

Hawaii Tribune Herald

Published: Sunday, January 30, 2011 8:16 AM HST



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Bill and Wainani Lee of Panaewa have welcomed 13 children in foster care into their home in the last three years. They now have three boys and one girl, plus their own three. - Peter Sur/Tribune-Herald

Who cares for children when birth parents can't?

by Peter Sur
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Published: Sunday, January 30, 2011 8:16 AM HST

Couple says fostering is a calling

Wards of the state, if they are lucky, are placed in the care of Bill and Wainani Lee.

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.

Today they have three boys, ages 11, 14, and 16, and a 13-year-old girl.

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Also living with them: the couple's daughter Kaila, 5, Bill's son Dylan, 13, and Wainani's son Tyson, 15. Bill's younger son, Elijah, 8, lives with his mother on the mainland.

Wainani Lee -- no relation to the radio personality of the same name -- runs a day care at their home, and during the weekdays she cares for four babies.

This is the opposite of an empty nest, and the Lees like it that way, with a lot of help from family and friends.

"I kind of believe it was a calling, because the fliers (seeking foster parents) kept landing in my hands," Wainani Lee said. "God has pretty much chosen the path for me. It's my calling."

Her calling requires a limitless supply of energy, with the day care business running from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and the mother business 24/7.

"I'm up at 6 in the morning, and it's a pretty busy day," she said one recent weekend. "I'd say that our calendar is pretty filled."

Bill Lee works in construction, although the economy has left him with more time to help at home.

The couple doesn't want to speak too much about the foster children's identities.

"Hilo's kind of a small town. They (the parents) find out one way or another," Bill Lee said. "We try to keep a good relationship with their parents, too."

Some of the children have been verbally, physically or sexually abused, they said. Sometimes the children's parents use crystal meth, sometimes it's a money issue.

Toni Schwartz, a spokeswoman for the Department of Human Services, said that a family member's drug or alcohol abuse is not, by itself, a cause for the state to intervene in a family; legally there must be neglect, abuse or the threat of harm.

"They're all pretty good kids, but some of them have been dealt a bad hand," Bill Lee said.

"Our whole goal is reunification," his wife added.

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'omalua, 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'omalua. "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."

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Get involved

Interested in becoming a foster parent?

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

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