

## **SIX INDIVIDUALS, AGENCIES CITED FOR FOSTER CARE WORK HONOREES DEVOTE TIME AND LOVE TO HELPING CHILDREN**

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Of the three thousand adoption cases that she has handled for free in the past 12 years, attorney Lynne Miertschin remembers best a family of seven children.

After the children's mother died in an automobile wreck and their father was killed in a construction accident they were split into three different foster homes.

"The two youngest children were adopted by a couple with no children," Miertschin remembered. "Then, the parents found out about three others, and finally the other two. They were impressed with the importance of the children being together and finally, they adopted all seven of them."

Miertschin, who lives in Davie, said that she still gets an update on the family. "The kids are all "A" students and the one girl is spoiled by all of her brothers," she reported.

"That case stayed in my heart more than any of the others," she said.

Miertschin was among six individuals and agencies honored at the Annual Foster Parent Appreciation Banquet sponsored by the Florida Department of Children and Families and the Children's Services Council of Broward County.

Also recognized were 40 adoptive parents, some of whom have hosted foster children for over twenty years.

"Having foster children is a calling for me," explained Verna Smith of Davie who is currently a single-parent foster mother for three children. "It's a way for me to help the community and to help disadvantaged children who are in the system through no fault of their own."

Smith said that she has cared for ten foster children in the past three and one half years. "It has provided me the ability to make a traumatic situation less traumatic," she said.

Kathleen Lester of Tamarac understands the frightening situations that foster children face. "I was a foster child myself," she explained. "This was something that I needed to do to give back something to the community and to give to the children." Lester currently has two foster children in her home.

"I saw a need to help older kids," said Peter Pender of Pembroke Pines. "For me, helping an older child was also easier. They know their situation, they know their choices and they have been in the system."

Pender, who is caring for a sixteen-year-old boy, proudly reports that his child's grades are improving and he is beginning to set goals for his life.

Foster children often come with few personal possessions but carry a lot of emotional baggage. "Our first foster children were delivered to our doorstep at midnight," remembered Steve McCrady of Coral Springs. "One carried his entire life with him in a garbage bag. He had been in 20 foster homes in ten years."

"They all bring emotional problems with them," reported Smith. "They have been removed from their environment where there were problems and they miss their parents. Many of them have been subjected to physical or sexual abuse which just compounds their problem."

"Many of their parents lack parenting skills, others are not ready to be parents," Pender said. "We learn most things from our parents, but there are no courses to train us for being parents."

"Often times, people are overwhelmed with their situation," Smith said. "When things go wrong, they resort to an unhealthy situation such as alcohol and drugs, and their children are neglected."

Helping neglected children takes patience Lester said. "Some of the kids adjust faster, you just have to have patience and comfort the child and make them comfortable. You have to show them love and affection until they get used to being with you."

Pender, who is a single parent, said he raised three of his own children before taking on a foster child. "I had good role models, I learned from my father and relatives."

In spite of the problems that some children bring, most foster parents reported satisfaction and success in their efforts. "You have to persevere and rise above the circumstances," Smith said. "You also have to have a firm foundation in God. That's my sustaining force."

In addition to helping children, adoptive and foster parents report that they are rewarded as well. "We adopted two girls who are two wonders," reported Circuit Court Judge Julie Koenig of Southwest Ranches. "They are the most loving, most beautiful girls in the world."

Koenig, who was among those honored at the Appreciation Banquet, said that she did not really start to live until she adopted her children.

"We need new foster and adoptive parents," Koenig said. "We have made it a lot easier and we want to get the message out that adoption is available."

"Adoptions don't cost what they used to," she explained, referring to Miertschin's free legal services. "They only take a few months now, and adoptive children are offered free college education in Florida state universities and free health insurance."

To get the word out and encourage new adoptive parents, the Department of Children and Families and the Children Services Council are launching a new advertising campaign.

“There is a need for more adoptive parents,” Zev Auerbach, Partner and Senior Creative Director of Zimmerman Advertising told the Appreciation Banquet. “Many people think that they have to adopt overseas or through private agencies. They need to know how many children are available locally for immediate adoption. It’s easier to adopt a child now.” Auerbach’s agency developed the new advertising campaign.

“A society is judged by how they care for their most vulnerable citizens,” Lawrence Korda, chair of the Children’s Services Council told the banquet. “We have worked to clear the backlog and streamline the system.”

Korda said that his organization works to develop foster parents because “many foster parents eventually adopt children.”

Sherri Winston, *Sun-Sentinel* columnist who is the parent of an adopted child reminded the audience that each family that takes a foster child or adopts a child helps an overburdened system. “I can’t save all of them, but I can help one child,” she told the audience. “I can make a home for one.”

Others honored at the banquet were Ron Castell, a marketing expert, Andrea Moore, a mental health volunteer, the *Sun-Sentinel* and its bi-weekly adoption column and Zimmerman Advertising.

Information on foster parenting and adopting may be obtained by calling 954-202-333 or on the web at [www.browardadopt.com](http://www.browardadopt.com).

**SIX INDIVIDUALS, AGENCIES CITED FOR FOSTER CARE WORK,**  
*South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, July 5, 2002