

## How overcoming adversity in their own lives made Brett and Carolyn ideal foster carers



Foster carers, Carolyn and Brett are no strangers to ups and downs in their personal lives, but only recently did they make the connection that these difficult experiences drawn from their past are the experiences that enabled them to better connect with and inspire Suffolk children in their care.

After losing his eyesight and ultimately the business he had built up over many years, Brett found himself in a dark place and struggled to cope.

The loss of his eyesight, and dealing day to day with his autism, led to a drop in Brett's confidence, as well as his mobility. What followed was a period of isolation where Brett rarely left the family house for 12 months culminating in issues around self-esteem and depression.

Looking for a complete change and reset, Carolyn and Brett decided to start a new life and relocated to Suffolk.

The move was fruitful and Carolyn began to fulfil her passion of helping children and families, by volunteering at the local children's centre part time, whilst also being Brett's carer.

Brett also received a boost to his confidence, with his Guide Dog, Monty arriving. With Monty by his side, Brett's world opened, and his confidence began to grow. Brett was now assisting at the local Children's Centre as well as working with children to help them overcome their own depression and self-esteem issues at a local gym drawing from his own experiences.

Hearing an advert on the radio one day for a foster carer, and despite fearing that with Brett's disabilities that they wouldn't qualify, Carolyn took the plunge and made the call to Suffolk Fostering and Adoption service.

Carolyn said, *"I didn't think we'd be able to become foster carers with Brett's disabilities and his breakdown, but the initial meeting made us feel confident. They weren't looking for someone squeaky clean, they need people with real-life experiences to help these children."*

Part of the application process to become a foster carer looks at past experiences and covered this in depth.

*"It was a revelation."* Brett said

Carolyn added: *"It was really positive – we didn't have the best upbringings, but we've come through it' and we've showed resilience and learned from it. It was a light bulb moment."*

As the couple progressed through their application, they were given a date to go to panel to achieve sign off to become fully-fledged foster carers.

Carolyn said: *"We weren't nervous going into panel. People around us recognised our experiences in life. By the time we went to panel, we'd had so much encouragement and positive advice that we weren't nervous."*

Brett added: *"We both cried when we were approved as foster parents – it was a euphoric moment. Losing my sight took me to a place I didn't want to be but passing that milestone and becoming a carer – I felt - I'm not useless and I am of value and someone does see my value!"*

With two of their own birth children living in their family home, the couple were approved for one foster child placement and it wasn't long before a little boy was placed with them.

Brett said: *"The little boy had low confidence and low self-esteem when he came to us – he had been neglected and had to learn everything from scratch."*

But with patience, perseverance and by using their training and experiences, Brett and Carolyn managed to completely change the boy's life around.



Brett Said: *"Now he's swimming, he's trampolining. He makes us proud of all of his small achievements, as when he came to us he couldn't do these things. He's also getting on well at school – he's really flourishing. "*

Brett and Carolyn were also quick to point out the difference the foster child has made to their own birth son.

Brett added: *"Our six-year-old birth child is thriving because he's got someone closer in age. Our son has sensory issues and was struggling to use a knife and fork and brush his teeth – but now since the foster child has been here – he's improved in every area! It really has helped them both."*

The couple are also quick to pay tribute to the training they received throughout their application process and the training and personal development opportunities since qualifying as foster carers as well as the helpfulness and positive impact of their social worker.

Brett said: *"We did a Therapeutic parenting course and it taught us stuff that we'd never thought about and it was a massive confidence boost to our parenting and helped the children with their behaviour. We're very supported with our learning – the CPD has been phenomenal, and we've had so much encouragement and positive advice."*

Brett and Carolyn paid tribute to the opportunities to network with other foster carers and how well supported they feel:

Carolyn said: *"We've got The Fostering Network and a closed Facebook group of carers and have made new fostering friends and WhatsApp groups - there's plenty of events going on too. Suffolk Fostering and Adoption really do put themselves out to network the foster carers together and I think that's a really good support network."*

When reflecting on her experiences becoming a foster carer, Carolyn is quick to encourage others to step forward and use their past experiences as a positive to help Suffolk children.

Carolyn said: *You don't have to be perfect – they're not looking for perfection – if you're a perfection parent and you haven't gone through life experiences then you're going to struggle. The whole process has given me self-confidence – just going through the motions of the process and brought Brett and I closer together. If having poor eyesight or any disability doesn't stop you from being a parent, it doesn't stop you from becoming a foster parent."*

Brett added: *"It's given me my self-worth back. It's changed our lives massively for the better, 100%."*