

STUART

M A G A Z I N E

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Why This Port. St. Lucie Couple Adopts Children In Crisis

They met on a college campus in Iowa during August 2013. Both 21-year-old students about to graduate, Chris Norton and Emily Summers struck up conversation at a party.

Nearly six years later, the still-young-and-in-love couple is celebrating one year of marriage—and new parenthood.

“April 21 is our first anniversary,” Chris says. “I can’t even believe it.”

In that time, their Port St. Lucie home has grown five-fold. Whittley just turned 19. Ava is 9. Liliana is 8. Isabella is 5. Ariana is 3. The newlyweds are proud parents of them all thanks to the avail of adoption.

“It was all Emily,” Chris says of becoming an adoptive parent.

“I was completely oblivious to all this, and she has opened my eyes. I was on the fence. I was scared. I just didn’t know what to expect. I had fear of being a father.”

And for good reason. The 27-year-old was paralyzed nine years ago during a college football game. Chris was earning his bachelor’s degree in business management at Luther College and playing football for the Norse. During a game in 2010, he was catastrophically injured while making a tackle. The moment the accident occurred, he knew his life had changed.

“I was told I would never be able to move again,” Chris says. “They gave me a three-percent chance.”

While his body was paralyzed, his mind was not. He endured grueling rehabilitation that enabled him to walk across the stage to accept his diploma and down the aisle to marry the woman of his dreams.

He parlayed his unpredictable progress into a career as a motivational speaker. His book will be published in July, and his movie will be released later this year. His mantra of encouragement helps others find their “power to stand.”

“It’s really about how you make people feel and the value that you add in the face of adversity, and the same sort of thing occurred with this,” Chris says of fatherhood. “I knew I would never be able to swim with them, play catch with the football or pick them up when they’re crying, but I could communicate.”

His positivity and Emily’s passion have turned them into an exemplary mom-and-dad duo. Not only have they adopted five children, they have also fostered 15—and counting.

“We definitely want to continue to foster,” says Emily, who majored in family services at the University of Northern Iowa. “There are times we felt like we weren’t equipped, but God has always provided us with a way. We are on this earth for such a short time that, at the end of the day, at the end of our life, we wanted to say we did everything we can.”

Their four-bedroom, two-bathroom abode is understandably cramped, so they are looking for another place with six bedrooms and at least three bathrooms to accommodate local children in crisis.



“We have had to say ‘no,’ and we don’t want to have to say ‘no,’” Emily says. “There’s such a big need here. There just continues to be more and more kids coming into foster care and not enough families who are foster parents.”

Karen Granger, community relations director of 4KIDS of South Florida, agrees.

“There are way more children coming into the system than there are foster families licensed and trained and ready to house them and care for them,” Granger says. “It’s a dilemma.”

MODERN-DAY PROBLEMS

The face of the foster child has changed along with societal ills. As human trafficking, mental health issues, opioid addiction and the sex trade continue to mount, minors are being removed from their homes at higher rates.

“This whole foster care thing is such a hidden epidemic,” Granger says. “There have always been orphans, and there have always been kids who are put into the foster care system for one reason or another, but in 2019, a lot of these modern-day problems are cranking out large numbers of modern-day orphans.”

Tim Putman, director of 4KIDS Treasure Coast, says upward of 250 children enter the foster care system annually from Martin, St. Lucie, Indian River and Okeechobee counties. Of those, an approximate 150 go to foster homes, and the remainder go to group shelters.

“Our philosophy is that every child deserves to have a family,” Putman says. “I don’t know anybody who really disagrees with that, but because there are just not enough homes, siblings and teens end up in group care.”



On April 5, the agency will present a simulcast titled “Advocate 4KIDS” to shine a spotlight on vulnerable youths in the community and inspire adults to take action. Leading the talk is world-renowned keynoter Nick Vujicic, whose broadcast will air at 7:30 p.m. at Westside Church in Fort Pierce. In addition, two ongoing networking meet ups—Coffee and Conversations and Family Share and Care—educate the public about foster care and what it entails with the goal of recruiting additional families so supply can keep up with demand.

“What we run into a lot is some folks think, ‘Oh, I could never do that,’” Putman says. “Just because it’s hard doesn’t mean that it’s the not the best thing to do. The cost to society is too high. When you look into the eyes of these kids individually, you can’t just walk away.”

Everyone can do something to help the most innocent of victims, he says.

“The point is everyone can do something, and whatever it is we can’t do, we should not let anything hinder us from doing what we can do to improve the lives of our vulnerable children,” Putman says. “It really comes down to: When will people stop mistreating children? When that stops, that will stop putting kids in care, but until that happens, the community has to step up.”



Place of Hope Treasure Coast has two orientation classes each month during which potential parents ask questions, learn what to expect, and understand that the task they are considering taking on might not be an easy one.

“We are very transparent and real,” says Jamie Bond, the non-profit’s business development and community relations manager. “We want to make sure they are vetted from the beginning. We will not license just to license.”

It costs \$3,370 to license one foster family that then must undergo 21 hours of training.

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“It’s our responsibility,” Bond says. “We have to ensure we’re taking care of these children at a high-level quality of care.”

At latest count, Place of Hope Treasure Coast was working with 70 children and 46 homes.

“Really, the problem is not enough families available,” Bond says. “We have a deficiency of foster homes. It’s unfortunate we are never going to be able to work ourselves out of a job.”

CYCLE OF ABUSE

When foster children age out of the system, they get a government check upon leaving a home or shelter. It is a crude 18th birthday present. If they do not have affordable housing, they end up as outcasts.

“These kids are going to be out on the streets, homeless, at 18 years old,” Bond says. “They are in unfortunate circumstances, and they deserve every chance at life like the rest of us.”

As they make the transition, the cycle of abuse that landed them in foster care to begin with often repeats itself.

“Our objective is to interrupt that cycle of abuse and rewrite the future of these children,” Bond says. “A good percentage of these kids do not have a home to go to.”

The success stories, although few and far between, let the agency know the importance of its mission.

“It’s really remarkable to see them come from such places of despair and hopelessness,” Bond says. “It melts your heart to be able to actually tangibly see these kids and to hear their names and to know where they came from. With the right tools and the support system, they’re absolutely capable of getting out of this.”

With the success stories come the nonsuccess stories—more than Caroline Vinyard, chief operating officer of Hibiscus Children’s Center, would like to see. Children unable to live in foster homes because of behavioral disorders such as aggression, emotional outbursts and symptoms of ADHD are fated with uncertainty.

“At foster homes, they’re not equipped to deal with those challenges being presented,” Vinyard says. “At Hibiscus, we are trauma responsive.”

The group home has shelters from Jensen Beach to Vero Beach offering longer terms of care and a staff of health technicians. The statistics sadly are not favorable for teens in those environments, though.

“They show a relatively low success rate,” Vinyard says. “Ninety percent live within poverty level and can never really get over that hump.”

In recognition of National Child Abuse Prevention Month, the center is sponsoring two fundraisers—the Blue Ribbon Luncheon & Fashion Show on April 4 and Raise the Roof for Hibiscus on April 27—that will support its \$1.7 million budget.

“Unfortunately, I don’t ever see this problem going away,” Vinyard says, pointing to a glimmer of hope in the recently passed Family First Prevention Services Act.

The legislation reforms the federal child welfare system by redirecting financial streams toward in-home courses that teach parenting skills. It also funnels state money away from group homes and into prevention programs.

“It’s about preventing child abuse, basically,” Vinyard says. “It’s about preventing the domino effect. Because it really just keeps going, this cycle.”

