

John Caher:

Welcome to Amici, News and Insight from the New York Judiciary and the Unified Court System. I'm John Caher.

Today we have two guests, Frank and Nancy Woods, who are here to share an incredible story of how they went from being "DINKS," double income/ no kids, to parents of five. Frank is senior coordinator of Grants and Contracts with the Division of Professional Court Services and Nancy is technical manager with the Division of Technology.

It all began about a dozen years ago.

Nancy and Frank, both in their mid-40s at the time, decided to adopt a child. They ended up adopting two, a little girl and a little boy, brother and sister who were in foster care.

Then, they encountered twin babies in the foster care system and they decided to adopt them as well. Finally, they took in an older brother of their first adopted siblings.

Frank, Nancy, welcome to the podcast. Why don't you start by telling me the basics, who, what, when, where, why? I'm still a journalist at heart. How did all this get started and how did it grow?

Frank Woods:

My wife and I had talked about adopting for a number of years. In fact, we used to fight about it. Generally, the argument went something like this: She wanted an infant and I would say, "Well, we're not getting any younger. Maybe we should think about an older child." Then we would go back and forth and nothing would happen.

One day, I had gone to a conference and heard a really terrific speaker who was talking about the needs of older children in the foster care system. I went home and I was telling her about it. I said, "You know, we really should think about this." She kind of finally gave in, or gave up, and said, "You know, if you don't do something about this tomorrow, don't ever bring it up again."

I went ahead and called a contact that I had, a friend of mine who worked in the field, and picked her brain a little bit about how do you get started. She said, "Where do you live?" I said, "Rensselaer County." She said, "Well, why don't you contact the Rensselaer County Department of Social Services and see when they're offering the MAPP class?" which is the class that you take. Ironically, they said, "Well, we're starting a class tomorrow. Can you guys come down?"

Nancy Woods: It was a Monday or a Tuesday and we were both doing research at the same time. I kind of had found an agency that I thought we would talk to, but then he said, "I did you one better, the MAPP class is starting tomorrow." I said, "Okay, you win. We'll go to the training," which is 10-weeks.

John Caher: Ten weeks of training? What do they do?

Frank Woods: You're learning about the needs of children, particularly children who are coming out of the foster care system. They do a bunch of exercises to help ensure that you're going into this eyes wide open, that you've thought things through. It was very interesting. It was also interesting to be in a class with other people who were also considering either becoming foster parents or adoptive parents.

Nancy Woods: Most of the people in this training were probably going to be providing foster care.

John Caher: Did you consider that at all, becoming foster parents?

Nancy Woods: Not really. We had always thought that, based on a couple things, our age, our jobs... A lot of people who are wanting to provide foster care, in my experience, have their own children. Oftentimes the mom is a stay-at-home mom or maybe has part-time job. This is a way for them, you know, to sort of expand on that and provide foster care for people. She's already home and she's kind of taking care of those things.

Not all people, but a lot of people, in my experience, were doing more of that. We were very adamant about our interest, which was providing a permanent home, hopefully to older children who needed a permanent home. That was our interest.

If you go through this sort of training and want to foster or adopt through the county, if you're sort of open-minded, there's this concurrent planning now, which I'm sure Frank will probably talk about a little bit later. Oftentimes, the goal is going to be reunification with the birth mom. At the same time, they want to plan for if that can't happen: Are you or are there other people out there who are willing to provide a permanent home to the child? If you're kind of open-minded about that, realizing that there is a risk, I think that placement can come relatively quickly, even if the child or children aren't yet free for adoption.

Frank Woods: We were very fortunate. At the end of those 10 weeks, I think it was almost like the last session or something, right around the last session, we sat down with the case worker whose responsibility it is to find homes for kids who are in foster care. She showed us some pictures of children. One of the pictures, there was two, a brother and a sister, siblings. My response to that was, "But there's two!" We had never talked about more than one. We had talked about adopting *a* child. She said, "I know, but I just thought I'd show you their picture." Of course, you know, they were incredibly cute.

John Caher: And you probably didn't want to separate them.

Frank Woods: We definitely didn't want to separate them. They had already separated Michael and Gayle from their older brother, Anthony.

Michael and Gayle were in fifth grade. Anthony was probably in eighth or ninth grade at that point in time and he was living in a separate foster home. These two were free for adoption. They were legally free.

