

NATIONAL FOSTER CARE MONTH

# Pennon family: Changing the way fostering looks



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Matt and Michael Pennon are changing what foster parenting and adoption look like -- by pulling back layer after layer of normality.

May is National Foster Care Month, and the Pennons are a visual representation of how diversity is making its way into the foster care system in the form of love and nurture.

Matt, a Central Coast native, is a former pet store owner and current resource family recruiter and trainer for Our County, Our Kids -- the outreach branch of Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services. Michael, originally from Kansas, is a Santa Barbara County Animal Control officer based in Santa Maria.

Matt explained that it is becoming less unusual to see gay couples fostering children, as well as interracial couples fostering children who might also be of a different race.

Matt and Michael happen to be all of the above, and their three children are of Hispanic descent.

“We just call it a blended family, where we have so many different cultures,” Matt said. “We love enjoying that and respecting where everyone came from.”

“We want kids to be in a normal home, no matter what normal is,” he said. “It’s about providing that stability they didn’t have. These kids didn’t have a choice in the matter, and they deserve the opportunity to thrive.”

He decided to start working as a resource family recruiter and trainer with Our County, Our Kids after the experience of fostering their children, he said, laughing about ending up with three children after the couple thought they only wanted one.

Our County, Our Kids is a program of the Child Welfare Services Division of the county's Department of Social Services, and is the information, resource and support provider for resource parents and caregivers who are fostering or adopting through the county. Potential resource families also are recruited and training provided through the program.

In Santa Barbara County, of the over 400 foster care children in the system on average per month, 75 percent typically come from North County. The majority of children are between the ages of newborn to 17, but Our County, Our Kids serves young adults up to age 21.

Last year, none of the adolescents aged 16 to 18 in the foster care system were placed in homes with resource families, and only 7.8 percent of children aged 11 to 15 were taken in by foster families, signifying a great need for foster families for older-aged children in the county, according to the Santa Barbara County Department of Social Services.

On the job, Matt often tells potential foster, or resource, families his own story.

“Sharing my story is a huge part of bringing perspective to families about what to expect and what the process is like,” Matt said. “They see diversity, options, and that it’s all about loving that child.”

“It’s an amazing thing to come full circle in this process,” Matt said. “Walking alongside a child from foster placement to adoption is not an experience you get to have as a traditional parent. You make a difference in their lives whether they’re in your family for two days or two years.”

Matt also said that becoming foster parents made a positive impact not just in several children’s lives but, also, in his own relationship.

“The diversity of our family is the best part about it,” Matt. “But we have also become a much stronger, more patient couple. We communicate better and have set more goals for each other and for our family.”

With the couple’s 8-month-old son Mateo on his lap, Matt said that beyond peeling back “normalcy” layer by layer, their family really is a normal family that enjoys spending time, traveling and eating dinner together.

“It’s really big to Michael and I to sit down and eat dinner as a family,” Matt said. “No cellphones, we just talk about our day. We tell each other our favorite word of the day.”

He explained that he and Michael hope to raise their children the “old-fashioned way” -- let them play outside until dark, learn by experience, teach them about respect, and give them responsibilities.

Matt said one day he hopes that race and sexual orientation are not things people still consider relevant when it comes to making up a good family. He often recruits single parents and gay couples -- essentially people and families from all walks of life -- if they have the resources to take care of and love a child unconditionally.

“We’re honest and upfront with our kids,” he said. “We tell them most parents don’t get to choose their kids. We tell them out of all the kids in the world, we picked them.”

For information on how to become involved and support Santa Barbara County foster care youth, visit [OurCountyOurKids.org](http://OurCountyOurKids.org).

Krista Chandler covers education in Santa Maria for Lee Central Coast News. Follow her on Twitter and Instagram @KristasBeat.

### ***County hosting appreciation dinner***

Santa Barbara County is hosting a Resource Parent Appreciation Dinner on May 6 to recognize and honor local families who have taken on the role of a parent in the form of fostering or, even, adopting a child.

The dinner will take place from 6 to 9 p.m. at the Santa Ynez Presbyterian Church, 1825 Alamo Pintado Road in Solvang.