

Jo Barton

Foster carer and community support worker, 48, Ipswich

Interview ELISSA LAWRENCE

Growing up, I always wanted a big family of my own and thought I would have four or five kids.

As it turned out, that didn't happen. I have one biological daughter, Rosie, 23. But I have been a foster carer and I have definitely ended up with my big family.

I've been a foster carer for 15 years including about seven years with (non-government, not-for-profit community services agency) Key Assets.

Over the years, I've had about 50 kids in my home.

Rosie also lives with me with her son Theo, 2. So there were always plenty of kids in the house. Children walked in my door and I just felt like they were my kids.

If my child couldn't be with me, I would want a parent figure to love and help my child, to still give them all the love, the hugs, the support and be someone to advocate for them.

I grew up on the northside of Brisbane, at Bray Park, and had a really normal upbringing. I have an older sister, Amanda (51), a younger brother, Scott (44), and I had a twin sister, Donna, who died during birth.

Our parents were happily married for 50 years until my dad passed away in 2016. Mum Gladys is 76.

After school (at Pine Rivers State High) I did a year of social work at uni but



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week. An assessment process took about six months and I was approved in February 2007.

You think you know what's going on in your community but you don't know what happens behind closed doors. It's been eye opening and confronting to see the situations kids come from.

You get a bit tough from it all but your heart breaks every time you hear a story about a child.

There is a lot of ice addiction, alcoholism, domestic violence, sometimes homelessness ... it all leads to neglect and sometimes physical abuse and just not a safe environment for children.

I run a support group for carers and mums and dads.

I used to get really angry about it but I don't anymore.

Over time you learn that the parents have sad lives, too.

I've never met a parent who intentionally hurt their kids.

They love their kids but they need help as well.

I also work three days a week as a community support worker and I have recently been accepted to uni to study a postgraduate degree in Human Services because I'd eventually like to end up working for the government or a fostering agency.

My life is crazy busy at times. I'm single – I can't even imagine going on a date and saying this is my life.

Then there are the chihuahuas – I foster them while they get healthy and then they are adopted out.

We have two chihuahuas that have stayed, and also a cat and six chickens.

Fostering (children) is not for everyone but more people should think about it. There are some kids I have only had for 48 hours who were found wandering on the street.

But even if it's 48 hours of a warm bed and a hot dinner, it's rewarding and satisfying that they were safe for that time. There are always children out there who need a soft place to land.

I got scared because everyone was mature-aged and very serious so I changed to a Bachelor of Teaching and Early Childhood.

I worked as a kindy teacher for four years in Glenden, a tiny little coal mining town inland from Mackay in Central Queensland, and in Stanthorpe. Then I had my daughter and moved to Caloundra.

Over the years I worked in family day care and ended up back in Stanthorpe

where I met up again with Rosie's dad but it ended badly. He only met Rosie for the first time when she was four or five.

I finally packed up and left on New Year's Eve, 2005, and moved to Ipswich.

I did some relief work in family day care and it was during this time that a lady came in with two beautiful little girls and said she was a foster carer. I thought, "I could do that".

That afternoon I rang a fostering agency and they came out within the

PICTURE: JOHN GASS

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