial contributions.

"There's an invisible army out there," Becki MacLay says. "You don't always see all people that are actually helping, but they're there."

Sheri Smith, of Scottsdale, is the mother of Aidan (17) and Sarah (13).

Mayor Jay Tibshraeny and the Chandler City Council



MAY IS NATIONAL WATER SAFETY MONTH

AND THE PERFECT TIME TO LEARN TO SWIM!

Enroll in a learn to swim program today. Chandler Aquatics offers free swim lesson skills testing during public swim hours, to ensure proper lesson placement. Learn to Swim programs are offered at all six Chandler aquatic centers, teaching basic swimming skills and water safety practices for all ages.

**WATER SAFETY
AWARENESS DAY**

**MAY 6
Noon-5 p.m.**

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