Wendell and Linda Green have cared for over 100 children as foster parents in Jackson County, Arkansas. Wendell and Linda provide a safe, loving environment for children until they can be reunited with their parents. The Greens stress that their purpose is to help families reunify by providing temporary care for kids so parents can focus on healing, learning, and overcoming setbacks so that they can be the best parents to their children. The Greens not only care for the children in the child welfare system, they also care for the parents as well. The couple frequently calls to check-in on parents, facilitating healthy communication between kids and their parents. The Greens provide parenting guidance and make sure that parents know that they are always available to help in whatever way they can, even after reunification. The Greens are often the parent’s strongest advocates, cheering them on as they complete departmental requirements and consistently reminding them, “you can do it!”

Keith Metz, the Communications Specialist for Arkansas DHS, shared that “if the unthinkable happens and my children were placed in foster care, I could only hope and pray that my children would be lucky enough to be placed with Mr. and Mrs. Green.” The Greens treat all children in their care “as part of the family” and are committed to creating positive, healthy experiences for them, taking the kids on various family trips and advocating for their participation in any after-school activities or projects that peak their interest. In their home, the Greens focus on a “cycle of love”, showing both kids and parents love, compassion, and respect. The Greens recognize that all kids love and want to be with their parents, and with the right help, they can be.

By: Katie Carden, Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law, J.D. Candidate 2021
How did you start being foster parents and what inspired you to become foster parents?

We first became foster parents because three of our nephews entered into the foster care system. We initially just wanted to help our family out, so we took in the boys until their parents could do what they needed to do to get them back and out of the system. After they reunited, the county asked us if we would consider being foster parents for other families. We had a great experience helping our nephews, so we decided to continue helping other families as foster parents. Our three nephews have graduated high school and they each have their own lives now. We are so proud of them.

How many foster children have you had in your care?

We have been foster parents for about 14 years and we just really enjoy all the children. We've had a total of 110 children enter our home since we've been doing this. It's been quite an experience. We've had challenging moments at times, but this journey has been very rewarding and we love the work that we do.

Were there any experiences or families who really impacted the way you think about reunification?

There was one family that really stuck out to us. The mom had been in a bi-racial relationship, and she had two bi-racial sons. She was in a relationship with someone who was not accepting her children because they were bi-racial. We cared for her children for a couple of years. My wife talked with the boys’ mother and helped her realize what she needed to do to get her children back. The mother soon reunited with her boys. We had these boys when they were about two and five until they were four and seven. Now, they’re 18 and 16. One of them just graduated from high school this year. Mom and the boys still keep in touch with us. We connect on Facebook and check-in on one another. We cared for these kids for a while, and we did become attached, but the goal was always to get them reunified with their mother.

What kind of relationship do you try to maintain with parents while caring for their children?

We always try to work with the parents, it’s a team effort taking care of these kids. We meet with the parents and get to know them. We haven’t really had any bad experiences with parents. We work hard to always maintain contact and open communication with the parents. We let the parents know everything that we’re doing and how we’re keeping their kids safe. We make sure to send parents pictures or write letters or make them cards for holidays, like Mother’s Day for example. Whenever the parents and children have a visit, we make sure the kids bring any artwork or letters they’ve written to their parents, or any pictures we’ve taken of activities that we’ve done together. We just want to let the parents know that we’re doing all we can to make their child comfortable and safe with us until they get their life back together and are reunified.
What do you think is the most important thing foster parents can do to help families safely reunify?

Open communication is key. Foster parents should encourage parents to do whatever means necessary to reunite with their children, such as counseling or parenting classes. We offer assistance with whatever we can to help with the reunification. We let parents know that we can work as a team and make this happen.

Don’t ever put a parent down in front of child. Don’t bring up anything bad, always stay positive. If something bad is happening with the case or the parents, don’t ever bring it up in front of kids. Whatever we tell kids about their parents, it’s going to be positive. If there is something bad going on, we just won’t mention it. As they get older, they will and can learn all about the negative. They don’t need that right now.

What advice do you give to parents who are hoping and trying to reunify?

We always remind parents, “it’s not about you, it’s about your kids reunifying with you.” We tell parents to do their best and show their kids that reunification is going to happen. If these parents have a negative attitude, they’re kids will react horribly. The parent’s negative attitude is reflected in the kids’ behavior. But if parents have a positive attitude and are confident that reunification will happen, the kids will do so much better. We encourage parents to maintain positive attitudes towards reunification, we tell them not to let their kids see them reacting negatively. We try to show parents how we treat each other, and the importance of love. Just because things are bad, we still show love to each other. Kids need to see their parents as loving. So, be good role models. Don’t let your kids see you act up, that is just going to make the child act up. Kids are never going to hate their parents, even the worst parent. Attitude is so important, for all sides – both the parents and foster parents. A positive attitude really helps with reunification.

