



Oregon

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(The *Portland Tribune* and *Lake Oswego Review* published this guest opinion by Mark McDonald, OYA foster care certifier for Clackamas County, on March 8, 2012.)



More OYA foster homes needed

By Mark McDonald

The array of people doing this important work is surprising: a high-tech manager, a sheriff, an optometrist, a social worker, a wholesale buyer, a counselor, an investor and a teacher, to name a few.

All of them are fostering youth offenders for the Oregon Youth Authority, the state's juvenile corrections agency. These foster parents say they like being "change agents" who see youth who come into their homes leave as young men and women who are on their way to becoming productive, crime-free adults.

In one OYA foster home, for example, the youth got a job, started exercising and eating better, lost 35 pounds, and now is enrolled in a Job Corps welding program. Another youth learned cooking and baking in the county juvenile department's culinary program and went to work in the Rose Garden kitchen before enrolling in a local community college.

These and other youth benefited from the real-life experience of living in a home where people eat together as a family, have the guidance and supervision of a caring adult, and are responsible for performing tasks youth in most families take for granted.

Unfortunately, of the approximately 40 OYA foster homes statewide, Clackamas County has only one. That means if a Clackamas County youth offender is judged to be a good candidate for foster care, he or she probably will be placed in another county away from family and other familiar community supports.

I work with OYA foster parents every day. I see the satisfaction they get from nurturing youth. And I see the positive changes in youth who go on to graduate

from high school, get jobs, sign up as community volunteers, enroll in college and enjoy pride in who they are. Recently one youth became certified as a nursing assistant and got a job. Another won a full-ride college scholarship. A third was doing so well in school and in sports that he was featured in the local newspaper's sports column. One of the most remarkable stories is of a youth who came into foster care virtually illiterate and two years later was on the high school dean's list.

Youth are judged appropriate for foster care based on a formal assessment and on the professional judgment of adults who work with them. We will support you with classes, DVDs and Web-based training. So you can devote your energy to being a good foster parent, you will have the support of several juvenile corrections professionals who know the youth.

If you would like to know more, please contact me or log on to www.oregon.gov/OYA/foster.shtml. You will not only be promoting public safety. You also will – as one OYA foster parent likes to say – “see someone change and turn their life around and become the person you know is really in there. It's a reward like no other.”

Mark McDonald is OYA Foster Care Certifier for Clackamas and several other Oregon counties. He may be contacted at 503-731-4971 or at mark.mcdonald@oya.state.or.us.

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