

OAKLAND PRESS OPINION

Guest Column: The forgotten teens



This image released by NBC shows, from left, Eric McCormack, Debra Messing, Sean Hayes and Megan Mullally in "Will & Grace." A new study says TV series are including more LGBTQ characters and adding gender-nonconforming ones. The study out Thursday, Nov. 9, 2017, from the media advocacy group GLAAD says that LGBTQ depictions increased in the current season across all TV platforms. But GLAAD said there remains a need for greater ethnic diversity among LGBTQ characters and richer, more complex stories about their lives. (Chris Haston/NBC via AP)

By Lena Wilson, Special to Digital First Media

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If you are a fan of the tear-inducing TV show “This Is Us,” you might have been surprised when one of the main characters became the foster parent to a teen. That’s because fostering isn’t something that’s talked about very often and it certainly isn’t something we are used to seeing portrayed in a positive light on TV.

And yet, it’s this kind of generous, selfless move that could save our communities by supporting the most vulnerable among us — our children. This Adoption Month, as we focus on celebrating the adoptions that do take place, it’s imperative to remember the many heartbroken children who are still waiting for their forever homes simply because there are not enough Michigan families who have opened their homes and their hearts to children — especially older children — who’ve endured heartache and trauma.

Cute, chubby babies don’t wait long to find loving homes. It’s the frustrated teens who’ve lingered too long in the system, separated from siblings, and bounced between foster homes that most often need our help the most. At a time when most kids feel misunderstood and alone, teens in foster care are alone and ignored.

They’re often the kids no one wants, and who seem the easiest to pass off as someone else’s problem. But they’re all of our problem. It’s up to us to show American kids the love and security they desperately need, not just for them, but to cultivate stronger families and better communities.

The largest population of kids who linger in foster care is African-American males. In many ways, this is linked to the dishonest media portrayal of the dark-skinned young man as a criminal who is angry, dangerous, and walking around neighborhoods hidden by a hoodie just waiting to commit crimes. This image, however wrong, is a strong reason most Americans won’t consider welcoming these love-starved children into their families.

Because people have a hard time committing to teens waiting for loving families lose out on schooling continuity, which perpetuates a cycle of under-education. They’re labeled by teachers as difficult, their brilliance hidden, as everyone turns their backs. They end up without anchors to community or role models to show them appropriate behavior, no one to encourage them, or to tell them they can succeed.

Until one day, these kids start to believe that what society thinks about them must be true. At that point, all is lost. That’s why foster care is often a great pathway to prison for young boys because they have few other options.

There is a myth circulating that when you adopt from foster care in the United States, there’s more trauma than most families want to deal with. But the trauma American kids face when they’re wrenched from their birth families and bounced between homes of strangers is no different than the trauma faced by children adopted from foreign countries.

Any child not held lovingly, nurtured from birth, suffers trauma. Early rejection and lack of bonding harms every wordless child, and only patient, loving adults can give them a chance at a good life.

In Michigan, about 2,000 kids are available for adoption from foster care; 45 percent are teens.

Why is this your problem?

Because welcoming one kid into your home makes a difference right in your own community.

Because when you give one kid a chance at a future, you change the course for everyone he comes into contact with.

Because if you don’t welcome this kid into your home, he’s going to impact you anyway — whether because of handouts your community will provide or the support in prison that your tax dollars fund.

Because investing in a child is an investment in a society that takes care of its own, a society that sees promise and potential in the shining eyes of a silent son, hoping someone will love him, just a little.

Nationwide, adoptions have a 12 percent dissolution rate, which means that of the 150,000 kids available for adoption from foster care, 12 percent end up being rejected by their adoptive parents. In the cases we handle

every year, only 1 percent fail. That means these adoptions are sticking, and the bonds growing between adoptive families and the children they learn to call their own.

Fostering a child can bring incredible value to your family. The great majority of foster children are bright, loving, caring kids who just want to belong and love the people who love them. They bring personality and integrity. They make hearts grow bigger, fuller with love.

Sure, they bring baggage, but who doesn't? Biological kids come with their own special challenges, too, we're just hooked before we realize it.

There is so much a family can learn from opening minds and hearts to youth desperate for a home. They can learn from their resiliency, from their hope, from their joy and happiness and inevitable sense of humor that is necessary to endure in the system.

This adoption month, I hope Michigan families will consider welcoming a teen foster youth into their families. It might make all the difference for all of us.

Berkley resident Lena Wilson is Executive Director, Lutheran Adoption Service, a subsidiary of Samaritas.