John Caher: Back up. What does that mean, they're "legally free for adoption"?

Frank Woods: Their parents' parental rights had been terminated by the family court for different reasons. Mom had essentially abandoned the children and was no longer showing up for any of the court proceedings.

Dad had been incarcerated and was a little bit less willing to surrender his parental rights. It actually took a heart-to-heart with one of the county case workers who drove up to a facility where he was and told him, "You know, listen. Your children aren't getting any younger, right? Time is going on. You don't have any prospects of getting out for many years. These kids need a home."

That was when he agreed to voluntarily surrender. I think, in this case, the mother's rights had been terminated through a court proceeding and the father voluntarily surrendered his parental rights. At which point the children become legally free and can be adopted.

John Caher: What happens next? What's the next step?

Nancy Woods: Well, we saw three sets of pictures and we said, "Yes, we were interested in meeting Gayle and Michael." The case worker set up a meeting. They were living with a foster parent at the time. We met on a Friday after school. I can't actually tell you the date, but it was after school, about

3:30 in October. That was the initial meeting. It was really very interesting. It was exciting and scary for all of us.

John Caher: I'm sure.

Nancy Woods: The kids were really adorable in person. They were playing on a trampoline, so they would kind of bounce in and out of the house when we were talking to the then-foster mom. That was kind of the first step in the process. When everyone decided, children included, that we wanted to move forward with the next step, we planned a more private meeting where we were going to take them out.

Frank Woods: Our first date.

Nancy Woods: He calls it our "first date."

Frank Woods: Right.

John Caher: What sort of things did the kids ask you?

Frank Woods: They were very different. First of all, Gayle was like, immediately without any thought, "When do I get adopted? What color's my room going to be?" She was so ready, without really giving it a lot of thought. Then, Michael was the absolute opposite. He was so deliberative and so thoughtful about this. He wasn't sure. He had like-

Nancy Woods: A list of demands.

Frank Woods: ... a list of demands, basically. He was like, "Am I going to be able to stay up until 9:00?" "Can I have a lizard?" A whole bunch of questions like that. We sort of fielded those questions.

It took a little bit longer for Michael to decide that this was in his best interest. That's what that dating phase is about, right? It's like, "Let's get to know one another." It's not only for us to decide if we want to parent these children, but it's also for these children. They have some input into this decision. They have to say, "I would like to come live with Frank and Nancy."

John Caher: What would've happened if one of them desperately wanted to come and live with you and one of them was adamantly against it?

Nancy Woods: I imagine we would've probably met and talked it through. That would be my guess, because they were young. They were 10 and 11 at the time. If I had to guess, I think we probably would've ...

John Caher: You could've persuaded them.

Nancy Woods: I think so.

Frank Woods: At that age, they have the right to be heard.

Nancy Woods: Right.

Frank Woods: You'll want to make sure that they have an opportunity to express their opinions. Ultimately, what we all owe them is for all the adults to make a decision that's in their best interest.

Nancy Woods: Correct.

Frank Woods: I think we probably would've wanted to proceed, think the county would've wanted to proceed. Then, ultimately it would've been up to the court to finalize the adoption or not.

John Caher: I mean, these were young kids, but they weren't infants.

Nancy Woods: Right.

John Caher: I imagine they would've formed some sort of bond with one or more sets of foster parents-

Frank Woods: Yep.

John Caher: ... maybe biological, maybe not. How did that factor in to everything?

Frank Woods: In this case, the foster parent, the foster mom who they had been living with for a couple years at that point had no interest in adopting them. They needed to find a different placement for Michael and Gayle.

John Caher: They knew they were going somewhere?

Nancy Woods: Yes.

Frank Woods: They knew they were going somewhere. They always knew they were going somewhere.

Nancy Woods: It never would've gotten to us if that's what she wanted.

Frank Woods: Which is going back to what Nancy was saying earlier, for people who are interested in adopting through the county, local departments of social services, that's often what happens, is you start out by fostering a child with the openness to eventually adopting that child if they're not able to be reunified with their biological parents.

John Caher: It must be shattering for a kid who thinks he's going to be adopted and the foster family decides they don't want him.

Frank Woods: Usually they know upfront whether it's a potential adoptive placement or not. They knew. The kids knew, "Well, Janet's taking care of us now, but eventually we're going to try to find adoptive parents."

John Caher: So Gayle and Mike were not under any illusion that their placement was permanent?

