

OXNARD

Oxnard couple take in 321 foster kids over the years



TROY HARVEY/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Barbara Williams (right) hands a plate of food to her son Quinten Williams during dinner on a recent Sunday afternoon.

By [Jean Moore](#) of the Ventura County Star

Posted: Yesterday 4:59 p.m. 0

Barbara Williams explains it like this: She simply had a lot of love to give.

That's why Williams and her husband, Edward, have fostered 321 children and teenagers over the past 35 years, some for just a few days, others for years.

Barbara Williams, 69, grew up in a family that always welcomed people into their home, and she knew she would, too, she said.

"That was just my upbringing," she said. "I just knew I would have this great big house where (children) could stay. They didn't have to stay forever. They didn't have to be my biological kids."

The Oxnard couple, who have no biological children of their own, took in their first foster child in 1981, two years after adopting their daughter, Tequa Wallace, who is now 46. The 6-year-old girl they fostered was their daughter's biological sister, and she stayed with them for six months before going to live with an aunt.

"We received this call saying she needs foster care," Barbara Williams said. "I asked, 'What's foster care?'"

But Barbara Williams had, in a sense, been preparing for that call since she was a teenager growing up in Florida. Back then, she'd bring kids home from church on Sunday, give them a hearty dinner that she had cooked herself, then return them to their own homes.

She felt blessed in her life, growing up in her great-grandmother's home, and wanted to share her good fortune, she said.

"I'd make fried chicken because kids like chicken," she said. "I'd make pork and beans, try to find things they like. Rice, sometimes. And cake. Always, always, always cake."

Barbara Williams still cooks Sunday dinners for her family to enjoy after church at Victory Lighthouse in Oxnard, where her husband, 72, is pastor. She makes enough food so that anyone who might drop by can join them and bring some home.

"When all the kids leave, I'm not going to know how to cook for two people," she said. "I never learned how to cook small."

[Stretching a budget](#)

Barbara Williams stretches her budget by shopping sales, but she's "picky" about the food she serves her family, she said.

"I shop wherever there's a nice sale," she said. "It has to be good meat. I don't want any secondhand food."

She also stretches the leftovers from Sunday's dinner to Tuesday, then makes things like burritos on other week nights.

"I never throw anything away," she said.

Foster parents receive at least \$707 a month from the county, depending on the child's age and needs, to pay for necessities, such as shelter, food and clothing. They also can get donations of clothing and furniture, as well as discounts on cellphones and laptops.

But that money is not a good reason to become a foster parent, Barbara Williams said.

"You have to do it for the right reasons," she said. "You can't do it for the dollars, because it's not enough."

Indeed, it's an unconditional commitment that Ventura County officials are looking for in foster parents, along with the ability to provide a safe, nurturing environment, said Keri Rushing-King, supervisor for Foster VC Kids, a division of Children & Family Services.

"We really hope they're willing to serve children, no matter what child walks into their home," Rushing-King said.

Certainly, the Williams have had challenges along the way. They've taken in children born with fetal alcohol syndrome or addicted to drugs. One child stayed just one day. Others have run away. Another was cutting herself to cope with her pain.

But the Williams always gave them three chances.

"A lot of times, if you didn't have the love within you, it would have been impossible to deal with some of the kids," Edward Williams said. "They didn't know how to respond in love, so it was all on you. ... You can't just say, 'I can't tolerate this.' You give them another chance."

Second chances

Syra Parker, who is now 37 and living in Oxnard, was one of those children who got another chance. The Williams became her foster parents when she was 6, and she lived off and on with them for seven years, sometimes going into group homes because of her behavior problems, she said.

"I wasn't listening, wasn't following rules," Parker said. "I had a hard time doing what I needed to do everyday."

But the Williams gave her a sense of family, something she hadn't experienced with her biological family, she said.

"The love they showed me I was able to show my kids," she said. "The chances they gave me showed the love they had for me."

At one point, the Williams had nine children living with them, three to a room, sleeping in bunk beds. Now the law allows them to have only two to a room, but the Williams still have five teenagers in their home, including their son Quinten Edward Williams, 18, who came into their lives when he was two days old.

For years, the Williams mostly took care of babies and young children. But it's the teenagers who most need homes and guidance as they head into adulthood, they said.

"If we refuse to help our teens out, we're refusing to help ourselves," Ed Williams said. "If you want society to be better, you have to put yourself out."

Dominique Martinez first lived with the Williams when she was 5. She had been taken from her parents because of neglect and lived off and on with the Williams until she was 17. Today, she's grateful that the Williams were willing to foster teenagers, recognizing that they can be a challenge.

"I was grateful to have a stable place to be," said Williams, who is now 24 and working with foster youth herself. "By the time I got to sixth grade, I had already moved about eight times. ... Just like regular parents, I would see them get upset sometimes, but I didn't see them give up easily."

At first, it was hard for the Williams when a child they had come to love left their home.

"When we first got started, I almost quit in the first few months," Edward Williams said. "I was attached to them, and they were attached to me. ... I told my wife, 'They took my heart.' But we gradually overcame it."

Now they prepare for their children to return to their biological family. In some cases, they have had the children's biological family to dinner on holidays and allowed visits.

"It's my responsibility to do my part so kids can go back to their families," Barbara Williams said. "I believe in kids being reunited with their families."

Foster parenting

Ventura County's key requirements for people who want to foster children and teenagers:

- Attend an in-person or online information session.
- Participate in 24 hours of training and a three-hour orientation.
- Fill out application.
- Undergo a family and home assessment.

- Go through a background check.
- Pass an in-home inspection for safety.
- Provide proof of CPR and first aid certification.
- Have a thorough health screening.

- Get employment verified.



TROY HARVEY/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Edward Williams shares a laugh with his foster children during dinner on a recent Sunday afternoon. Edward and his wife, Barbara, have fostered 321 youths and teens over the past 35 years.



TROY HARVEY/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Barbara and Edward Williams along with their foster children and friends say grace during dinner on a recent Sunday afternoon.



TROY HARVEY/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Dominique Martinez (from left), Lily Henderson, Alexis Cortez and Anjaleagh Fisher laugh while telling jokes during dinner at Barbara and Edward Williams' home on a recent Sunday afternoon. Barbara and Edward have fostered 321 youths and teens over the past 35 years.



TROY HARVEY/SPECIAL TO THE STAR Barbara Williams (left) speaks with her husband Edward, not pictured, as Hannah Taylor listens during dinner held at their home Sunday afternoon.

<http://www.vcstar.com/news/local/oxnard/oxnard-couple-take-in-321-foster-kids.html>

