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Foster VC Kids Sponsors Open Hearts Town Hall Meeting

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By Tim Pompey

When you mention the term “foster care” to people, it conjures up all kinds of mental images, most of them unpleasant. Whether through news media reports or acquired impressions, much of foster care has gotten a bad rap.

Elizabeth Thasiah, director for Foster VC Kids, would like to change that impression. Even more important, so would the kids who are placed in foster care.

To that end, Thasiah and her staff have worked hard to create a network of resources for foster parents to rely on. Foster parents here in the county have extensive access to health care, therapy, and other important services that support their efforts to care for their foster children.

And yet the real need for Foster VC Kids remains the most basic: parents willing to take in children and provide them with extraordinary care while they remain in the foster care system.

To that end, Foster VC Kids is holding town meetings specifically geared to recruit local families, especially what Thasiah calls “high quality care givers who are willing to provide unconditional love and support for children.”

Oxnard needs such parents. “Sixty percent of our kids are in Oxnard,” Thasiah explained, “but unfortunately, sixty percent of our homes are not in Oxnard, and for children, they need to be with their siblings, to be within their communities where their friendships are located, and they need to stay in their schools of origin because that’s their safety network.”

Which explains why Foster VC Kids sponsored what they called an “Open Hearts Town Hall Meeting” on Saturday, February 25 at the Ventura County Health Care Agency located on Gonzales Road in Oxnard.



A panel was featured to discuss current issues of foster care and to answer audience questions. Featured left to right: Public health nurse Amenaghawon Ugwuode, foster parent Natalie Torres, foster parent Amanda Maxson, former foster child Lucy Zamora, and panel leader and Foster VC Kids Community Outreach Coordinator Jaci Johnson.

“The city of Oxnard serves the majority of our families who are entering into the child welfare system,” said Thasiah. “We’re here to recruit families for children to help them have stability and support.”

What's more, as Thasiah explained, Foster VC Kids would like to focus on families from specific backgrounds: "We are intentionally reaching out to our helping professions such as nurses, medical professionals, police officers, and public health care staff because we believe that people who are working in helping professions will already have a heart for kids in foster care."

For Ventura County, there are twelve hundred children in Foster VC Kids and approximately five hundred families to service them. For Oxnard, there are about two hundred and fifty children in the system, but only about sixty Oxnard-based foster parents. This means that some children in Oxnard must be placed somewhere outside their community.

Angelina McCormick Soll, a licensed social worker and program coordinator for Foster VC Kids, noted how the economic crisis is still taking its toll in Oxnard. "Kids coming into foster care are coming in for reasons of neglect," she stated. "What that tells us is that these are families that love their kids, but they're having trouble making ends meet and providing for the basic needs."

It's the soft underbelly of the financial meltdown. Those who were struggling prior to 2007 are still struggling in a county in which the cost of living, especially housing, has risen dramatically.

Soll lays out the reality of Oxnard kids coming into foster care: "Oxnard has been hit very deeply by the economic distress we've had in the last 10 years, and although the economy in other pockets is getting better, it's very slow in Oxnard."

This means that children from families struggling in Oxnard not only face the prospect of being placed into foster care, but having to leave their family, their friends, their school, anything that is familiar to them.

"The challenge becomes, how do we keep those kids in that community connected to their school, their friends, neighbors, coaches, anybody that they've been connected to," said Soll. "We know that coming into foster care, the further away they move from their home of origin, the more connections they lose and that really adds to the trauma that the kids experience by just coming into the system."

The answer to this, of course, is to recruit and train more families from Oxnard as part of Foster VC Kids. That is the hope of Foster VC Kids this morning as they appeal to a room full of potential foster parents.

Foster parent Amanda Maxson talks about the great joy she and her husband have as they work to help children in crisis. She has been a foster parent for four years. So far, the Maxsons have cared for eight kids. Their terms of care have ranged from two weeks to one actual adoption.

"My husband and I feel a call to it," she said. "We just feel it's a call from God for us to care for others."

They started by learning about Foster VC Kids and becoming acquainted with other foster parents: “We got to meet some people that are foster parents and got to see what that looks like. We thought, we could do this.”

It helps that Amanda is a licensed RN. “A lot of our children have some sort of delay or medical needs,” she explained. “When they’re in our home, we get the time to work with them and help them learn and take them to therapies, or get them the resources they need.”

She doesn’t shy away from the challenges, but there’s also a payoff. “It doesn’t take a long time before we get to see the effects and we get to be a part of that and know that we made a difference, even if they’re only in our home for a couple of months,” she stated.

For Thasihah and staff, foster care remains part of a vital safety net that exists uniquely in Ventura County. That safety net is formed by people who remain compassionate toward children in need. As she laid out for the potential foster parents in the audience: “Foster care falls under the safety network. You are the safety network. You *are* the safety network for our families in Ventura County.”

This in a county fortunate enough to have abundant resources to assist foster parents in their mission. “What is so unique about us as a county is that we’re on a smaller scale and what we’re known for are the incredible networking groups throughout the county,” she said. “The number of nonprofits and civic organizations for this size county are off the charts.”

For all those gathered this Saturday in the audience, it was an indication of how diverse this care could be. Young married couples, singles, seniors, men and women. It was a demonstration of how easily a family outside a family can be formed to provide foster care.

Thasihah hopes that somewhere in that audience are enough foster parents to equal out the number of children they care for, or maybe tip the scales a bit to provide more local family care to children in Oxnard and around the county who need that safety net to give them a shot at growing up healthy and happy.

For more information about Foster VC Kids, call (805) 654-3220, or visit their website at www.fostervckids.org.



(l. to r): Foster VC Kids Director Elizabeth Thasiah, foster parent Natalie Torres, Foster VC Kids Program Coordinator Angelina McCormick Soll, foster parent Amanda Maxson, Foster VC Kids Community Outreach Coordinator Jaci Johnson, Foster VC Kids Caregiver Support Specialist Crystal Stratton, former foster child Lucy Zamora, Support Specialist Ana Navarro

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