

# The More the Merrier

In 1970, Art and Ruby Harper made a decision that would change their lives and the lives of over 250 foster children. They decided to become foster parents. If you had to choose one word to describe the Harpers it would be commitment. Commitment to each other, commitment to the foster care experience, commitment to the children placed in their care and commitment to the birth families of those children. Born and raised in Spokane, Ruby met Art when he was stationed at Fairchild Air Force Base. They married and settled in Spokane and had 5 children. Since both of them came from a long line of large families, they both knew they wanted a large family themselves. Unfortunately, Ruby's 6th pregnancy ended in the loss of their newborn child. Still wanting more children, they attended an adoptive meeting. Since they already had 5 children and there were families without any children, they were instead offered the opportunity to do foster care. They decided to give it a try since it would bring more children into their lives. With the recent loss of their baby, they decided to foster babies. This eventually led to them specializing in medically fragile babies, a niche that they would remain with for the next 44 years until Art's declining health required them to retire from foster care. Despite their official retirement, they still have 2 former foster children (aged 3 and 8 months) for whom they provide occasional respite for the birth parents. They also remain close with many of their past foster children and receive regular birthday cards, graduation announcements and letters.

When asked about their foster care journey, Ruby responds; "We may be boring, but foster care and adoption are not a bit boring. It's been a wonderful trip." A trip that was marked with many challenges and blessings. The one story that stands out the most to the Harpers is one that involves both loss and gain. With a trembling voice, Ruby emotionally recounts the story of one of their adopted children. 25 years ago, an infant from a set of twins was placed in their home while his brother, Patrick, remained hospitalized with complications related to a premature birth. After 4 months, the baby in their home passed away from SIDS. Working with medically fragile infants increases the risk of losing a child, but this was their first experience and it left them grieving. When baby Patrick was finally released into their care, their grief slowly dimmed as they worked tirelessly to meet Patrick's medical needs which included hourly breathing treatments. As Patrick grew stronger their hearts began to heal and they eventually experienced the joy of his adoption. Little did they know as they labored to keep Patrick alive that he would soon save Art's life. Art and Ruby were required to have physicals done at the time of Patrick's adoption. Art was 58, but had no medical concerns so he anticipated a clean bill of health. However, the doctor discovered prostate cancer. Because it was caught early enough, Art's cancer was treated and cured, something that may not have happened if not for the physical mandated for the adoption.

In spite of their humility and Art's insistence that having a large family is "no big deal", you can't help but experience a sense of awe and respect for the amazing work they have done and the selfless love it took to accomplish it. Their advice to those interested in foster care is to "just do it". This may sound like oversimplified advice, but it captures the heart of what makes the Harpers so special. Their unswerving faith and focus on treating others with kindness and respect. From the beginning, Art and Ruby included the parents of their foster children in their care. Art shares; "We like to interact with the natural parents. We felt like we could serve the family better and the child better by knowing the parents and knowing their circumstances. In doing so, you come to sympathize with their circumstances and see them as human beings who have faced many challenges in their own lives." Though many of their foster children were not able to return home, the care they provided to the child as well as the birth parents helped these children transition safely into their adoptive homes. To those who are already providing care, they recommend getting as much training as you possibly can. Foster care is something that has to be learned by doing and training gives you the tools you need to be successful. They also encourage you to communicate with your child's social worker. You may not always agree with the decisions they make, but having an honest and open relationship helps you to be on the same page and work together in the best interest of the child in your care.

44 years ago the Harpers did not know where the journey of foster care would lead, but 10 children (6 biological, 3 adopted and 1 in guardianship) and over 40 grand and great grandchildren later, the Harpers know that this was the road they were supposed to take. The challenges they faced were far outweighed by the blessings they received and if they had to do it over again, they wouldn't change a single thing.