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Little Women
the Broadway musical

LOCAL HEROES | Fostering healing and helping one another

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Local heroes include Vanessa Webster-Smith, Jillian Abbott-Gonzalez, Lorin Linder, Matthew Simmons and Rhonda David, at Marina Park in Ventura. Erika Harding was not available due to a scheduling conflict.

"I am excited to star as Sharpay this summer in CJT's production of *High School Musical*. She is grateful to her parents for believing her and for their continued support. In turn, she looks forward to her life ahead, as well as to giving some form of help to those who may be victims of sexual abuse.

"He may have taken away my childhood, but thanks to my parents, he will not take away my future," she said.

Vanessa Webster-Smith | Foster parent, giving friend

Vanessa Webster-Smith of Camarillo is a busy woman who is trying to live as her mother did, by helping everyone, no matter the circumstance.

She is the director of campus services at California Lutheran University and she is also a foster parent, a role that she embraced more than a decade ago to help continue the actions of a good friend who had died.

Over the years, Webster-Smith has fostered, through the Ventura County Human Services Agency, more than 50 children ranging from days old up to 17 years old; children are in her care for a month to a year or more.

"The most rewarding thing is helping a child see their inner beauty and watching them succeed. The most challenging is seeing so many broken youth who are so disengaged and broken. But once you give them the right foundation they begin to grow and flourish. They just need guidance and love," she explained.

It was one of those challenging moments that led her to adoption. She recalled that one of her foster children, Mario, came to her emotionally drained and with a fractured arm and leg.

"I never thought I would adopt. But once my kids were with me I knew they were mine. It's like it was meant to be. You just know," she said, and noted that Mario proceeded to accomplish remarkable things.

Webster-Smith reports that she is still in contact with many of her foster children, stating that it means a lot to her when they call to say hello or ask for advice. Essentially, helping others is her priority.

And that priority is how she also quickly welcomed her colleague Dennis, into her home. When a kidney infection left him unable to care for himself, Webster-Smith took him in.

"Dennis is a part of my family. He is like a grandparent to my family. I coordinate his entire doctor and physical therapy appointments, make sure he is eating correctly, monitor his breathing machines and medication, make sure he is always looked after so he does not fall or injure himself. He goes on family vacations and events. He is treated like family, not like a patient or someone who is being looked after," she said.

Usually, Webster-Smith is responsible for six people in her household at any given time, although that number does grow from time to time.

On a typical day, she wakes up at 5:30 a.m., checks on Dennis, prepares the children for school, gets ready for work, does some chores, takes the children to school, ensures that Dennis and his caretaker have everything they need. Then she goes to work. Later she picks up or drops off kids to/from activities, checks on Dennis, oversees dinner, dishes, medication distribution, showers, laundry, small chores and then off to bed.

She may be busy but Webster-Smith is more focused on how her time positively impacts others. "I just aspire to be a good person; that's all that I can be."

For more information, visit www.fostervckids.org