Nancy Woods: Right. Honestly, during that time, I think, first of all, she was a professor and a single mom providing foster care. I do think that there was an attraction for them of coming into a family where there was a mom and a dad and this kind of thing. I think that was something that they thought they would like as well.

We met them in October, almost toward the middle of October, and we had our first overnight on Thanksgiving break in the house that was to become their home. We had them over the break, so they went to our family and stuff like that for Thanksgiving. They ended up moving in permanently on December 22nd. It was a Friday in 2006. We picked them up at Social Services and brought them to our home.

It was only a couple of days before Christmas. One of the reasons, and I actually do agree with this, one of the reasons that I think that they came at that time was because it was a school break. Rather than wait six months or whatever for them to finish out a school year where they were, that was a good time, if there is such a thing, to move them during that break and then start the second half at the school that they were in and where we lived. That was a very interesting thing.

As far as their relationships went, we were very open-minded about having them, helping them even to continue the healthy relationships with biological connections. They had a maternal grandfather that they saw from time to time, certainly their brother, who Frank indicated earlier had not been living in the same home. He was living with a foster

father and he was a teenager now—15 I think at that time. We set up with the county. They were having monthly visits at Social Services. We said, "Why don't Anthony and his foster dad" —Ed at the time—"Why don't they come once a month to our house for Sunday dinner?" We started to try to create something that was a little bit more normalized.

John Caher: A family.

Nancy Woods: A family.

John Caher: With the stability they had never known.

Nancy Woods: That's right.

Frank Woods: We had reached a point of stability. They were going to school and we got them involved in sports and we were living our lives.

John Caher: Then you upset the apple cart and two more come into the picture.

Frank Woods: Then the apple cart was upset. I was in a meeting at work and Nancy called me. I said something to the effect of, "I can't talk right now, honey. I'm in a meeting." She was like, "This is important. You need to step out."

Then she said, "Well, the Department of Social Services called and they wanted to know if we would take nine-month-old twins on an emergency basis as foster parents. They really don't have foster placements for these twins right now. Would you be willing?" I said, "Well, honey, whatever you think, it's fine." She's like, "No, you have to make an actual decision." I thought about it for a minute and I said, "Yeah, let's do it." At that time, they said we would have them for two weeks.

John Caher: And 12 years later....

Nancy Woods: They'll be 11 in just a couple of weeks. Middle of December, they will be 11-years-old. They were nine-months-old at the time. That happened to be September 21st, by the way. I know.

John Caher: So, this is a different dynamic. They were babies. They had no prior relationships that they would recall, I'm sure.

Nancy Woods: That they would recall? No.

John Caher: Yeah. They're brought into a family. How did everybody react? How did Gayle and Mike react to their new siblings?

Nancy Woods: Gayle was just thrilled to death. She was so excited, because Gayle and I would play with baby dolls together. That's one of the things that we did together, which by the way, when I first got her, she said, "Don't ever get me a doll."

John Caher: Really?

Nancy Woods: Three months later, she wanted dolls.

John Caher: Why do you think that was?

Nancy Woods: I think that Gayle became sort of, well, she was a tomboy, which is genuine, but also kind of toughened and didn't want to open herself up to who she truly was. You know, caring for a baby is very, what's the word I'm looking for? It's nurturing.

Frank Woods: Nurturing.

Nancy Woods: You have to trust and all these things and I don't think she was ready for that. By three months later, she wanted dolls. We would play with these baby dolls together. To Gayle, these were like real-life baby dolls. She was very excited. Michael, again, was quite the opposite. I think he thought this was going to infringe on him and his interests. He had sports, as you know now, and all this kind of stuff.

It didn't take long. I mean, the babies came in and, as you said, they were babies. It was very different, because they really did have needs. We had to rally as a family. They needed all the services, physical therapy, OT—occupational therapy— speech and something else. I'm missing the fourth one. All these services were pushed in right away after they were evaluated.

John Caher: Did you know at the onset how needy they were going to be?

Nancy Woods: No, I had no idea, nothing at all. I remember thinking, "Oh, my God. Who are these babies? What are they going to look like?" I knew nothing. They were small for their age, certainly. They couldn't do things that a nine-month-old could do. They couldn't hold their bottles, even at that time, by themselves. Initially, we were treating them like newborn infants, feeding them like you would an infant and so on and so forth.

