

women who **make a difference**

The child's cry cut through the bitter winter night. "Mommy, help me!" Jeanette Laws rushed into the 8-year-old's room. "I'm here, Dana,*" she said, as the little girl burrowed her face into Jeanette's neck.

"I'm so scared," Dana whispered, her face wet with tears. "They're coming. They want to hurt me again."

Jeanette stroked Dana's hair. "Don't be afraid, sweetie," she said. "No one can hurt you now." Dana trembled and Jeanette wondered what kind of monsters haunted the child's dreams.

biological parents for their safety. These children have little chance of either being reunited with their parents or adopted, but for what may be the first time, they have a normal, permanent home.

Hope Meadows was created by Brenda Krause Eheart, a professor of child development and public policy at the University of Illinois. "I spent years researching the problems in adoptive and foster-care homes," she says. She tracked one group of youngsters for five years, and their stories were heartbreaking.

birthday cakes and food on the table and clean clothes—provide security. Without them, children can't become emotionally healthy adults."

Brenda dreamed of a community of people who would look after each other and, most of all, love children. "When I was growing up, my grand-

Hope for the Children

If I can set two of these children on the right road, that's two who haven't been lost.

FC By Lynn Crandall

"Why did my mom hurt me?" Dana asked. "I was real bad, wasn't I?" Jeanette's heart nearly broke.

"Sweetie, you didn't do anything wrong. Your mom just didn't know how to love." Jeanette cupped the little face in her hand. Looking into Dana's eyes, she said, "I'll love you forever, because you're so precious."

"I'll love you forever, too, Mommy," Dana mumbled sleepily, climbing back into bed. Another nightmare conquered, thought Jeanette, tucking Dana in with a soft kiss.

Dana and her 7-year-old brother, Jacob,* no longer have real monsters to fear, thanks to Jeanette, their foster mother at Hope Meadows, a unique residential community for children who have been removed from their

She found that the system leaves children like Dana and Jacob in limbo, often bouncing them from foster home to foster home, where they may suffer from neglect, and even abuse.

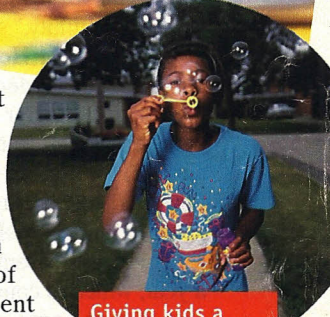
Brenda was determined to prevent more children from suffering the same fate. Although reunification is the foster-care system's goal, fewer than 40 percent of children are actually reunited with their parents. With only 7 percent of foster care children being adopted, many of them grow up never having a real home. In Illinois alone, statistics show a compelling need for change: 80 percent of prisoners there have a history of foster care.

"Foster kids are uprooted so often, they have no idea what trust and stability mean," says Brenda, 52, the mother of two grown children, one adopted and one biological. "The things we take for granted—like

parents lived next door and the neighbors all kept an eye out for us kids," she says. "Children need that kind of caring environment in order to thrive."

In 1993, Brenda heard about the closing of an Air Force base in Rantoul, about 130 miles south of Chicago. The closure left vacant neighborhoods where military families once lived. To the people of Rantoul, it looked bleak and barren. To Brenda, the town held the promise of loving homes for children.

She enlisted the help of John Hirschfeld, then an Illinois legislator, and got a state license to provide foster care. He helped steer her through the Illinois legislature, where she asked for a \$1 million state grant to fund her organization, Hope for the Children. She logged more than 1,000 phone calls to politicians ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶



Giving kids a chance: Brenda (above, top) with Tiffany Hill, who lives at Hope Meadows. Jamie Calhoun (above) shows off.

Lynn Crandall is a freelance writer in Ludlow, Illinois.

*Names followed by an asterisk have been changed.

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to plead her case. On July 13, 1993, she got her funding. "The lawmakers were impressed with Brenda. Everyone wants a solution to this problem," says Hirschfeld. She also garnered private donations. The housing was bought for \$215,000.

Her dream was alive, but Brenda knew she needed to find special people to parent all the children who would be coming to stay at Hope Meadows, her name for the new community.

