

Miami couple has fostered 90 children

By Ana Veciana-Suarez
aveciana@miamiherald.com



Pedro Portal / EL Nuevo Herald

Lisa and Jorge Alvarez, standing from left, with former foster daughter Kathy Ramos and her fiancé, Brandon Phillips. Seated from left are Kathy's daughter, Noemi, adopted daughters Natasha and former foster daughter Vanessa Bello with her daughter Mya.

Lisa and Jorge Alvarez wanted a child. One child to diaper, feed, cuddle, watch grow. Over the course of a dozen years, they've had 90.

The Southwest Miami-Dade couple has fostered that many kids since they decided to take in a baby boy in hopes of adopting him. Though that didn't work out — the child was adopted by his aunt — they got lucky with their second placement, a cherubic-faced baby named Natasha whom they adopted soon after her second birthday. Today she's almost 12.

The Alvarezes also adopted Desi, a baby with myriad health issues including hydrocephalous, cerebral palsy and chronic lung disease. He's 5 years old now and

loves watching Rachael Ray on TV from his wheelchair.

"People tell me, 'You're going to heaven,'" says Lisa, with a laugh, "but I'm not going anywhere. I've already got heaven here. I have heaven on earth."

She gestures toward Natasha playing with her electronic tablet, husband Jorge feeding Desi through his G-tube and three foster children, all under age 3, playing, fussing and cooing.

Jorge agrees. "This is heaven for her. She couldn't be happier."

The Alvarezes never have more than five children in their four-bedroom house, including their adopted two. Photographs of those they've fostered line the walls, and the closets are stacked to the ceiling with clothes, diapers, shoes and accessories.

"I don't ever get rid of anything," Lisa says. "I don't know when I'm going to need it."

Most of the foster kids stay for about a year. One little girl stayed three.

And some, as the Alvarezs joke, never really leave. They move down the block or to a nearby neighborhood when they age out of the foster system.

Vanessa Bello, 29, lived with the couple as their foster child for two years when she was 17. When she began looking for a house of her own recently, she made sure “I was no more than two minutes away. This is my home. It’s comfort food. If I’m bored, I come here. If I’m having a bad day, I come here.”

She stops over after work several times a week for dinner, her 8-year-old daughter, Mya, in tow. “They feed you with unconditional love,” Bello says. “They’re so patient, so selfless.”

Katherine Ramos, 23, is another former foster child who stops in several times a week. “You know how they say home is where the heart is? This is where my heart is. This is my home. Lisa and Jorge are like angels walking on earth.”

Oren Wunderman, executive director of the Family Resource Center of South Florida, a child welfare and advocacy agency that provides services to more than 1,000 children, calls the Alvarezs “truly remarkable human beings. Their passion and calling to care for kids who face the most difficult health battles is extraordinary.”

But he’s quick to add that people interested in fostering shouldn’t think they have to follow in Lisa’s and Jorge’s large footsteps. “It is important to point out that all foster parents, from those who foster one healthy child to those that foster and adopt a sibling group, make a huge impact.”

Lisa, 52, and Jorge, 56, were married in 1993. She was a waitress — she still works one night a week at Deli Lane Café in South Miami — and he delivered bread. They knew they wanted children, and when they couldn’t conceive, they began exploring adoption. After waiting two years, they decided to try foster parenting in hopes it would lead them to a child of their own.

Jorge had lived in foster homes when he had first arrived from Cuba. “He was on a mission to give back,” says Lisa, who grew up in Pittsburgh.

Their first child, the one eventually adopted by an aunt, barely weighed four pounds and suffered from fetal alcohol syndrome. For the first few weeks, he cried nonstop – until they took him to the backyard swimming pool. The water soothed him.

“He was the hardest child we ever had to take care of,” Jorge says.

The second child they fostered, Natasha, was 3 months old when she was placed in the Alvarez home. Now a chatty middle-schooler, she never strays far from either parent, talking about how fantastic they are, and how her mom comes to career day at her school to talk about foster parenting. Very cool.

“They take such good care of so many kids at the same time,” she says with admiration.

The Alvarezs say they continued taking in foster children after adopting Natasha because they saw so many other babies in need of temporary homes. “This is very rewarding,” Lisa says. “I love doing it. I realize this is my calling, this is what God had set out for me to do.”

Five years ago the couple became licensed to care for kids with special medical needs. The three now living in the Alvarez home fall into that category, which means the couple's days are filled with therapy sessions (handled by Jorge) and doctors' appointments (handled by Lisa.) Everything they do for each child, whether it's administering medication or visiting the pediatrician, must be logged in a three-ring binder at the end of each day.

The Alvarazes admit the work is hard and often relentless, but they say the joy is immeasurable.

"I feel like I'm accomplishing something," Lisa says. "It makes me feel good to know that I'm helping them get better. Besides, these are children who need someone to love them."

And the Alvarazes are only too happy to do that.