I do remember when the case worker put them down in their little seats. I thought to myself they were the most beautiful babies I'd ever seen in

my whole entire life. I absolutely thought that. We rallied as a family. I mean, Michael was tentative. I mean, it is an adjustment.

John Caher: Oh, sure.

Nancy Woods: Frank rallied and he would always have the bottles ready for me. They needed different types of bottles for their needs. It's hard to explain, but one would throw up if she got the food too fast. Luckily, I'm the oldest of seven, so I'd been around babies my whole entire life, children and babies, and caring for them. That's the only thing that got me through this experience, was I knew what I needed on an emergency, you know, what kind of diapers.

Frank Woods: I had an office in a spare bedroom upstairs. By Friday afternoon, that office had been converted into a nursery. We had casseroles from all of our family and church friends and things of that nature. We had planned a progressive dinner where people go from one house to another and we were the dessert phase. This was scheduled for Friday night and we went ahead with that plan. We pulled off our dessert. We were with a bunch of people. I would take people upstairs, one or two at a time, to peek in and see the babies. It was hilarious. We just forged forward. I think I took maybe one or two days off from work. I think she did the same. By Monday, we were back at work, 9:00 to 5:00, and had miraculously found a very appropriate daycare setting for them right-

Nancy Woods: Well, it was right at my Tech Park, where I work.

Frank Woods: Everything fell into place very miraculously for us.

John Caher: You started this process thinking you'd adopt *a* child, as in one.

Nancy Woods: Right.

John Caher: Now you've got four.

Nancy Woods: Right.

John Caher: Then comes Anthony. How did Anthony come into the picture? Anthony is the older sibling of Gayle and Michael, correct?

Nancy Woods: Right.

John Caher: How'd he come back into the picture?

Frank Woods: Anthony had been a part of our life, right? We had Anthony's-

John Caher: The Sunday dinners?

Frank Woods: ... Sunday dinners. We had Anthony's high school graduation party at our house. Anthony was getting close to aging out of foster care.

We were driving to pick up Michael from his soccer practice and Anthony was in the car with me. We got talking and he said something like, "I don't know what I'm going to do when I leave foster care." I must've blurted out something like, "Why don't you come live with us?"— obviously without having talked to Nancy in advance. Anthony was like, "I thought you would never ask." He really had grown up to the point where he sort of admired our family, probably regretted the decision that he had made years earlier where he had told the Department of Social Services case workers that he didn't want to be adopted. Anthony had always harbored this sort of fantasy that, when his father got out of prison, they were going to get back together.

John Caher: Did he know his father? Did he have any memory of him?

Frank Woods: He did. They had visited him some sporadically.

John Caher: Amazing. To some extent, with him, was it a matter of being loyal to his father?

Nancy Woods: Yes, all of those things. He had a strong family sense of being the one responsible to keep the family together no matter what.

Frank Woods: Yep. So, he came and he lived with us. There was some typical sort of young adolescent—emerging adult issues that we encountered and he didn't stay with us. He packed his Hefty bag one day and decided he wanted to move out and be independent and live on his own. Couple more years went by, right?

Nancy Woods: Approximately two. Yeah, he stayed for about 18 months.

Frank Woods: We didn't see him that much-

Nancy Woods: Not that much.

Frank Woods: ... during that 18-month period.

Nancy Woods: At first, not at all. Then, slowly he started integrating back in.

Frank Woods: He really hit bottom. His car had broken down and I don't think things were going well for him at work. He was living with some roommates, and unhealthy things were going on over there. At some point, he sort of begged his way back into our house. This time, we said, "We'll do it, but we're going to have some more structure."

Nancy Woods: And goals.

Frank Woods: Yeah. I think we told him more or less, "This is a last chance bootcamp kind of program. You have to toe the line here and we're going to have some goals." The good news is that he achieved most of those goals. He's got a much better job now. He just got a promotion not too long ago. We helped him to buy a car, establish credit, develop a bank account, give him some stability in life. I think, more importantly, what we've given him is a place to be every holiday.

He came with us to Thanksgiving this year. He's there with us just about every holiday. He's just like what you would expect, what you expect from a family when you're an adult, right? He has that lifelong family now. That's been really important to Anthony.

John Caher: You mentioned holidays. What is the family dynamic? Are there different camps or do they all get along well or what?

