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FAMILIES FIRST OF VIRGINIA

COMPANY FOSTERS CARE FOR KIDS WHO NEED GOOD FOLKS

By Gary Ruegsegger

Correspondent

On a sunny Saturday morning, John Murray and his son Ross, 14, waited for families and friends at Norfolk's Town Point Park. They were going on a harbor cruise.

But it's not always smooth sailing for Murray, chief executive officer of Families First of Virginia, who is in the business of mending children and building families.

Families First is a private company that provides ongoing therapeutic care for neglected or abused children. Placing these children in stable homes with highly-trained foster parents is the lynchpin of its efforts.

The organization has placed troubled children referred by departments of social services from cities throughout Hampton Roads and as far away as Charlottesville. The long-term goals of foster care are to either return the children to their parents or adoption. "The best foster parents are naturally empathetic," Murray said. "You fill up a room with them and you'll see a powerful room."

Earlier this month, he filled the second deck of the Spirit of Norfolk with 125 foster parents and children for a celebration cruise.

"It's a miracle that these families are willing to open their homes and their hearts to children they don't even know," said Murray. "We need to celebrate the work they do."

And celebrate they did. For two hours, foster parents and their children dined, danced, hugged and smiled on the Elizabeth River.

Children require foster care for various reasons, including abuse, neglect and abandonment. According to Murray, 3.1 million confirmed cases of child abuse occur in the country each year.

Effective foster parents come in all sizes, shapes and colors. Selflessness and a love of children are the central threads they share.

Over the last eight years, Suffolk residents William Wilder, 60, a 1971 Booker T. Washington High School graduate, and his wife Elizabeth, 59, have opened their home to 12 foster children.

"I love kids," said Elizabeth. "All kids deserve a chance to have a good home."

Married for 39 years, the Wilders have adopted five of their 12 foster children. They plan to adopt more.

Elizabeth, their youngest adopted child, joined her parents on the cruise.

"My husband was always a hard worker and he knows how to teach children," continued her mother. "He loves God first and that love just flows over onto the children."

"My mom makes everywhere home," added Eliza-beth, punctuating her words with a hug.

During the last 13 years, Virginia Beach residents Dwight, 62, and Angela Moore, 53, have guided more than 60 foster children. They have one adopted child.

"You have to have a listening ear. The kids feel comfortable talking to me and building a relationship," said Dwight Moore, an Army veteran of Vietnam and Iraq. "We don't have foster children in our home; when they come to us, they're our children."

"It's a blessing to open our home," Angela Moore said. "Everybody needs a place to belong. We all need a loving home."

Murray explained that foster parents are responsible for 45 percent of all adoptions in this country.

"I had five and I adopted all five," said Lamon Hamilton Akagbor, a retired Air Force veteran and a 1973 graduate of Maury High School, where she was the school's first black majorette.

"A lady from church told me I'd make a great mother," she said. "I never thought about adopting children. I was an only child."

"It's just God," said her husband George Akagbor, a native of Ghana in West Africa.

New to this country, some things about America confuse Akagbor, like putting clothes on dogs and children talking back to their parents.

Each year, Families First of Virginia averages 35 placements.

"We're here for the children, the parents and the long haul," Murray said.

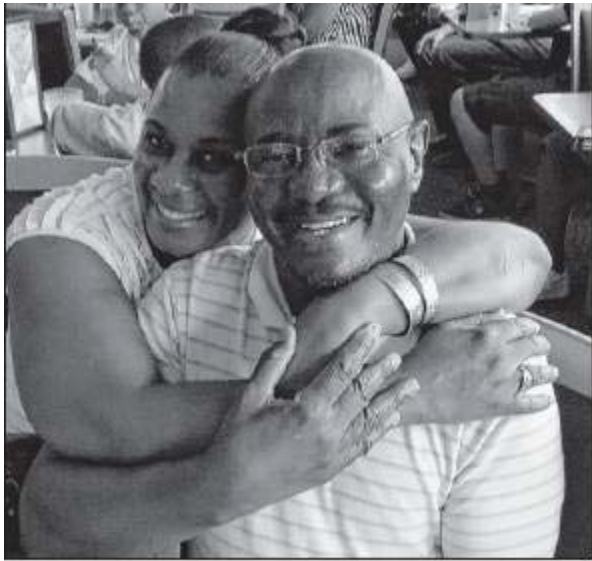
For details on foster care or adoption, go to www.familiesfirstofva.com or call 689-3818.

Gary Ruegsegger, gruegseg@gmail.com



GARY RUEGSEGGER PHOTOS

Elizabeth Wilder's youngest daughter, also named Elizabeth, said, "My mom makes everywhere home."



Dwight and Angela Moore have guided more than 60 foster children over the past 13 years. They have one adopted child.
