



A Great Agency Can Make All the Difference

We started working with our fabulous foster care agency almost two years ago. We took a huge leap of faith and contacted the Northern Virginia Family Service foster care agency in February 2013. My husband and I decided we wanted to pursue adoption and we started searching our options. We did a google search and Northern Virginia Family Service came up and we liked the website and liked what they stood for, so I dialed the phone. That call changed the rest of our lives.

The director of the agency took my call and I explained what we were interested in doing and she explained, in great detail the pros and cons of foster care and gave us some honest information. I know she wanted us to be fully prepared for the journey we were about to embark on. By the end of

the conversation we had signed up for an orientation, and shortly after the orientation we started our PRIDE training.

To be honest, we had pretty low expectations of how the training would be and how the social workers would be. Social workers, especially in foster care, have quite the negative stigma. To our great surprise, and relief, the training was good, and the social workers were GREAT! They were honest with us as they shared the good, bad and ugly of the foster care system and families who they had dealt with. Despite some of the awful things they had seen in their job they were still positive and loving to the kids and to us.

After the training, we started the “dreaded” homestudy. We had heard about how difficult homestudies and paperwork would be,

so again, we were prepared for the worst. We scrubbed, cleaned, childproofed and were on our best behavior when the social worker to arrived. We wanted to work hard to impress her. After the worker arrived to conduct the study, she immediately put us at ease and by the middle of the homestudy, it felt like we were walking around chatting with a friend — a friend who wanted to make sure our toilets and electricity worked and that our medicine cabinets locked. Not only did they make the big “scary” homestudy not so scary, they also made the GIANT mountain of paperwork not so intimidating either. They were with us every step of the way to answer questions and explain why we had to fill out every silly, redundant paper. They made the overwhelming process of becoming a foster parent not quite so overwhelming. Without their support and assistance,

we would probably still be lost in a pile of paperwork somewhere.

After we finally got approved to become foster parents, there was the dreaded wait. Being first time foster parents, AND first time parents all together — we were pretty anxious to get things started. They dealt patiently with my frequent calls and emails “gently” probing as to when we would actually get a placement. Even though they are not a specifically Christian agency, many workers shared in our Christian beliefs. At one point, I emailed the director in desperation to get a placement and she said, “Pray for the right match and it will come . . .” And literally later THAT DAY, we got our first placement. Of course, we had been praying for the right match for a long time before the director said that, but something about the director’s reminder, gave me renewed confidence that God was still in control of this, and it was comforting to know that she felt this way too.

After three months of waiting we got our first placement. The placement lasted a week and then they were returned to home. It was a special week and we will always have fond memories of those children being our “first” children. Fortunately after that we didn’t have to wait much longer for the real party to begin. A couple weeks after our first placement, we got placed with the two sweetest girls in the world, who just so happened to be up for adoption. We were thrilled.

After we were placed with the girls, we met many social workers, caseworkers and other people involved in the case. With every worker we met, we kept thinking “This is going to be the mean one . . . this will be the one like in the movies or the horror stories you read about on the Internet . . .” Yet over and over again, we were (fortunately) proved wrong. Every single social worker from Northern Virginia Family Service has been a joy to work with and we can truly be open and honest with them and consider each one



Mandi Brown with the team from Northern Virginia Service.

we worked with a true friend. What a difference from what the media tells us.

After the girls were placed with us, we were assigned a case manager who would stay with us through the duration of the year that they were with us as foster children. She was our biggest cheerleader and advocate. She was there to be a listener, sounding board and advice-giver. She was there to “pester” the county when they needed to provide a service that they were hesitant about. Most importantly she genuinely cared about the girls AND us.

This past year with the girls has been a roller coaster of getting so close to adoption and then being faced with appeals from the biological parents, then getting close again and meeting other road blocks. I think that is the name of the game in foster care, though, and we survived with the help of the wonderful workers at Northern Virginia Family Service. As we are anxiously awaiting the signature of the judge any day now . . . we are so thankful for many things. We are thankful of the blessing of these girls, our daughters,

and we are thankful of the special people from Northern Virginia Family Services who helped us and supported us through this crazy year. We are so looking forward to the finalization of the adoption. It will be nice to not have to ask for permission to do things for the girls or jump through the hoops of foster care rules and regulations. I have to say, though, that I will actually miss meeting with our caseworker and having such a great organization backing us.

Northern Virginia Family Service will always hold a special place in our hearts, not only because they united us with our daughters, but because they played such a special role in the first year we had with them. ❁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Mandi Brown lives in Gainesville, Va., with her husband and their two recently adopted daughters. She has the privilege of staying home with the girls during the day but also teaches classes for the American Red Cross. The Brown family enjoys traveling, playing, laughing and just spending time together.