Nancy Woods: Oh, we're one family, we really are, one family. Gayle and Mike were only there for two years when the babies came, so they saw them grow up and now they're going to be 11. Anthony, having lived with us for five years total, on and off, they're sisters and brothers. I was going to say, "Almost like anybody you've seen." But maybe it's even more so.

John Caher: Why more so?

Nancy Woods: Well, I think that for Gayle and Michael and Anthony having lived in a family that hadn't any structure, or where they hadn't developed that trust or being able to count on family members, I think that they value it more than other people. Listen, these kids went hungry, including the babies. They know.

I'm going to tell you a story. Amara is one of the twins. She was less than three-years-old and she said to me — Amara, she was always closer around Frank. Caydence, the other twin, was always with me. Cadence was very needy as a baby and it kind of demanded a lot of my time. One day, Amara says, as I'm putting them to bed, she said, "Mommy?" I said, "Yes?" She said, "Do you remember when I pretended I didn't like you?" I

said, "Yes." She said, "Well, I did." That's prior to three-years-old. Do you see what I'm saying? It's like-

John Caher: Sure. She was afraid to open herself up to that. That's remarkable she was aware of it and three years of age.

Frank Woods: Yeah, that's pretty neat.

Nancy Woods: Everybody in our family's adopted, you know what I mean? They even appreciate it. I actually have a thank you note in my pocketbook that Amara gave me around Thanksgiving, thanking us for driving two-and-a-half hours to see my family and her cousins and thanking us for adopting her and for feeding them and for toys and everything.

John Caher: They're very appreciative.

Nancy Woods: Very appreciative. I think that Gayle and Michael, on some level, may feel the same way.

John Caher: Yeah. Frank, you do a lot of work with the Child Welfare Improvement Project, which raises an obvious chicken and egg question of which came first, your interest in promoting permanency and better outcomes or the adoptions or did it just kind of happens all at the same time?

Frank Woods: It's interesting. I think that there clearly is a connection to the work that I was doing and our decision to adopt through the public child welfare system. People have other options, right? There's private adoptions and you go through private adoption agencies. Because of my experience of working with the family courts, I think we made a very conscious decision to go through the public foster care system because of the tremendous need and all the negative stereotypes that are out there.

Very well-meaning people in our church community or other friends that we would talk with about our plan to possibly adopt children from foster care, everyone would sort of look at you kind of funny and say things like, "Well, you know, those kids come with a lot of baggage." I would chuckle and basically acknowledge the fact that I come with a lot of baggage as well. I was adopted when I was an infant.

John Caher: Oh, I didn't know that.

Frank Woods: That was part of my thinking as well here. We had gotten to a point where we had some things in our life. We had time in our life. We were living well and felt a certain something missing. That was part of the

drive, I think, for us to bring children into our home. It's like it was to share the sort of gratitude that we had for everything that we had accomplished and obtained in life.

John Caher: What was your adoptive experience?

Frank Woods: I was adopted at nine-days-old. I have little or no actual recollection of anything other than my parents being my parents. To their credit, I always knew that I was adopted. They totally normalized it for me. You know, it's certainly a part of my life. It's a fact of my life, but it hasn't really been that big a deal, you know? It's not like I'm on some search to find my biological parents. In fact, I sort of made up a story in my own head about how this must have come to be, and I'm sticking with that!

John Caher: Nancy, with what you know now, what is your view of the foster care system and how could it be better?

Nancy Woods: You know, I would've thought with Michael and Gayle, being freed for adoption, I thought this was going to be a walk in the park and even that was very, very difficult to navigate. When we navigated it the first time, there were times I wanted to give up. We had to keep our eye on the outcome and persevere.

John Caher: Let me back up. Was it unnecessary bureaucracy or extreme due diligence or both?

Frank Woods: In our case, it was conflict between us and the foster mom. She did not make it easy for us. We don't really know what the motives were. She had no intention of adopting, but she did have intentions to keep them longer. I'm going to be very frank, I think she wanted to continue to have the income through the rest of the school year and that was her plan.

Then, when it became clear that we and perhaps the county were thinking that the kids should move in with us sooner, she didn't like that idea. Then she started bad-mouthing us to the case workers and things of that nature, making it very uncomfortable when we would go there to pick them up or drop them off. She kept me waiting. We were supposed to meet to pick them up for Thanksgiving weekend at a parking lot halfway between Berlin, where they were living, and our house in East Greenbush. She kept me waiting there, like, 45 minutes to an hour. I didn't give up. I wasn't going to give up. We were going to persevere and we were going to push through this, but it was very emotionally taxing. With the twins, it was similar to what we were talking about earlier, where they were not legally freed.

