

Full House, Full Heart:

VALENCIA HARVEY MODELS STRENGTH AND GRACE TO D.C. TEEN-AGE GIRLS

A foster parent since 2000 and a mentor to children before that, Valencia Harvey has an extensive alumni network of children, many now adults. The oldest is 36 years old. Several of her kids have children of their own who call her “grandma.” She’s licensed to foster three children in her southwest Washington, D.C., home. She tries to have at least two children at all times.

“I like a house full,” Harvey says. “They always have somebody to talk to, doesn’t have to be me. When you have all three, the dinner table is full. There’s always chatter. It reminds me of my household growing up. It was always somebody, somewhere.”

She grew up in the middle of seven siblings, three girls and four boys, in Racine, Wisconsin. Her family was part of the African American Great Migration of the mid-20th century, moving from the South to the North for work. Still, the family maintained strong ties to the relatives remaining in Mississippi. Harvey spent summers there on the farm, picking vegetables, tending chickens and cows, alongside every first cousin. It was a happy childhood, providing a foundation for the calm yet lively household she runs.

Harvey became a mentor in the child welfare system in 1998, at the suggestion of a church friend who thought she’d be good at it. She remembers taking a child to see “The Lion King” in New York and his joy at the show and being out of Washington, D.C., for the first time.



She realized her experience of spending time in the North and South could convey the value of different experiences to children. “I knew the geography” and lessons of different environments, she said. Being a longtime paralegal at an international trade firm adds workplace insights.

She became a foster parent and while she has mentored and provided respite care for boys, including those placed through her best friend, a social worker, and others through her wide group of friends and

contacts in the child welfare community, she has been a foster parent only to girls, especially ages 17 to 20.

“I don’t think I would be good at it if they were eight,” Harvey says. “I like the age group because they’re malleable. They stand a chance if you’re patient, and you give them all the pieces that they missed.”

A missing piece might be how to cook all of the elements of breakfast in the right order, so everything arrives to the table hot. It might be turning off all of lights in unused rooms to save money on electricity. Or it might be having a parent give a moment of space when needed for a child to face the day.

If someone is having a bad day at school, “Talk about it. Try it again tomorrow,” Harvey says.

These elements build not only the practical life skills but also the confidence and self-awareness teen-agers need to succeed as independent adults. One of Harvey’s girls, now age 27, went into independent living at age 19, knowing she had two more

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years until aging out of the foster care system at age 21. She could return if she needed to “learn something else.”

At first, the girl lit up every room in her independent home “like Christmas” until she realized the effects on her electricity bill and unplugged everything but the refrigerator when unneeded. “So they do learn. You may not see it in your home, but later, you do,” Harvey says.

Harvey promotes a good work ethic and teaches the value of money toward building a later appreciation of the necessities of independent living.

Certain rules apply in the household, such as no texting Harvey from another room in the house, but flexibility is critical, something she emphasizes as a trainer to incoming foster parents.

An incoming parent will say, no cursing whatsoever is allowed. While it’s fine to ask children not to curse, and to explain why not, tempering expectations is key to success, Harvey says. “The music they listen to is that. You gotta be flexible. There are some things that you’re not going to bend on, so be it. But you’re gonna work around them.”

Remember the children’s traumas may be so deep that seemingly mundane tasks might be hard for them, she says.

“If you come in dirty I, I don’t insist that you take a bath. I don’t know what it does to you. I don’t know enough,” Harvey says. “A foster parent would do good to be patient and learn the child first.”

Flexibility also is important to fulfill the joy of foster parenting. Harvey learns from the children as they learn from her. She does TikTok dances with them. While she eats very little processed food, having grown up with everything cooked from scratch, using ingredients from the farm, she appreciates the creativity the teen-agers use to doctor their ramen noodles. She asks them to consider the sodium levels and teaches them to cook their favorite meals.

The cooking skills are important when working with birth parents, Harvey says. Children in her care sometimes make their favorite meal for their birth parents, an ice breaker for everyone involved in what might be a tense meeting.

Harvey enjoys working with birth parents who want to restore a relationship. They’re often good people who made mistakes, she says.

Reuniting with birth parents may be part of the entire package of children coming into foster care, along with medical care, managing medication, going to counseling, speaking with teachers about individualized education plans, and much more, Harvey says. Foster parents must embrace all of it. “If a piece is missing, then you can’t complete the puzzle,” she says.

A foster parent assembles the puzzle pieces to help children in her care meet their goals, whether independent living, establishing a relationship with birth parents, going to college, working, or having children of their own.

It’s this wise insight and steady, successful track record of mentoring and fostering so many children into thriving adulthood that earned Harvey the recognition as 2021 Washington, D.C., Foster Parent of the Year.

Good news for the community: She has no interest in stopping. “It’s wonderful. It’s wonderful to be a part of their lives and to help,” she says.

Jill Gerber, a free-lance writer, regularly covers the families and children who work hard for success in foster care. CHAMPS is grateful to Ms. Gerber and the Harvey family for contributing this story.