

LEGACY

The Making of Mom and Dad



“When the time came to place them permanently, I just couldn’t take it anymore,” Edward said. “We had gotten to a point where we wondered if we could even do this anymore.”

By Jannette Jauregui

Barbara Williams held strong when her daughter, Lisa, asked to take her infant son with her on a walk to a store near their Oxnard home.

“She wasn’t in a good place at the time,” Barbara said. “She didn’t want the baby, and I knew it was safer to keep him at home with me.”

Lisa left and some time passed. Barbara remembers hearing the sirens come closer and closer.

“I’ve learned the difference between sirens over the years,” she said. “And these were just too close.”

Barbara grabbed the baby and headed around the corner where she saw Lisa running away from the accident.

“She had gotten in a car with a man and the two crashed,” Barbara said. “They were OK,

but the police said that if the baby had been in the car he would have died.”

Barbara’s decision to keep the baby at home likely saved his life. It was simply a mother’s instinct.

It was the same instinct that kicked in when a second daughter came to Barbara asking to go shopping for new pants.

“We had just gone to buy clothes for the new school year,” Barbara recalled. “I kept the proper supplies for all of our girls for when they needed them each month. She never asked me for any. I knew something was wrong.”

Barbara set up a doctor’s appointment, confirming her daughter’s pregnancy. When the baby was born, her daughter approached Barbara and said she didn’t want the baby.

“I moved the crib into my bedroom,”

Barbara said. "It was just what felt right for the baby."

Both daughters joined the Williams family as teenagers, part of the VC Foster Kids program. They were at risk and in need of a loving home. Barbara and her husband, Edward, took them in as their own, loving them unconditionally, but holding firm to what kept them, and their infant children safe.

The teens were eventually placed in different programs, and separated from the infant children they didn't want. And even though there weren't any biological ties, the girls were still two of Barbara and Edward's daughters.

"We've never introduced any of the kids as foster children," Barbara said. "They are always our daughters or our sons."

The foster system has very much become an intricate part of the Williams' lives. They've welcomed 321 children into their home, all ranging in age from 2 days old to 18.

"We'd sometimes get calls from the social workers about an 18-year-old that had been kicked out of their foster home," Barbara said. "They turned 18, the checks stopped coming, so the families let them go."

But the Williams' love for their kids didn't stop with the checks.

"Some of them still come home for the holidays," Barbara said. "They bring their kids - our grandkids. We've never stopped loving them."

That continued love is what has kept the Williams' going.

Long before she met Edward, Barbara would find kids and even military men on leave who had nowhere to go, and bring them to her family's home in Fort Walton Beach, Florida.

"My mom used to ask me, 'what on earth are you doing?'" Barbara said. "But I'd go to church, see the need, and I just couldn't turn my back."

So Barbara began cooking meals on Saturdays that provided enough leftovers for the guests she'd bring home from church on Sundays. She continued the tradition when



she met and married Edward.

"She'd bring these kids home, just for a short time, and I'd wonder what she was doing," Edward said. "It just became normal after a while."

Barbara always loved children and she imagined herself as a mother often. But she and Edward lost one baby of their own in utero, and were unable to conceive another. Then Edward's military career led the couple to what was formerly Oxnard Air Force Base in May of 1969. They purchased a home, Edward was eventually honorably discharged from the Air Force, and the two began to build their life in Ventura County. Edward's calling was as a pastor and para-educator with the Oxnard Unified School District. Barbara secured a job at Scott's Apparel in Ventura.

"A woman I worked with was fostering through a private service," Barbara said. "But she and her husband were getting a divorce and she asked if I'd take the little girl they had. I asked, 'take her how?' And the woman said, 'home with you to live.'"

Barbara spoke to Edward and the couple agreed - 10-year-old Tequa became their first child.

Sharmin followed as a foster child, and then siblings Collin and Syra. Soon after came

sisters Jenny and Jessie.

"They were the loves of our lives," Barbara said.

"When the time came to place them permanently, I just couldn't take it anymore," Edward said. "We had gotten to a point where we wondered if we could even do this anymore."

Barbara reached out to the social workers for help.

"We needed to learn how to let go," she said.

Howard Miller from Ventura County Behavioral Health came to the couple's assistance, helping them transition, and teaching them how to say goodbye.

"Howard said something I will never forget," Barbara said. "He told us 'what you do is the very best you can do and pray that where they go is even better.'"

So that's exactly what Barbara did.

"I had to program my mind," she said. "I had to say to myself that it had to be better than what we gave, and I know what we gave."

Despite the difficulty of saying goodbye, Barbara and Edward have made it a priority to maintain relationships with biological family members whenever possible.

"You do it for the sake of the children,"

Barbara says. "You make it work."

That willingness led to a house full of guests for birthday parties and holiday celebrations – times when the children could see their foster Mom and Dad working positively with their biological Mom and Dad.

The Williams' have also made it a priority to build trust with each of their children.

"Edward would set aside a box for each of them to keep any money they made," Barbara said. "It worked exactly like a bank. He had a book and they had a book. They'd make a deposit with him, record it all, and the child would place the money in the box and be the last one to touch the money. Then they'd go to Edward to make a withdrawal."

But, according to Edward, it had to be for a necessity.

"I'd ask them what they wanted to buy," he said. "I wanted to teach them to save. To be responsible." Lessons like that led to two of the children being able to purchase their first car with cash.

The stability that the Williams' offered was a comfort to many of the kids, including the five still remaining in their home. Those five, they say, will be the last. A tough decision, but a necessary one for the couple now into, and nearing, their 70s.

"Some of them never want to leave," Edward said. "Some have cried or screamed. That has always been the hardest."

Still, even with the challenges, both Edward and Barbara maintain that the "positives far outweigh the negative."

"There may not be an immediate reward," Edward said. "But if you stick with it, there is an impending reward."

The Williams' say that many of the kids they once cared for – now adults – are living productive and successful lives. They are proud of them, and there is proof of that in the photos that fill the couples' home. Memories of a commitment they made to the children of Ventura County more than 35 years ago. Memories of what made them a Mom and Dad.



Foster

VC Kids

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LEGACY is a publication of the Ventura County Area Agency on Aging that was established to highlight the life stories of residents throughout Ventura County who continue to make a difference in their community. To view video related to this story, please visit ventura.org/vcaaa.

The Ventura County Area Agency on Aging, an agency of the County of Ventura, is the principal agency in Ventura County charged with the responsibility to promote the development and implementation of a comprehensive coordinated system of care that enables older individuals and their caregivers to live in a community-based setting and to advocate for the needs of those 60 years of age and older in the county, providing leadership and promoting citizen involvement in the planning process as well as in the delivery of services.

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