Frank Woods: They were in foster care. The goal was reunification with their mom. We had made efforts to help their mom. She had come to our house a few times. We figured, if they're going to go back with her, we should do everything we can to make sure that she's ready for that, right? Turned out she wasn't ready and she wasn't going to be ready. She had a lot of issues and she, frankly, made the right decision in the end. Her decision was to voluntarily surrender her parental rights with the condition that Frank and Nancy would adopt the babies.

John Caher: She would surrender her parental rights as long as you were the adoptive parents?

Nancy Woods: Yes.

John Caher: Otherwise, no deal?

Frank Woods: That is right.

Nancy Woods: It's not an easy system to navigate at all. I don't know enough about the inner workings of it, why that is. Some of the points of the training, though, the MAPP training, I thought were very, very good, as we were talking about earlier. Things like working in partnership with any of the institutions and appropriate biological family members I think was probably something I might not have known.

I worked a lot with any school. Oh, they knew who I was. I called team meetings, because I didn't want Gayle and Michael to fall through the cracks, things like that. I said, "Don't cut them slack." I said, "Let them do as much as anybody else does." When they're done, they're going to be done and the world is still the world and nobody's going to care where they came from. They have to be ready. Things of that nature, we were very involved.

I think two things about the Department of Social Services: one thing is I think they should talk more about addiction as being a factor. I think that, in my experience, many of the children that are in foster care are there because, in one way or another, addiction is part of the family, the mom, the dad, whatever. They really shied away from that. Addiction is really so often a part of it, I wish they would talk more about that.

We talk to our children about that so that they know what the risk factors is for them to have to deal with that, whether they pick up and use and become addicts themselves or at least understanding that, "You are

affected by this disease. There are ways to deal with that as well." As young as we can, we kind of talk about that in an age-appropriate way.

The other thing I would like to see different, because there are lots of children in foster care, I'd like to see something done to help more kids get involved in sports and the like. It's been my experience, only mine, that that doesn't necessarily connect with other kids, to try to become friends with kids that are more active in healthy ways.

Frank Woods: That's true. When a child is removed from their home, they're not just losing their parents. They're often losing their friends, their connections to all of their afterschool activities, their teachers. It's a very disruptive event in a child's life. I've actually seen a lot of improvements in the system between the time that we were involved and now, much more emphasis on locating and placing kids with relatives, right? The Department will go out and find aunts and uncles . . .

John Caher: They actually go looking for them?

Frank Woods: They do, yeah. There is more emphasis on the child's well-being and educational stability. A lot of work has been done in that area, a lot more work to be done. Generally speaking, it's an under-resourced system. Not only the child welfare system, but the family court system. The family court is like the legal equivalent of the emergency room. You hear that quote a lot of times, but it's so true. These are families that are in great distress.

One of the things that I'm most excited about recently is that there's an emphasis and a movement, really, nationally to put more focus and emphasis on prevention. When families who are beginning to show signs that could lead to the kind of an event that would result in the removal of a child from the parents, why don't we wrap around those families earlier and figure out ways to help support them and keep them together in the first instance?

Michael and Gayle and Caydence and Amara and Anthony are very fortunate. We're very fortunate to have them, but they're very fortunate to have us, too. Not every kid who winds up in foster care ends up in a good permanent placement, right? The system tries, but it doesn't happen for every kid. The negative impact of removing that child from their parents in the first instance, is there some way for us to get substance abuse treatment or financial assistance or housing assistance or-

Nancy Woods: Or training even, like nutrition and shopping, shopping for food and meal planning and time management.

Frank Woods: To me, that would be money well-spent. Let's try to figure out a way. I mean, there's always going to be situations where children need to be removed and put into foster care. I mean, there's serious abuse cases, but the vast majority of cases that come into the system are neglect. What's causing parents to neglect their children? Well, there's life circumstances, immaturity, substance abuse-

Nancy Woods: Mental health issues.

Frank Woods: ... mental health issues.

Nancy Woods: Serious mental health issues, yeah.

