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Foster parents 'amazing people' who 'give and give and give'

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The recipients of this week's Ben's Bell are Barbara "Babs" Reyes and James Reyes, who have been foster parents to more than a dozen children.

The couple were nominated by one of those children, Katie Larson, who said: "If I could handpick parents, I would have picked them. They've taught me so much. They're amazing people."

Nearly 28 now, Larson met the couple when she was 11 and in trouble with authorities for fighting at home.

Barbara Reyes was volunteering at the Juvenile Court Center and visited Larson at the halfway house where she ended up. Both immediately knew they'd found someone special.

"For some reason, I could talk to her," Larson said. "I'd been sent to all these counselors, and I never talked to anyone, but for some reason, I could open up to her and tell her anything."

Larson bounced through the system for a while longer before Reyes and her husband persuaded a judge to let them be her foster parents.

The ensuing years weren't always easy, but the couple's strict discipline, strong faith and belief in Larson's potential helped her finally get her life together, she said.

"They were totally strict, which was what I needed," she said. "They never gave up on me.

"You think, 'I can't believe there are people out there like that,' " she said. "They just give and give and give."

Larson is married now and has two daughters of her own — Ada, 9, and Adisyn, 18 months. She and husband, Tim, have another child on the way, too.

"I'm a strong Christian, and that's because of them. They took me to church, and I got to know the Lord," she said. "They taught me a work ethic, the importance of being responsible and how to take care of myself."

Larson wasn't the first child the couple took in. The parents of four have fostered about 15 children through the years, they said.

It started when Barbara Reyes decided she wanted to get her degree.

She thought volunteering would help get her class credit, so she started giving her time to Child Protective Services.

ben's bellings

The Ben's Bells project began in March 2003, one year after Ben Maré Packard died of croup, just before his third birthday. His family hopes it reminds people to be kind, to help ease one another's pain.

The latest phase of the project began in September 2005, weekly "bellings" for those among us who make our community a better, kinder place to live.

If you know people who deserve a Ben's Bell, nominate them to be "belled." Go to www.929themountain.com/pages/jennie_itm.html and click on Ben's Bellings. To learn more about the project, go to www.bensbells.org, or help work on bells by dropping by the studio, 816 E. University Blvd., in Geronimo Plaza. It's open Friday 2-7 and Saturday 10-3.

And check the Star each Saturday to see the latest recipient.

"I got hooked," she said. "I started school, and I kept volunteering."

As she earned her associate's degree in criminal justice from Pima Community College, she kept taking in foster kids and raising her own. She took a break for a while and then began volunteering again with juvenile-court programs.

"My cousin told me one time maybe this is my calling," she said. "I guess it's a gift. I don't know. I just think teenagers are a lot of fun. It's faith, too. Everybody's got a calling, and this must be it."

Larson decided to nominate her foster parents for a bell after hearing about the program on the radio and seeing the nomination form online.

"I just thought, 'Who better to nominate than my foster parents?' " she said.

The folks with the bells quickly agreed and honored the couple at their home recently.

It was supposed to be a surprise, but James Reyes couldn't keep the information from his wife. "He said he couldn't lie; he said this whole thing about kindness would be hidden behind a screen of lies," Larson said, laughing. That's just the kind of humor her foster father is known for, she said.

"He used to sing this song in Spanish and play his guitar. The song is "*Payaso*" (Clown) and he taught it to me. We call each other *Payaso* No. 1 and No. 2," she said.

"He's always been so great. He taught me what I looked for when I was dating, how he treated my foster mom and her other daughters. I knew what to look for in a man because of him."

Larson said she was happy she could honor her foster parents for all they've done for her, and all they continue to do.

Even now, they're raising another child because the girl's parents couldn't handle her special needs on top of their own problems.

"When I think of the stuff she had to put up with me, and not only me, all the other girls, it's amazing," Larson said, referring to her foster mother. "To open up your house to people like that is a huge thing."

"I just hope that I have as much of an impact on someone as they've had on me. There's nothing I could buy them or say to them or do that would show them what they've meant to me. I'm blessed to have had them in my life."

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● *L. Anne Newell*

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