

“A Humbling Experience”

Retiring foster parents Sam & Alga Smith always knew their number one goal: reunify the family.

by Anya Earl, MSW, LSW

Sam and Alga Smith have been foster parents since 1994 and have learned several important lessons in their 22 years of fostering. They have cared for 24 children, ranging in age from three weeks to 16 years old. Of those 24 children, the Smiths worked alongside birth families and teams to reunify 21 children. They made the decision this year to retire from fostering and have had the opportunity to reflect on their time supporting families and healing children's trauma.

Explain your feelings about reunifying children you have built relationships with while they are in your home:

When looking back on the reunification of all of these children, we think of the following three words: unity, happiness and everlasting. We want to unite with the biological parents as a team to help them get their babies back. We want our children to be happy. They will always love their parents, but we can teach them and their parents how it is possible to have many people love and care for the kids and for those kids to love us back.

We have relationships with all of the families who have remained in Las Vegas and just recently celebrated the birth of a foster grandbaby! We know it is scary, but ultimately, a biological mom or dad is usually just plain scared. They are fearful of being replaced, fearful of being forgotten and fearful of what you do better than them. We help them see past all of that and work as a team.

What barriers do you experience working with biological parents?

We tell them about how we like to parent in general and the reason we decided to be foster parents. We also introduce the idea that we will always keep them informed of any health, educational or emotional issues that arise with their child so they can be a part of those experiences. Ultimately, we feel that more communication with a parent leads to a better relationship, and a better outcome for that family.

What positive experiences have you had when working with biological parents?

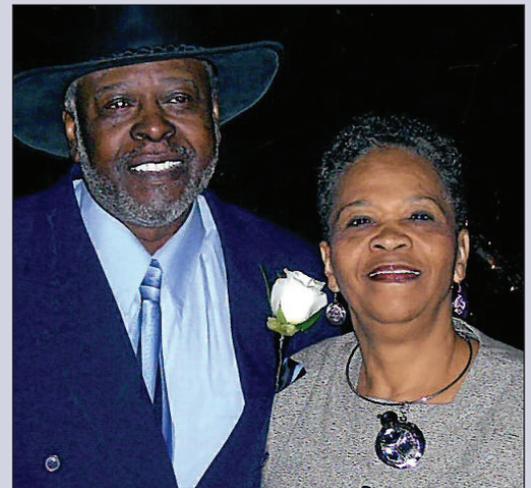
Most parents just seemed to have a general lack of understanding when it comes to being a parent. They also never seemed to have a champion in their corner. We have done more parent training than we ever thought we would when we started this journey!

After seeing that the kids were actually going to go home (despite pulling on our heart strings and fears for them), we decided early on that we needed to help those biological families learn how to be good moms and dads.

We have had the pleasure of watching these parents grow and be the kind of parent we want to see our foster children have. We still get phone calls from moms asking questions, crying about bad choices or looking for moral support, but we also get calls inviting us to birthday parties, crying tears of happiness for a fantastic report card or a breakthrough in relationship! Those calls are all positive to us. It allows us to be in their lives and a champion in their corner.

What will you miss most about fostering children?

We will miss little voices, mealtime together and experiencing things from the perspective of a child. We will miss seeing a biological mom make changes to her life and watching their child see this progress. We will miss the relationships we built with our treatment agency family and the countless other team members in the community that we worked alongside. It has truly been a humbling experience.



Sam and Alga Smith were foster parents for 22 years and reunified 21 children with their biological families.