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'I want to help as many children in the world as I can'

Linda Darby has just been nominated for a mum of the year award after devoting half her life to fostering youngsters. **Rod McPhee** found out more about her unique job and why finding fresh volunteers is vital

SHE'S smiling while leafing through a thick album packed

with pictures of the children she's helped over the past quarter of a century.

During that time more than 100 children – some newborns, others as old as five – have passed through the door of Linda Darby's home in Yeadon, Leeds, and left,



hopefully, with the expectation of a better life.

It is the ultimate labour of love for Linda and her husband Paul.

They gain huge joy from helping the babies and toddlers that come to them. But as heartening as it is to see them go on to a good home, it can also be heartbreaking.

"You can be all smiles and laughter when you're handing them over to the new parents," she says. "Then as soon as you've shut the door behind them you can be crumpled up in a tearful heap in the hallway.

"Some of the children come to us for a few days or weeks but we've had others stay with us for up to two years and, obviously, they're usually the ones that we get very emotional about when they leave. "And that's both of us, Paul is just as emotional, in fact he's probably more emotional than me. But you just have to deal with it, you get used to it and remind yourself that the overall good you're doing outweighs the sadness of them leaving you." Fostering remains something of an unknown for the majority of

the population not involved in this vital part of childcare. Because of the confidential nature of the service most people are unaware of where children go, who is looking after them and in what sort of environment. Anyone concerned by this would be wholly reassured by a visit to the Darby home. It's a large, cosy, family house where Peter and Linda have also raised their own two daughters and a son. They've grown up and left the nest now, but at one time there could be anything up to six children running around the place. It makes their achievement seem all the more incredible.

Loving

Nursery nurse Linda spends most of the time looking after the children while salesman Paul is the main breadwinner. She is the ultimate carer: brisk, disciplined, no-nonsense but, above all else, loving.

"That's one of the most important things," she says. "We treat any

child that comes here as if they were one of our own. We set boundaries for behaviour, cater for them practically, discipline them, but it's also vital that they know we care about them.

"The key thing is I absolutely adore children, always have. I know it sounds a bit daft, but I really do feel that I want to help as many children in the world as I can."

Providing comfort to kids is about more than good parenting, it's also a crucial part of the rehabilitation of some of the

babies and toddlers. It's a maxim that children respond more quickly to treatment if they're placed in an environment where they feel the most content.

This is crucial, since some children come to them needing constant medical attention – on oxygen or drip feeds – some newborns come to them from parents who were drug users and effectively have to be weaned off by gradually reducing oral doses of the drugs.

Linda said: "There are all kinds of issues which have emerged over the last ten years or so, things like drugs which weren't really part of the equation when I started 25 years ago.

"But the changes happen gradually and you just adapt. It brings it home to you how much bad there is out there but at least you feel that by sticking to what you're doing you're doing your own little bit of good to balance that out."

Although Linda is flattered (as well as humbly embarrassed) by her award nomination, she insists there are other foster careers in Leeds who have an even tougher job. The Darbys only tend to have kids up to the age of five, other people take youngsters well beyond that.

"Up to the age of five they're still pretty mouldable," says Paul. "So if they have habits or behavioural problems when they come to us, and they may well have, then we can try to change that and usually, nine times out of ten, we achieve some degree of success. "Beyond that age it gets harder, but not impossible, to change.

Youngsters get stuck in their ways which is why it's important to be there for them at a very early age."

But although it is easier to help the under fives it is far from a walk in the park.

"It can be completely exhausting," says Linda. "Not just physically – when you're rushing around all day doing everything you need to do for all these children – but also emotionally.

"I'm quite a strong person and, like I said before, I've got used to it, but the emotional strain can still be very hard to deal with."

This becomes apparent when asked whether they've ever had a child in their home whom has subsequently left, leaving them particularly distraught.

Linda and Paul both look at each other with a wry smile and a knowing look. "Yes there was one case," she says. "But we can't talk about it, mainly for reasons of confidentiality."

Discretion is an essential part of the job. The Darbys won't even contemplate discussing the specifics of any child they've cared for. Even if fostering rules didn't forbid them

from doing so, they wouldn't divulge anything through personal principle alone.

Though that doesn't mean that every child who leaves their home has to be wiped from their memory. So long as the family the child is given to are amenable, Linda and Paul can keep in touch with youngsters who pass through their doors, though this only tends to happen in a handful of cases. But what about their own family? Didn't their biological children get envious of the attention given to a long line of strangers?

