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Sharon Mitchell and her three children

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Three generations of caring

Sharon Mitchell is right in the middle of what's set to be three generations of foster carers, creating her own cycle of giving and showing that we truly are influenced by the kindness of those around us. Growing up, her mother was a foster carer back in the UK — so Sharon grew up with lots of kids in the house and learnt the importance of caring at a very young age.

Sharon went on to have three daughters of her own. When the oldest was 13 and the youngest just seven, Sharon decided she

had more to give and wanted to continue on the culture of caring she had grown up with in her own home for those less fortunate.

She remembers each and every child by name all the way back to her first placement — more than 40 children ago. They were two little boys, just four years old and 18 months. She says the house was very loud from then on, but the joy they brought her, the care she could give them, and the difference she could see in them as time went on, made her determined not to stop.

“When you get that phone call in the middle of the night, it's so sad because you know something shocking has happened... but you're wide awake and you're there for the child, whatever they need. When they bring these children at that time of the morning, your motherly instinct just jumps in.”

As a crisis carer, Sharon takes children in from a few days, to a few months, or over a year. She's taken older children, in their teens, who have never in their lives slept in a real bed. But as long

Story continued...

Cover story continued...

as they're with Sharon, her home becomes theirs, and her family becomes theirs. She's cared for babies, as young as five days old. "They've only just been born and it's too dangerous for them to go home, so they need to be supported straight from hospital," she says. "Crisis care is about taking little steps to break the cycle of abuse."

We all want to teach our children about charity and the impact of helping others. Sharon believes it has also been a truly positive experience for her own daughters to share their home with others from less fortunate circumstances. Growing up they have been able to see firsthand that sadly, not all Australian children are born into safe and caring homes.

Her oldest daughter, inspired by the change she has seen made possible by her mother, grandmother and our donors, has recently decided that she too will become a foster carer when she is older. Maybe the cycle of caring will continue for even more generations to come.

Protecting children and young people in care

In Australia, more than 43,000 children and young people can't live at home because it is simply not safe. More than 40 percent of these children are living with foster carers, and five percent in residential homes. Many of you may have seen the recent media reports around several tragic incidents involving children in care.

We want to reassure you that none of these cases have involved Barnardos. With your help, we're doing everything we can to keep the children and young people in our care safe and protected. Barnardos gives children and young people in care the opportunity to express their thoughts regarding their placement, care circumstances, contact with family and wishes for the future.

We can proudly say that in 2005, Barnardos was the first agency to be accredited by the Office of the Children's Guardian after an extensive and vigorous accreditation process and this accreditation has been renewed twice since (in 2010 and 2015). Barnardos continues to set standards of policy and practice, leading the way for Out-of-Home Care reform, nationally.

Our donors play such a strong role in our success. While we

receive government funding for a basic level of care, traumatised and abused children require and deserve a greater level of support in order to thrive. Funds from our donors ensure our care goes above and beyond, giving children the very best chance at recovering.

All our foster carers must complete a rigorous application process including police checks, Working With Children checks (also including other adult household members), health checks, reference checks and are recorded on the NSW Carer Register. Our carers receive training which helps them understand what it is like for children to be removed from home, how to handle difficult behaviour and how these children's pasts affect their behaviour and feelings.

Barnardos foster carers have access to 24/7 phone support from our caseworkers. We facilitate carer support groups so our valued carers can come together and share their current experiences and challenges, giving them a wider network to lean on.

Caseworkers visit children and their carers frequently, and with every child's needs being different, so may be the number

of these visits. Every six months we conduct a formal review of the placement in which children can have a say confidentially without their foster carer present.

Donors also allow us to make sure our children have the best care experience, even if their placement should need to change. Each year, every child in Out-of-Home Care is surveyed about their happiness and feelings of safety. We also use our case management system, My Story, to keep a single electronic file of each life event and milestone a child experiences as they grow up.

Finally, as standards and regulations are changed across the sector, we are able to use funding from donors to adapt. While these may seem like difficult standards, they are all in place to make sure children are not let down again — and are only possible thanks to you.

We are always here to answer questions about the practices we follow for children in our care or to talk if you or someone you know is interested in becoming a foster carer. Just give us a call at **1800 061 000**.



Musu Musa – She asked for a home

Children in Australia have many different stories. When war broke out in Sierra Leone, Musu Musa, just eight years old at the time, was airlifted into Australia on a humanitarian visa. She came to stay with a family friend, while her mother and older sister awaited their own chance to go to a “lucky country” one day. While Musu was now in a safer community, her new home was anything but.

Each day, she was being abused verbally and physically, simply because she was a girl. “I would go to the park on school holidays and just sit there, afraid to come home,” Musu says. The abuse continued on for two years, causing this once bright, bubbly child to withdraw. “I was shy and afraid to speak, afraid to do anything, distanced.”

She knew that police were there to help people, so now 10-year-old Musu ran away from her home and to the doors of a local police station. The police tried to take her back, but they could see the fear in her eyes as they pulled up outside the house — Musu was shaking uncontrollably.