We repeatedly tell parents, we’re not doing this job to take your kids, we’re doing this to help you. We tell the parents, “you’re the parent, you can do this.” We try to encourage them and help them realize that they’re the parent and their child wants to be with them. It doesn’t matter how little they know or how much they have to do, as long as they’re doing their best that’s what matters. Even if they think they’re bad parents, they are still so loved by their kids. We try to give the parents a positive outlook on life. We want the parents to know that they have a support system and they have people who believe in them. We explain to parents that we’ve been parenting for long time and we learned along the way and we just might have some input that will help them.

Do you maintain any relationships with the families you’ve worked with after reunification?

Yes, we do! After families are reunified, we keep in contact with the parent and child. We want these families to know that we’ll do whatever we can to keep them on track. We’ll do whatever we can to help them, at any time. Sometimes the children we cared for come and visit us occasionally. Some of the kids still go on vacation with us. A lot of the parents have shared that they appreciate that we still keep in contact with them and that we let their child stay in contact with us.

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm
Both the parents and children keep in contact with us. We’ve had parents, both those who’ve reunified with their children and those who haven’t, who have come to us and told us how much they appreciate what we have done for their child. Several parents told us that they really appreciated how we helped them out.

Some parents who are reunifying with their children still ask us for advice. They’ll ask us what we did when their child misbehaved or how we handled certain situations. We explain that in the tough situations, parents must be fair and honest and never talk down to their kids. We tell parents to get on their child’s level and communicate with respect. Parents must maintain a positive attitude about their kids. If a child thinks that his mom or dad believes he is “bad”, then he’ll act badly. If a child believes that Mom thinks good of him, then he’ll think good of himself too and he’ll behave better.

Can you describe what your home is like?

We are very active and like to get the kids involved in all sorts of activities. We take them everywhere with us – to sporting events, museums, to magic shows, everywhere! We’re big football fans and have taken the kids to the Dallas Cowboys Stadium and to the GoDaddy Bowls for Arkansas State University in Mobile, Alabama. We went to a Wheel of Fortune audition together. One of my nephews auditioned for the X-Factor, and we brought two of the kids in our care to go watch his audition with us in Austin, Texas. We love to take them places. We’re always very busy with the kids. We have a timeshare that we bought in Orlando Florida, near Disney World. So, in the summertime we buy plane tickets for any child in our home and take them to Disney World.

One of the girls in our care now wants to take gymnastics and dance lessons. We’ve asked the department about this and they’re trying to get that together. We’ve had a child who was on the Homecoming Court for two years. These children have been cheerleaders or on volleyball, basketball, and whippet dance teams. A lot of the kids participate in activities and events at our church. We’re very hands-on. We have done so much with the kids and we like to do activities with them, we want to help them learn and grow.

Our time together is more than just going out and doing activities together. We try to create a caring environment for kids to thrive and learn. We have lots of books to read and we help the kids out with their homework. Our daughter works at Arkansas State University, whenever she visits, she always brings books to our home and reads with the kids. Just the other day, she was asking these two little girls in our care what they want to be when they grow up. We’re always talking about plans for the future and goals that the kids can achieve. We tell them they can be anyone they want to be.

We have a saying in our house, we always tell the kids when they come into our home, “A closed mouth don’t get feed.” That basically just means, if you want something, you need to speak up and say it. They get a good laugh out of that phrase. We want the kids to communicate with us, we want them to tell us what they need and want. We give the children allowances so they can be responsible. This money
gives them some independence, so they don’t feel like they always have to ask for everything. It’s one of our house rules to always say, “Good Morning”, every morning and have family style meals. Although the kids aren’t with their parents right now, we try to make our home still feel like a loving family unit. We have our challenging moments, but we just try to support and care for the kids as best we can.

Are there any programs or practices that are most effective in helping families reunify?
Yes! Training on parenting or maybe other programs, if parents want to know they can ask a resource person at DCFS.

Has being foster parents changed your life in any way?
It’s really made us appreciate family, patience, and caring for others. It has taught us that no matter what life throws at you someone else is maybe going through things worse than we are. Most of the time, the kids are coming to us from broken families, whether that is because of financial issues, drug problems, or abuse, and these kids are recovering from that while they’re with us. We’re helping somebody who’s in need and when we show them respect, they turn around and show respect to us. Working with these families and being a foster parent is really a constant love cycle. We show them love and they show us love. The more we do for these families and kids, the more we realize and appreciate what they do for us.