

FOSTERING HOPE

More Latino families are urged to open their hearts and homes to foster children in need

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Twenty-eight year old Miriam Martinez of Chicago has opened her home to four foster children of different races.

Miriam Martinez describes the year she waited to welcome her first foster child – a sweet, shy Puerto Rican girl – to her home in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago as the “longest year of her life.”

Four years ago, the then-28-year-old teacher’s assistant felt an unshakeable longing to be a parent. Soon after, that fire was fueled when she stumbled across a commercial about foster parenting from UCAN, the social service agency through which she would eventually take in four foster children. “I was excited to be a mother,” Martinez says, lingering over the last word. “To provide for someone less fortunate.”

Before making that life-changing decision, the half-Dominican, half-Puerto Rican woman did what many other Latinas would do: She asked for her family’s *bendición*. “I asked my mom, my sister. Made sure it would be OK. I knew I would not be able to do it myself. I needed a support system.”

A year of preparation (background check, parenting classes, home inspection) and praying finally paid off in June 2005, when the 13-year-old girl walked into her home. Martinez was thrilled, envisioning movie nights and trips to McDonald’s. The girl was terrified. But with some patience and attention, the two soon bonded.

“She was very quiet when she first got here. Once I showed

her this was her home, she opened up to be a normal teenager. She finally got over that uneasy feeling and felt: ‘OK, this is my home. I can relax,’” Martinez says. “These kids really just want to be treated normally. They want to have a home ... nothing extravagant. And the rewards are endless. The hugs, the smiles, the ‘I love yous.’”

As the Latino population continues to grow, more Latino children are entering the foster care system without enough Latino households in which to place them. Mayra Burgos-Biott is a foster home-licensing supervisor for Cook County’s central region, which includes the predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods of Humboldt Park, Logan Square, South Lawndale, Little Village and Pilsen. Recently, the state Department of Children and Families Services has intensified efforts to reach out to Latinos, she says.

“We find ourselves struggling to find a home for Latino children,” Burgos-Biott says. “For the past nine to 10 months, we’ve been participating in different events in the [communities] to recruit Latino families because there is a great need for us to do so.”

That common cultural background can play a crucial role in helping a foster child adjust to his or her new home, says Burgos-Biott. “It provides the child with a sense of belonging, places them in somewhat of a familiar territory. They might

share the same values, and being a Latino foster parent of a Latino child would provide some stability for the child to counteract the impact of separation from the [biological] family."

Burgos-Biott points out that Latinos are known for being family-oriented, and that definition of family often stretches beyond shared genes. "It's not an issue of blood," Burgos-Biott says. "It's about compassion and the desire to make a positive contribution in the life of a child. We as a community tend to take care of our own – whether it's blood-related or not. That's always been part of our culture."

A SENSE OF STABILITY

When trying to match the right child with the right foster parent, cultural sensitivity can make a world of difference, said Francisco Monzon, vice president of placement services for UCAN. His agency began 140 years ago as an orphanage and has evolved into a multifaceted social services agency, expanding to help neglected and abused youth, children and families. UCAN offers a professional foster-parenting program that helps place children from traumatic situations into safe and stable homes; it also has a residential treatment center, clinical and counseling services, and special services for teenagers.

Hearing familiar nursery rhymes, celebrating *Los Tres Reyes* in addition to Christmas or seeing a favorite dish on the dinner table "makes that whole transition easier to deal with," Monzon says. "It's much easier to go into a home where food is similar to what they've had at home. They come from chaotic backgrounds. We feel it will give them some sense of stability, of safety, and it allows the children to open up and show their true colors."

More than 200 kids are in foster care through UCAN. On any given day, roughly 20 percent of those kids are Latino, says Monzon. This number has risen during the past several years, and will likely continue to rise. "We expect, with the economy the way it has been, to have more of an influx of [Latino] kids coming into the system," he says.

On a national scale, of the estimated 510,000 in foster care as of fiscal year 2006, 19 percent were classified as Hispanic, up 4 percentage points from fiscal year 2002, according to the latest report from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, which collects information on all children in foster care for whom state child welfare agencies have responsibility.

While a shared cultural background is an important factor in placing a child in a foster home, it's by no means a requirement. "More than anything, we look for someone willing to open up their home and treat them as part of the family," says Monzon.

He urges the Latino community to see these kids for what they are: "Not as damaged kids, not as kids who are trouble makers. Think of these kids as any other child you love and support. They just need a sense of belonging."

Since 2008, Burgos-Biott estimates that DCFS – in conjunction with some private agencies – has placed more than 600 kids in foster homes throughout Chicago and surrounding

FOSTER CARE STATISTICS

- As of Sept. 30, 2006, there were an estimated 510,000 children in foster care nationwide.
- Almost a quarter (24 percent) were in relatives' homes, and nearly half (46 percent) were in non-relative foster family homes.
- Almost half (49 percent) had a case goal of reunification with their families.
- The number of Illinois children living in substitute care has decreased from 51,331 in Fiscal Year 1997 to 16,160 in June 2007, due in large part to increased emphasis on early intervention and permanency services such as adoption.

SOURCES: ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES, ADOPTION AND FOSTER CARE ANALYSIS AND REPORTING SYSTEM

suburbs. The numbers fluctuate on a daily basis.

DCFS defines foster care as the temporary placement of children outside their homes due to abuse, neglect or dependency. The ultimate goal is to return the child to their biological family, something that individuals interested in becoming foster parents need to realize, Burgos-Biott says. "They need to understand children belong with their families, even though they may not be able to be with family at the time."

DCFS makes every effort to find a relative willing to take the child. In situations when this is not possible, placing the child in a stable foster home is the next best option. In some cases, fostering a child can lead to legal guardianship or adoption.

In order to become a licensed foster parent, individuals need to meet certain requirements, including having adequate accommodations for the child in their home, undergoing a background check and participating in nine weeks of preparing to deal with the special needs of foster children. Parents must continue to undergo training in different areas of child development, first aid and CPR after becoming licensed.

The process should take between 75 and 90 days. During this time, a caseworker also assesses the family dynamics to determine the best match, says Burgos-Biott.

Miriam Martinez has opened her home to four foster children – including the older sister of her first foster child, as well as an African-American and a Caucasian toddler. Although her daughters have confided "how comforting it was to finally see the Latino side," race never mattered to Martinez.

Her family of various skin colors, life experiences and personalities works. And while they may occasionally draw curious glances from strangers during their frequent family outings to go bowling or roller skating, Martinez knows family is more than skin – or blood – deep.

"We're very unique. Very diverse. And I love it," she says. "They might look so different [from one another], but they're so family."

More info

For more information about becoming a foster parent in Illinois, visit DCFS at www.state.il.us/dcfs/foster/index.shtml and UCAN at www.ucanchicago.org.

