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MODERN FAMILY

John Guthrie and Dennis Cash had never contemplated having children. They had a loving relationship and successful careers and that was enough. Until John saw an ad in the local newspaper 20 years ago.

The ad, placed by the child protection charity Barnardos, was seeking foster carers and it piqued John's interest. He felt that he and Dennis could offer children a safe and loving home.

At first Dennis was less enthusiastic. He worried about whether he and John had the skills and experience to deal with traumatised children and the reaction to their same sex relationship.

"I had some concerns about fostering young boys being a same sex couple only because of what people might think. So my stipulation was that they had to be girls," Dennis said.

12-year-old Sarah was their first foster daughter. She had endured years of physical and emotional abuse and stayed for four years.

"Moving in with John and Dennis is pretty much like winning a car and hitting the jackpot," Sarah, now 30, says.

Musu, a refugee from Sierra Leone, was next. The 12-year-old came to live with John and Dennis having been mistreated by family friends.

"I'd get beaten up and punished for things that I would do. I realised that this wasn't the life I should be living," Musu says.

While John and Dennis were always optimistic about the difference they could make to each child, they say the reality of looking after traumatised teenage girls was complex.

"It did create a lot of tension and it did create a lot of stress in our relationship," John recalls.

Occasionally they thought they were failing but they persisted and dealt with the curve balls that life threw at them.

When Sarah became pregnant shortly after she left their care and was unable to look after her baby Liam, John and Dennis took him in. They later adopted Liam, now 12, leading to complicated family relationships.

"I consider John my Dad but my son considers him Dad and gosh it makes my brain hurt sometimes. It's certainly a new dynamic in terms of family," Sarah says.

Over the past 20 years, John and Dennis have also opened their hearts and home to Caitlin and Aryana and current foster child Hailie. They all revel in their modern family.

"We may not be blood but at the end of the day we're all there for each other," Caitlin says.

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