Frank Woods: I mean, these are all things that we should at least be trying to ameliorate before we take the drastic action of breaking up a family. That's from somebody who was the beneficiary of families where the children, it was in their best interest, in the case of my children. I think that that's happening more frequently than it needs to and that the system needs to shift to a more preventive model.

John Caher: What brings us here today is I happened to see a video, part of a video, I guess, of OCFS, Office of Children and Family Services, a video that you two were in. How did that come about? What was that for?

Frank Woods: This year, for National Adoption Month, what they decided they wanted to do was to highlight families that they also had some professional connection to. One of the things we learned, in addition to them coming out to our home and videoing our family in our natural habitat, they also had a recognition day where we came and we watched the resulting video and they gave us a proclamation or something.

What we learned that day was is they read off a long list of OCFS employees who've adopted kids from foster care. So many people who end up working in this field are touched by the kids. Once you meet some of these kids, all that stereotype that we talked about just goes away. These are kids. They're great kids, right? Yeah, they come with some baggage, but so what?

John Caher: Don't we all?

Frank Woods: Don't we all? Right. That was really neat. It was really an honor to be recognized by my colleagues at OCFS. The people who were giving Nancy and I this award are people that I work with all the time as we try to work together to improve the way that the system responds to these kids.

John Caher: Great. Just one final question. You've obviously brought a lot of love and stability to the lives of five children. What have they brought to your life?

Nancy Woods: I have to color my hair very, very often now! I would say purpose and meaning, I would say that. Frank and I were in a really great place just before we made this decision. You know, people go through ups and downs, but we were very solid at that time. We probably could've taken any vacation or gone out to eat whenever we wanted and this and that. By that time, as he said, we'd gone back and forth for over a decade on this, but we moved a lot, too, during that time for our careers and all kinds of things.

It really is the most important thing I or we will ever do. I make a lot of mistakes. I make them every single day. I'm not the person I would like to be all the time, but I think in general, I'm innately structured and I wouldn't underestimate the value of that, of the dinners and homework and all these different things. We had our period where we would do this, that and the other thing. Most of what we do is really centered around them now. It's okay. Naturally, we still have to take care of ourselves or go out now and then, but it's not all that often. This is what we do.

I feel like if all of them, hopefully, are able to go out in the world and be successful, and I don't mean financially necessarily, but to be happy in what they're doing, have successful relationships, friendships and partnerships, those things, because those are challenges for people who have gone through these kinds of losses, I think, and trauma. If they can do that, I will know that I've contributed enormously.

John Caher: Terrific.

Anything to add, Frank?

Frank Woods: I have tremendous pride in them. The percentage of kids who are in the foster care system that actually graduate college is incredibly low. I think it's like 5 percent. I am working on two right now. My son, Michael, is going to graduate from the College of Emergency Preparedness Homeland Security and Cybersecurity at the University at Albany this

December. He is a second lieutenant in the Army National Guard. He's an incredible athlete and just an all-around really good guy.

Frank Woods: My daughter, Gayle, has one more year at SUNY Maritime College, where, when she graduates from there, she will commission as an ensign in the United States Naval Reserve and obtain the 3rd mate deck license from the Coast Guard, licensing which will enable her to be an officer on a commercial vessel of unlimited tonnage and unlimited horsepower. I always have this vision of her driving one of those giant oil tankers that you see out there in the ocean. She will-

John Caher: And leaving it in your driveway or something, right?

Frank Woods: Yeah!

Frank Woods: We just had parent-teacher conferences with the twins with their fifth-grade teachers. Aside from the fact that they're doing well academically, I was thrilled to hear that their conduct is exemplary. What more could you ask, right? They're doing great.

And Anthony is doing great. He's an assistant manager now at Panera, making a living wage finally, living in his own place, with his own car. He's stable and he's doing well. He's going to be a good productive member of society.

We've done okay with all of them. This is a lifelong commitment that we've made to them.

John Caher: Well, Nancy, Frank, thanks for coming on the podcast. That was a lot of fun and very, very interesting.

John Caher: Thanks for listening to Amici. You'll find all of our recent podcasts on the Court Systems website at [www.nycourts.gov](http://www.nycourts.gov). Most are also in the iTunes Podcast Library. If you have a suggestion for an Amici podcast, please let me know. I'm John Caher and I can be reached at 518-453-8669 or [jcaher@nycourts.gov](mailto:jcaher@nycourts.gov). In the meantime, stay tuned.