Who cares for children when birth parents can't?

by Peter Sur
Tribune-Herald Staff Writer
Published: Sunday, January 30, 2011 8:16 AM HST
Couple says fostering is a calling

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In less than three years since they became a licensed resource family, the Panaewa couple has taken in 13 foster children, mostly teenagers. Privacy laws prevent the Lees from naming any of the children.

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The length of stay for each child varies. The 16-year-old has been with the Lees since they began foster care, and he's been virtually adopted into the family. The 11-year-old is the youngest they have taken in.

"I have come across many teenagers that need homes," Wainani Lee said. For some reason, many foster parents do not want to take in older children.

"Teenagers are not bad," she said. "We were all teenagers."

Most foster children only gather attention when they run away; DHS lists 10 Big Island children as missing.

The Lees say they have not had that problem, aside from one girl who "took off for a day."

"All the parents I see, they all love their kids," Wainani said. "We've taken in so many kids, that there seems to be a success rate with us."

Whatever the Lees are doing, it must be something right. Hui Ho'omalual, the agency that places foster children in homes, suggested the couple speak to the Tribune-Herald for this article because of their uncommon willingness to work with teenagers.

"They are very good parents," said Michelle Carvalho, the East Hawaii liaison for Hui Ho'omalual. "There's a need to have families that are willing to take in teens." The same goes for sibling groups and special needs children.

Carvalho, a foster parent herself, is charged with recruiting resource families from Honokaa to Volcano. She says that aside from a background check, the top reason that prospective families are disqualified is an insufficient amount of living space.

"I think just teens in general have difficulty," Carvalho said. "People shouldn't be afraid just because you have foster teens."

E-mail Peter Sur at psur@tribune-herald.com.

Get involved

Interested in becoming a foster parent?

Call Hui Ho'omalual at 987-5988 in East Hawaii or 896-3829 in West Hawaii.

On the Internet: http://www.pidfoundation.org