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Ramona Pickett's optimism keeps her smiling and creating cherished moments with her grandchildren.

Antelope Valley grandmother shares her family recipe for raising five joyful grandkids

When the last of Ramona Pickett's four children reached high school, the Palmdale resident couldn't have imagined that one day she would again welcome home the pitter-patter of little feet.

But Ramona did just that five years ago, when she received a call from the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) that transformed her world. The caller said her son's

children needed a safe, loving home while their father navigated difficult personal challenges.

While other grandparents may have understandably asked for time to think about it or may have altogether said no, Ramona felt an immediate surge of gratitude and profound, unconditional love. Without hesitation, she welcomed her young grandchildren into her home, the youngest of whom was just an infant.

"Family over everything," she said, affirming the basic need for children to have protection and love in their lives. "At the end of the day, I have an opportunity to help heal and build them."

At the time of their arrival, the arrangement was expected to be temporary, but as sometimes happens in life, that changed. Ramona is presently in the process of adopting the children, now ages 5, 7, 9, 10 and 12. In her quest to cultivate optimism and hope in their lives, she gave the children new, inspirational first names symbolic of their limitless potential.

"I allow gratitude to guide me," Ramona said. "Love, kindness, dignity and respect. That's what's in our house."

As the adage goes, raising children requires a village, and DCFS remains a part of that community of support for Ramona and her young descendants.

Derrick Pèrez-Johnson, Kinship Support Services manager, explained that when relative caregivers allow the department to become partners, DCFS can help in a number of ways, including connecting families with supportive services.



Ramona Pickett and her five grandchildren enjoy a summer day in their new Palmdale home.

In Los Angeles County, about half of the children in foster care live with relatives. Nationally, 90% of children living with kin do so informally, without child welfare involvement, said Derrick, who has been with DCFS for more than 20 years. That disconnect causes caregivers to miss out on free local resources, services and other types of financial benefits that could make a significant difference for struggling families.

“We can support them. They just don’t know it,” Derrick said, emphasizing that caregivers must advocate for themselves to access this assistance. “We have to improve outreach to informal kin so they’re not afraid that DCFS might open a case.”

In June, after a fire ravaged Ramona’s Lancaster home, she turned to DCFS and others in the aftermath. Relative Support Services and the Alliance of Relative Caregivers were among those who provided vital assistance, helping the Picketts secure approximately \$15,000 for housing and other additional support to start anew.

While the trauma of a severe setback, like a devastating house fire, might reasonably make a person feel defeated or shaken, the Compton native continues to draw strength from her core guiding principle: positivity. Relentless optimism is something she learned from her dad, her greatest supporter, she said.

“I’m great,” Ramona said, reflecting on her situation. “My circumstances are not great, but I’m not my circumstances.”

“Every day, we get a new opportunity,” she added.

In her new Palmdale home, this mindset lives on and continues to help Ramona’s grandchildren adjust and thrive. She has created a sanctuary for them where love, kindness, dignity and resilience bloom every day. Weekly “Family Fun Day Fridays!” feature lively karaoke singing and dancing, accompanied by music, popcorn, pizza and Capri Sun cheers.

For others who may find themselves in a similar situation of raising young family members, Ramona has some advice.

Be clear about your motivations and understand your “why,” she said, noting that parenting is hard, but growing up in foster care is harder.

“We all have a role in healing these children,” Ramona said.