

## Foster Parents awarded Order of Ontario



### 64 foster children and counting

**Bernice and Rolland Desnoyers have raised 65 foster children over the years between the two of them. The Leamington couple are currently foster parents to Colin Garnett, 20, left background, and Skylar Sayers, 18. 'It's been rewarding'**

**Sonja Puzic, The Windsor Star**

Published: Wednesday, December 19, 2007

When the phone rings at Bernice and Rolland Desnoyers' house, any one of their 64 foster children could be on the other line.

For decades, the Leamington couple has been opening their doors to kids who need a safe home and an escape from often troubled upbringing.

Many of them have been teenagers who arrived full of angst, but stayed for months, even years, calling Bernice and Rolland "mom" and "pops." One of them didn't leave until he turned 26 and got married in the backyard of the family's Robson Road home near the lake.

A lot of Desnoyers' former foster children still stay in touch, calling with updates about their jobs, marriages and children.

Over the years, Bernice, 73, and Rolland, 68, have been recognized for taking care of so many kids by organizations like the Children's Aid Society and Bluewater Family Support Services. But they never imagined their names would end up on the list of Order of Ontario recipients, along with the province's famed scientists, doctors, business leaders and scholars.

"We were so shocked," Bernice said Wednesday, when the recipients of the province's highest honour were officially announced. "(Rolland) is thrilled to death."

A friend nominated the couple for the Order of Ontario, which is awarded to Ontarians "for excellence and achievement in any field."

This year, the 27 recipients also include a University of Windsor professor, John William McConkey, considered a world leader in atomic and molecular physics.

"Our friend thought we were making a great contribution to the community and thought we should be recognized for it," Rolland said.

The Order of Ontario Advisory Council agreed.

"The kids are all really excited," Bernice said. "Everyone's been calling us."

Bernice has been a foster parent since 1960 and is in the process of welcoming her 65th foster child, Jacob, to the home this week. She turned to foster agencies while married to her first husband because

she thought she couldn't have any biological children. Eventually she gave birth to two children and adopted one, but that didn't stop her from taking in more kids through foster programs. When Bernice married Rolland in 1988, he was no stranger to foster parenting. He also had six children of his own from a previous marriage and "moved right into" fostering more kids with Bernice. The couple currently has two foster children living with them, aged 18 and 20. They've taken in kids from foster-care programs in Windsor-Essex, Chatham and London. "It's been really rewarding," Rolland said. "A lot of kids really need homes and many people won't take in teenagers. Some of them go through a lot before they find a safe place to live." Although the couple has housed a lot of kids on a short-term and emergency basis, many others stayed for a long time, truly becoming a part of the family. "They never leave when they come," Bernice said with a laugh. "Some of them come for one visit and they want to stay right away. They can stay as long as they want." Asked why so many kids chose to spend up to 11 years with the couple, Bernice said: "I guess we treat them like human beings." "I never introduce them as my foster kids," she added. "When we go out somewhere, I say this is my boy, or these are my boys." Disciplining teenagers is a challenge, but the Desnoyers say they have a good handle on that. "I have my rules and if they don't follow my rules, well, the doors open both ways, I tell them," Bernice said. And although 65 may seem like an overwhelming number of mouths to feed, clothes to wash and homework assignments to help with, Bernice said she's never housed more than five kids at a time. "It's never really been hard," she said. "We've enjoyed so much seeing these kids ... coming in so mixed up sometime and turning out so loving and caring." This year's Order of Ontario recipients will receive their awards at a ceremony at Queen's Park on Jan. 24.

### **About adoption and foster care**

There are about 250 children available for adoption in Windsor and Essex County but living in the foster-care system, according to the Windsor-Essex Children's Aid Society. Most are between two and 16. There are about 700 kids in the foster-care system. Want to be a foster parent? Call (519) 252-1171.

I had the joyous opportunity yesterday to witness the investiture of a foster parent couple into the Order of Ontario. I really think this honours all foster parents, both public and private. They were awarded the Order of Ontario because they are foster parents and have made a recognized contribution to our province through caring for children in care. Every foster parent in the province should feel proud. I feel this honour acknowledges the caring of foster parents everywhere.

Be of good heart,

Wilf Graham  
Director  
Bluewater Family Support Services