

ALWAYS A WAY HOME

MARY SANDERS AND HER HUSBAND RONALD have been foster parents to about 15 children since signing on with Aspiranet in 1999. Though most of the children she's fostered have eventually been reunited with their own families, the connection remains strong. "They still call me 'Mom,' no matter where they are," she says. And they stay in touch, too.

One weekend not too long ago, Sanders got a call from the birth mother of one of "her boys." Could they stop by for an impromptu visit, the woman wanted to know? Sanders said sure—and happily spent an afternoon catching up with the boy, his siblings and mom.



Another young man, who was reunited with his birth mother after spending just a year in the Sanders' care, also phoned recently. He wanted the Sanders to know that he had just become a father and is proud to be working steadily to support his young family.

All of the young men currently in her care are doing well, too. The five boys, ages 12 through 15, are making As, Bs and Cs in school, and all of them are making plans to attend college. But it hasn't always been easy. Mr. Sanders recalls having to play tough when it came to helping one of his foster sons understand the importance of education.

"He was getting in trouble in school, being the class clown, not turning in his homework, and I told him, 'Do not be the class

clown today. If you do, you have to suffer the consequences,'" Mrs. Sanders says, applying what she'd learned in Aspiranet's "Love and Logic" parenting class. "It's about giving children choices instead of always coming down on them when they're doing something wrong," she explains.

"I keep a good rapport with the teachers," she says. "And I let them know from the beginning. 'This is my child. If you have trouble with him, here's my phone number. Call me at work or call me at home or call me on my cell and let me know.'"

Long story short, when the Sanders got a less-than-satisfactory report from the boy's teacher, basketball was off-limits for a short time. The loss of privileges made a big impression—his behavior improved and his grades went up.

The Sanders remains hopeful for each of their children that they will all eventually go home again. To help them maintain a connection to their families, Mrs. Sanders reaches out to their parents whenever possible, and even arranges play dates with their siblings who may have been placed elsewhere. Keeping siblings connected is a hallmark of Aspiranet's foster care program.

"We tell them, 'We are not trying to take the place of your parents,'" Mrs. Sanders says. "We say, 'When your mom or dad can get themselves together, then you'll be able to go home. But for right now, we're here for you.'"

"I believe in family," she says, explaining that she is one of eight siblings, and has two sons by birth, three daughters by marriage, 10 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

"I want to work with that mother and that father to get their children back because I think that it's important for the child to be with his biological parents if at all possible," she says.

"My kids have a really good relationship with the social workers. All the social workers that we've had liked every one of them. Our social workers become part of our family."
— Mary Sanders