

# LSA CELEBRATES FOSTER CARE MONTH

## Lutheran Social Services of Illinois

### THE WATSON FAMILY



*Osayande and Nanyamko Watson (seated center) surrounded by their son Jahari (back right), daughter Tamahrah (back center) and granddaughter Myiesha (seated left).*

Osayande and Nanyamko Watson had a unique perspective on foster care when they decided to become foster parents in the early 90s. As employees of the Cook County Correctional Facility, the Watsons saw first-hand the struggles of adolescent African-American males.

Osayande, who worked at the correctional facility for 30 years before his retirement, saw a void in the mentorship of young people.

“The young people I saw come in didn’t seem to have a lot of guidance,” he says. “I tried to be that somebody to help them with their problems. It came very easy.”

Growing up in foster care, Nanyamko lived in four homes before she was 18. Her final home was “fantastic,” enabling her to transition successfully into adulthood. So when health issues meant she could no longer work full-time, Nanyamko turned her attention to helping

children like herself.

Many children have come through the welcoming doors of the Watsons’ home over the past 24 years. Three have stayed permanently. Jawanza was their first adopted son, now grown and living in Colorado. Then came Jahlani and five years later Jahari. They are currently in the process of permanently adopting two more boys.

“We know that African-American boys with special needs are the hardest to place, and their adoption rate is almost zero,” Osayande says.

The Watsons thrive working with African American boys with special needs, believing they have the tools to set them up for success.

“I think I have a great nurturing ability,” Osayande says. “Everyone seems to come to me when a crisis is on. I’m very structured, sometimes probably to a fault. They can pretty much know how I’m going to do things.”

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LSSI provides placement and casework services for children who have been removed from their birth families because of abuse and/or neglect. The goal of LSSI's foster care services is to return children back to their birth families. When reunification with birth families is not possible, children may achieve permanency through adoption. Services include training and licensing for foster families. LSSI offers additional services for children in foster care, including counseling and educational support. Foster parents, working with LSSI, assist in the child’s connection to his or her birth family by providing transportation to or hosting sibling visits, and visiting with birth parents when the child welfare team mutually agrees upon this.

LSS of Illinois is a member of the LSA Network and it’s part of the LSA Children, Youth and Family cohort working with the Center for the Study of Social Policy.



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Nanyamko admits she is the stricter, more disciplined side of the pair. She rose to the rank of captain in only 10 years at the Cook County Correctional Facility. She has her empathetic side, however, having lived through the same experiences her children do, moving in and out of foster homes.

“I think in that respect they can relate to me and know they’re not alone in what they can experience,” she says. “They’ll talk with me about it because they know that I know.”

It takes a unique couple to face the challenges of fostering and parenting children with special needs. “I haven’t had anyone like them,” says Gail Jackson, the licensing representative responsible for the Watsons at LSSI’s Augustana office. “They are such good foster parents because they mirror each other. I think that is why it is so easy for them to work with children who have special needs. They don’t look at it that way—they just see that the child needs a home.”

A home is what they have provided. Along with their soon-to-be five adopted boys, they have four birth children as well. Add in their nine grandchildren and the many, many children who have spent an extended period of time within their walls, and they have parented, mentored, and loved almost 30 children.

“For all of those people who say ‘How do you do it? I could never do it.’ I just say, ‘How do you not?!’” Nanyamko says. “I forget I didn’t give birth to these kids because I love them exactly the same. I can’t really tell the difference.”

LSSI is the largest provider of foster care services in their state. Approximately 10 percent of Illinois children under the guardianship of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) are served by LSSI.

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For more information about foster care, please call 888.322.5774 or visit <http://www.lssi.org/>

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