Linda said: "No, not at all really. Because we started doing it when they were all at an early age they never knew any different. It was perfectly normal for them.

"In fact they loved it when we told them we'd be getting a new little boy or girl the next day, they were so excited. Of course they could sometimes be a bit sad when they left."

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Admiration

She laughs: "But they were always consoled by the fact that it wouldn't be very long before the next one came along."

Peter added: "In fact they got so used to the whole routine that one day one of them asked us: 'When will we get sent to our new mummy and daddy?'"

The reality is that their son and daughters hold great admiration for their fostering parents, in fact it was

their daughter Louise who put her mother forward for the title of Tesco magazine's Mum of the Year accolade. She's now on the shortlist and the final winner will be announced in February.

There's a distinct vibe of contentment as Linda, 56, and Paul, 63 ponder the long line of children they've helped over the years. Now they're seriously considering giving it up over the next decade to make more time for themselves and their grandchildren.

But there's also a sense of concern as a whole 'generation' of foster carers in Leeds could possibly disappear. Leeds City Council currently has 500 fostering households around the city, but are always eager to add more.

"We know quite a few foster carers in Leeds who are around our age," she says. "And what is worrying is that if they all start to retire then who is going to do the work that they're doing now?"

"It isn't easy work, but it is one of the most gratifying jobs imaginable. And these days you don't have to be someone like us who have a 'conventional' family unit to start from. You don't have to have a big house and a partner and all those other things.

"What is important is that you can offer a child care, a support network, stability and, above all else, love."

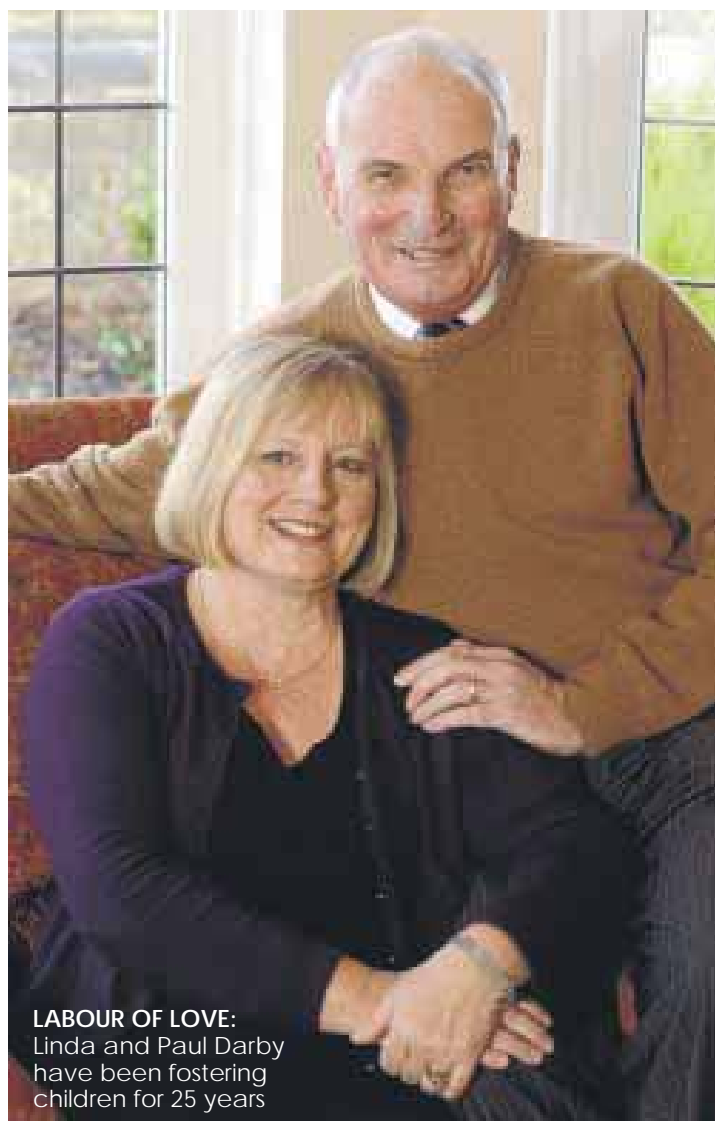
● To find out more about foster care opportunities visit www.leeds.gov.uk/fostering or call 0113 2474747.

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**HAPPY
MEMORIES:**
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Linda Darby
from Yeadon
who has
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more than
100 children

PICTURES BY:
Tony Johnson