

# Unlikely foster parent

■ 71-YEAR-OLD  
STILL TAKING  
CHILDREN IN

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Annie Hayes is an unlikely foster parent.

At age 60, she had already raised five children, survived a heart attack and was living on her own.

In the last decade, Annie has become "Nannie" to more than 70 children through the Family and Children Services Niagara foster care program.

The phone can ring at two o'clock in the morning and Nannie is there to answer the call. She never quite knows what to expect when they show up on her doorstep. Children have arrived that have even caused Nannie's family to worry about her personal safety – but the soft-spoken senior with a lyrical scottish accent seems to take it all in stride.

The 71-year-old foster mother claims she got involved in the program because of loneliness, despite the fact she is surrounded by family members on most days and usually invites a dozen or so people for Sunday dinner.

"It's a very busy household," she said. "It's good to have kids around."

Last year, Nannie had heart surgery but she remains committed to opening her home to children in crisis situations.

"I'll keep doing this as long as my legs will carry me up and down the stairs," she said.

While she admits there are challenges to fostering, Nannie believes there are few children that can't be won over with love and patience.

"Only once in 10 years did I ever have to have a child removed from the house."

Currently, Nannie is caring for two teenage girls; a 14-year-old and a 17-



STAFF PHOTO MARK TAYTI

**Annie Hayes cuddles on the couch with great-granddaughter Kendra. The 71-year-old Welland woman attributes patience and love as the best tools to fulfill her role as a foster mother for Family and Children Services.**

year-old. The 17-year-old has asked Nannie if she can stay once she is no longer eligible for the foster care program.

Former foster children continue to show up at her door long after they have left Nannie's care. There's also the Christmas cards and letters she receives from her foster children after they have moved on.

"It's a good experience," she said. "Very fulfilling. I'd recommend it for anyone who is lonely or retired."

While the foster care duties are "not all joyous," there is a good feeling that comes from knowing you have made a difference in a child's life, she said.

"I've always been a caregiver," Nannie, who is one of 11 children, added. "It doesn't matter what race, creed or religion – a child is a child."

There are times when the children coming through the door speak a different language and the food they eat differs from the Scotch cuisine of Nan-

nie's household.

"You have to go with the flow ... time and love is what it takes."

On Thursday, Nannie will be honoured with a 10-year award during a special Foster Parent Appreciation Night being held at the Quality Hotel Parkway Convention Centre in St. Catharines. The event is organized by Family and Children's Services and will honour more than 30 foster families from across Niagara.

The event is being held in conjunction with Canadian Foster Family Week.

"The dedication of these individuals is truly extraordinary," Ann Godfrey, a spokesperson for FACS Niagara, said. "They are always willing to go above and beyond for these children."

The need for foster parents in Niagara remains urgent, especially for teens. Anyone interested in being a foster parent can call 905-937-7731 and ask for the Home Finding department.