Family Services were contacted, and with it not safe for her at home, Barnardos was called in to help. Musu soon found “love” and a forever home, with foster parents who pushed her to achieve dreams she didn’t even know she had.

Musu’s foster parents helped her come to terms with the issues of her past, and provided her with the care and support she needed to grow up safe and happy. Musu has since been given the opportunity to travel to other countries, but this time not

as a refugee. “I thank my lucky stars every day that my carers opened the door to another life.”

Musu successfully completed year 12 with good marks and has gone on to get a diploma in events management. At age 24, she is already living out her bright future, but this was only possible because of the support kind people like you give to make it all possible.

Children don’t choose abuse. Your kindness allows children in crisis to escape their dangerous situations, and have the kind of life they deserve long term. For Musu, and many others, the care they received was the difference between deep scars of abuse preventing them from success, or being healed by a family and network who truly care.

We missed Holly this Christmas

We know those of you who read Holly's story were deeply saddened by what happened to this tiny little bub when she was just a few weeks old.

If you remember, when we first met her she was in hospital, completely wrapped in plaster. Her parents had said she fell from her crib but with breaks in both arms, crushed toes, bleeding on the brain and shattered ribs, it soon became apparent she hadn't fallen. This infant had been violently abused.

Holly spent 10 months with one of our incredible crisis carers, Diane, doing many hours of back to back therapy, multiple days a week. She required constant supervision for her choking condition, and was behind on all of her milestones due to the abuse. With perseverance, love, and a whole team behind her, Holly eventually began to roll over and crawl.

When her grandmother stepped forward to offer a stable, permanent home, we knew this was just the start to the future she deserved.

Now, Holly is nearly three years old. While she still has some ongoing issues caused by her brain damage, this little girl is always smiling and bouncing around with her full head of curls. Her grandmother has two children of her own still at home, and they love to play games with Holly and help her with her learning and development. With continued support we believe Holly will start school one year late. That is such an amazing achievement, given that she barely survived her first Christmas.

This year, Holly's Christmas was very different. It was the first time she didn't come to the Barnardos Christmas Party — but that's because Holly was on her very first holiday! The whole family took a trip

to New Zealand, and now Holly will say "Quokka" if you ask her what her favourite animal is.

The amazing difference between Holly today and that tiny baby who faced an uncertain future was only possible thanks to the kindness of our donors. While we were able to raise much of the funds we needed over Christmas, we were unable to reach our target and are still needing **\$126,000** to provide quality care that children in such tragic situations need.

We hope you had a wonderful Christmas with your family or friends and if you haven't already, please consider sending a belated gift to Holly's appeal — making sure children in crisis get the support they deserve.



Children at Auburn Long Day Care

30 years of helping children

In December, Mary-Anne Bechara from our Auburn Children's Family Centre celebrated her 30th anniversary of caring for children at Barnardos, in a surprise party thrown by staff from across Barnardos and even some local officials. Mary-Anne is one of several staff at Barnardos who have been dedicated to helping some of Australia's most vulnerable children for more than three decades.

She first started with Barnardos as a casual after finishing up her HSC. Having grown up in the Auburn area, she simply knew the name as one of the only childcare centres there, and she had always wanted to work in childcare. Even though Mary-Anne started straight out of high school, she continued her studies while she worked at the centre and worked her way up to become manager of our Long Day Care Program.

When asked why she's been with Barnardos for so long she says you were either "made to work here or you weren't" — some stay for a short time because the work is tough, emotional and often confronting, and others, like

Mary-Anne, stay much longer because "the kids just get into your heart" in such a way that they don't want to give up on a single child.

Mary-Anne has never given up on a child that's come through her centre's doors. A couple of years ago, one four-year-old in her class had been kicked out of 14 other childcare centres before arriving at Auburn. Mary-Anne made sure it wasn't 15. She helped to work through his behavioural issues by making sure he knew she wouldn't make him leave no matter what. He did leave the next year, but he was ready for school.

This is exactly what Mary-Anne and her team do for the approximately 50 children aged two to five who attend every day needing a little extra support. Mary-Anne says "We make sure that they will be the same as everyone else that first day they walk into school. They won't be the kid that's come from the family that's got all the problems. They won't be the kid that's come dirty to day care for the last six months. They won't be that kid whose dad's been taken away by the police. They'll be a kid who walks in the

door who can write their name, they go with a new bag and everything they need, they go fully ready."

At her 30th anniversary celebration, each speech highlighted the same thing about Mary-Anne: that she keeps the child at the very centre of everything she does and tenaciously fights for their best interests. "That's just my philosophy on how I do my work," she says. There to celebrate Mary-Anne's achievements were former and current CEOs Louise Voigt and Deirdre Cheers, former and current Barnardos staff members, and perhaps most heart-warmingly—some of the children Mary-Anne has helped grow into successful adults.

Auburn Council Administrator Viv May presented Mary-Anne with 'keys to the city' for the impact she has made in the local area, but we believe her methods and commitment — along with yours — will make an impact on many more Australian children in the future. Thank you for 30 years of caring, Mary-Anne, and thank you for helping children every day through your generosity.



Mary-Anne Bechara