Of the 144 applications she received, 12 couples passed screening and underwent detailed background checks, including fingerprinting and in-depth interviews. "We wanted people who had demonstrated a genuine love of children, who were stable and who would blend into a diverse community," says Brenda.

In May 1994 Hope Meadows officially opened its doors. Today, 13 families with 26 foster and 24 biological children live in spacious homes on 22 acres. The houses hold not only the families, but counselors and foster grandparents as well.

The foster parents are paid \$18,000 a year, which is considered income for one stay-at-home parent. The other spouse works outside the home. The average cost for caring for a foster child here is just over \$15,000—far less than the \$30,000 to \$50,000 the state typically pays to provide for such kids.

Brenda credits the parents with much of the program's success. "When the children come here, they are so lacking in trust they can barely talk. The parents love them, and eventually the real child emerges."

James,* an African-American boy, is one of those children. When he first came to the Hope community, he told Joyce Hill, his white foster mother, "I don't want to be black anymore." His experiences in foster care had deprived him of positive black role models.

After living in the mixed-race setting at Hope Meadows, James lit up

Joyce's heart one day, announcing with a wide, proud smile, "I'm black, just like Mr. Calhoun," a foster parent.

"The program is rescuing lives," says Nancy H. Pepler, the Midwest director of the Child Welfare League of America. "It's

not for every child who needs foster care, but it's a wonderful place for sibling groups and special-needs children who probably won't be adopted."

"If I can set just two children on the right road, that's two who haven't been lost," says Brenda. Her child-centered community gives kids the break they need. At the

Intergenerational Center, for instance, they gather to spend some time with their foster grandparents, seniors who pay a reduced rent on smaller homes in the community. In exchange, they volunteer their time each week with the families. Whether it be by mending clothes, reading to toddlers or providing respite for the foster parents, the seniors play an active supporting role.

As with the other adults in the neighborhood, the love of children brought 72-year-old retired teacher Irene Bohn here. "I feel more fulfilled than I did all the years I taught in public schools," she says. "These children really need me."

Six-year-old Neil* is one of Irene's grandchildren. "When he first came here, he

was withdrawn and wasn't doing well in school," she recalls. "He was in first grade and he couldn't read yet."

Irene tutored him, helping him to learn reading skills. "At first, he didn't want to try, so I coaxed him to sit on my lap and I read to him. One day he told me, 'Grandma Irene, I like the stories better when I'm sitting on your lap.' He was starved for loving."

One afternoon Irene's doorbell rang and she opened the door to find Neil. He stood holding a handful of coins in one sweaty little hand and a fistful of dollar bills in the other.

"It was the most wonderful thing," Irene says, her face beaming. "He asked if he could take me out to eat—just me and him. My heart soared."

Fifteen other states have contacted Brenda so far, interested in starting up similar programs. She's won many awards and been invited to the White House to celebrate her accomplishment. But nothing warms her heart as much as hearing of small miracles like Neil's. "We're giving children a chance," she says. ■



Foster granny Irene Bohn helps Shana Calhoun master her two-wheeler. "These kids really need me," Irene says.

How to Raise Happy, Healthy Kids

Brenda and the Hope Meadows foster parents use these guidelines for raising happy, emotionally healthy children:

- **Love unconditionally.** "Show them there are no strings attached to your affection," says Brenda.
- **Get involved.** Make time every day to talk and listen to your child. Building a strong relationship helps ensure your child will look to you for guidance at critical times.
- **Teach values.** "Too many kids are not successful because they don't understand concepts like respect, responsibility and honesty," says Brenda. Teach by setting a good example.
- **Encourage individuality.** When appropriate, let your child make increasingly more important decisions about his or her own life.
- **De-emphasize the material.** Parents can show by example that cost and status do not determine what is valuable.
- **Put children first.** "Warring parents should understand that they are instilling like behavior in their children," says Brenda. When adults focus on the needs of the children, rather than on retaliation and manipulation, the children thrive.
- **Set the rules—and stick to them.** Make it clear which behaviors are O.K. and which aren't. Kids do well and gain a sense of direction when they know there is a bottom line that is nonnegotiable.