

## South Miami-Dade woman adopts five siblings

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Al Diaz / Miami Herald Staff

Katrina Deshazior, 32 and a single mother of a teenager, adopted her drug-addicted sister's five children. Here, Christopher Cohoon, 2, dances as Deshazior, left, watches. On the couch, left to right, are Kieyah Cohoon, 15, Deanna Cohoon, 17 and Celeste Cohoon, 15.

Not once has Katrina Deshazior doubted her decision to adopt five of her older sister's children. Not after she had to quit her job as a certified nursing assistant. Not when she had to move from her home to a rented townhouse. Not even after her husband, overwhelmed by the responsibility, walked out last Thanksgiving.

"I wanted to give them shelter," says Deshazior, 32, of Cutler Bay. "I wanted to give them love. All those things they didn't have with their mother."

A laudable intent, to be sure, but not an easy feat. Deshazior is now a single mother to six. The brood consists of her biological daughter, Deanna Cohoon, 17, Celeste and

Kieyah Cohoon, both 15, and Leanne, 4, Christopher, 2, and Faith Cohoon, 1. (Deshazior, who goes by her married name, decided to give her children her maiden surname, which she shares with their mother.)

It would be an understatement to say she doesn't get much sleep.

And a social life?

"I don't go out and party or have a girl's night out," she says. "Now it's all about the kids."

Oren Wunderman, executive director of the Family Resource Center of South Florida, a child welfare and advocacy agency that helped arrange the Cohoon adoption, says case managers always try to do kinship placements first. "Kids tend to do better with family members they know than with a family they don't know," he says.

But multi-sibling adoptions, he adds, are "very unusual. You don't see many."

Michael Hill, the children's case worker, has been working on finding permanent placement for the children for the past year, though keeping these five together was never part of the plan. When Celeste and Kieyah showed up at Deshazior's doorstep, however, "she just didn't hesitate. She immediately moved to a larger apartment in order to have

enough room for everyone. She knew it was going to be a lot of work, but felt like keeping all five of the kids together would be the best thing for the family. She really is an amazing woman.”

How Deshazior ended up with a houseful is a long, complicated story that began years ago and is an all-too-familiar tale for child advocates. When Deshazior’s older sister, a drug addict, had the first of 10 children, a set of twins, Deshazior quickly stepped in to help her mother care for the boy and girl. This turned out to be just the beginning of a long-term commitment.

After that, her nieces and nephews came quickly, at a pace of almost one a year, all by different fathers. Eventually the mother’s parental rights were terminated by the state, and the siblings ended up living, at least temporarily, with assorted relatives.

In September 2011, Deshazior was awarded custody of Leanne, Christopher and Faith. The adjustment was difficult. “At first we didn’t sleep,” she recalls. “They’d cry at night, all night.”

The children had assorted health problems — not surprisingly since they had been born with drugs in their system. Deshazior persisted, however, dutifully going to doctors’ appointments and making sure the children had both a schedule and stability.

In the meantime, Celeste and Kieyah were living with their great grandmother. When representatives of the Department of Children and Family Services visited, they found the elderly woman senile and mostly bedridden. The house was a mess: human feces in a corner, nails jutting from the floor, electrical wiring exposed. The only food in the refrigerator were rotten eggs, bread and peanut butter.

In the year that followed, the two teens bounced around six different foster homes, running away from one and walking for miles to find their auntie. Even now, months later, Deshazior recounts the story with wide eyes. She says she knew she had to open her already full home to the two teenagers. “They’re blood,” she says. She says it’s hard making ends meet on food stamps and state subsidies.

The girls proved a great addition, though. “They’re a big help,” she says. “They clean. They help with the little ones.”

Deshazior’s adoption of the five children was finalized in mid-November. But the older kids say court papers simply confirmed what they already knew: Together, they’re a family.

Celeste, the more talkative of the teenagers, is particularly pleased. She talks about her past foster homes and shows a visitor the burn scars on her hand, a result of trying to cook when she was a child. When DCF picked them up from her great grandmother’s, she says she hadn’t had a real meal in four days.

“It’s different here,” she says. “It’s comfortable.”

How so? “I have my own bed. I don’t sleep on the couch. We have A/C.”

Then Kieyah, who is much shyer, pipes in: “We eat. We don’t have to ask for food.”

For Deanna, who was an only child until last year, welcoming her cousins has meant a lesson in sharing. “It used to be all about me,” she admits, laughing. Now: “I don’t mind. I’ve got them (her new sisters) to talk to and we take the little kids to Chuck E. Cheese. We’re a family, just bigger.”

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