

LOVING ABBIE: *Five Rivers Ireland* is an independent fostering agency with families all over the country, some in Skerries. One such family are the Waters, on Dublin Road

‘We’re a family— Abbie is our forever girl’

By EMILY DIEBOLD

WHEN Skerries News calls around

to meet the Waters family there is a lot going on.

It’s hard not to be impressed by Sharon Waters and the loving home she and her husband Padraig have created for their family. They have three little girls of their own, 12-year-old twins Ciara and Leah, and seven-year-old Hannah, as well as foster daughter Abbie (not her real name), who is three.

We are greeted at the door by Sharon and Abbie. Abbie is so sweet, it would be impossible not to fall in love with her at first sight. She looks like a little doll but like any other three year old she is also quite a handful.

Abbie has just got new pyjamas from Penneys to watch *the Late Late Toy Show* that evening and is very eager to try them on. She gets quite distressed as she doesn’t think they fit quite right. Meanwhile, Ciara is busy packing for her first overnight scout trip and trying to find everything she needs. Hannah is doing her homework and practising on her recorder. Leah has just arrived home from school in her



wheelchair and needs to have her coat taken off and be settled. Leah is severely disabled.

During our chat, Sharon seamlessly takes care of all four of her children’s needs.

Clearly, this is a house filled with love and it is a real pleasure to see how the family interacts. We have been told by the foster agency that due to confidentiality we can take a family photo but Abbie cannot be in it. Mum, Sharon, immediately protests that if Abbie is not in it, it’s not a family photo. We agree it is probably all right that her face not be seen, but it proves almost impossible to take a photo without Abbie beaming from the middle of it, as she rarely leaves Sharon’s side.

VISITED

Abbie came to the Waters family almost three years ago, at just 11 months old. They knew about Abbie for quite some time before they were finally able to take her in. There were some medical issues and they visited her in hospital before she was discharged to them.

Sharon takes up the story: “Our foster story is probably different than others. It was about a year before that, that we decided we

were going to foster.

“Leah [one of the twins] used to be in hospital a lot but she’s not any more. Leah is *jejunum* fed. She has a tube that goes past the stomach so the acid can’t come back up. If she pulls it out she has to go in to hospital to get it put back in. There are only two doctors who can do it.

“One of the times she was in hospital for about two and a half weeks. When Leah is in hospital one of us is there all the time. There was a little girl beside her and she had nobody to visit her. I just thought, jeez, we’d bring her home. My heart went out to her. That really brought it all to a head.

“I had thought about fostering before. It’s in my background and also in Padraig’s background. He has a brother they fostered at just days old, who was a family relative who couldn’t be looked after by his own mother who was ill.

“It was like fostering because he grew up as Padraig’s brother but regularly visited his birth mother. My mum was a nurse in Baldoyle and back then she would bring children home. There was one little boy Francis he had special needs and she used to bring him out in his buggy. He was just lovely. She would have fostered if she could have.”

As Sharon talks, she is up and down finding socks, getting snacks, dressing Abbie, tending to Leah and making sure Ciara has everything she needs. Sharon is natural with children. She has a playschool/montessori in Artane. She used to teach there but now she just manages it. She had to give up teaching because she needed to be available if Leah was sick. As the girls grew older and she had more time she felt that she was ready to take on a foster child. Sharon really loves children and it was something she really wanted to do.

“A lot of it came about because I need to be here with Leah,” says Sharon, “but she goes off to school so there is more time.

“The bus collects her at eight



in the morning and she is home between three and four. She’s very happy there and I try to be as involved as I can with the school.

“When I stopped teaching I found it very hard. The support I had with Leah had all kicked into place. I had every morning and I just thought it’s a perfect opportunity. Hannah was five and by the time we actually got Abbie she was nearly six and she just couldn’t wait. She was always the youngest. Her whole life was spent following after Ciara and she just wanted a little sister.

CONTACT

“My friend, Carmel, in Skibberreen, fostered a child and advised me to contact Five Rivers. She said the support you get is amazing, it’s 24 hours. You hear a lot of horror stories. One of my friends brought someone around to talk to me who had fostered before and it wasn’t bad but it wasn’t a great experience.

“It’s all in the matching. It’s all about what you have on your plate and what fits into your family. That was the one thing about Five Rivers. They were very careful about the matching. Because our family are used

myself and met her. That was it. Then Padraig went in and he was the same. With the girls, we talked about it a lot and we all had a long time to get used to the idea. They were determined they wanted a baby. Hannah was so looking forward to it.

“Then when we got her there was a honeymoon period,” reveals Sharon. “They were all arguing over whose turn it was to do things for her or to sit beside her.

“After that when it was difficult Hannah said, ‘Can we give her back now?’ and I said ‘Nobody goes back. We’re all here now. We’re a family...’

MOTHER

“And we are. She’s our ‘forever girl’. She’s long term. The judge has said that we can foster her until she is 18 with her birth mother’s permission. She’s very happy for her to be with us and we visit her regularly.

“It was just meant to be. It would be different than a lot of other cases maybe but it’s just brilliant. Ciara was nine and when she heard the judge say it was to eighteen she told me to go back and say we want her longer. I said don’t worry Ciara, I’ll be kicking her out at 30 like you.”

And how has it been working with Five Rivers? “It has been great. Hazel is my social worker. She’s been there since we first got Abbie and she knows everything that goes on in our lives.

She’s a friend as much as a social worker. We always just sit and chat about everything and I send her photos all the time.

“I think that’s what we liked about it,” says Sharon. “It’s not formal and it suits us. There’s lots of training and I love the courses. They are on call all the time.

“We like that we all meet up about four times a year with other foster families. Sometimes it’s at a farm or now for Christmas it’s skating. It’s great for Abbie to see everyone else.”

So is their family complete now or would the Waters foster again? “Well, I wouldn’t say no,” says Sharon. “Maybe When Abbie is older and is in school.

“I love the baby stage and there is a need for fostering for the first year or two or even the first few months when they’re just out of hospital. It’s the baby thing.

“The girls all love babies too. Short term fostering of babies or respite care for foster children would really suit us.

“Our house is always full of children and that’s how I like it. Fostering is a wonderful experience,” concludes Shaon. “It breaks my heart when I think that there’s all these children out there and all they really want is a family.”

Abbie is very lucky to have found the Waters family and the Waters family is very lucky to have found Abbie. They are a perfect match and it was a pleasure to visit such a lovely family.

About Five Rivers

FIVE Rivers Ireland is an independent fostering agency with foster families all over Ireland, working closely with Tusla to provide family-based care for children and young people who cannot live at home.

“Our ethos is to operate a holistic service which recognises people’s strengths and works with them to flourish and thrive,” says the organisation. “We have a team of wonderful foster families who look after children and young people of all ages.” They also have a highly qualified and motivated team who provide support to the foster families, with training, individual support, therapy and education services as well as 24-hour on call support.

Five Rivers Ireland are looking to grow their team of foster families. “We are especially looking for families in the greater Dublin area. The types of fostering that families can do include: emergency foster care (at very short notice), respite/very short time limited care, short term, open ended and long term.” They are looking for families who could care for children and young people from 0-17 years. “We also need families who can care for sibling groups or who may be interested in providing a placement to a young parent and their baby. And we would like to recruit some families who could care for a child with a disability.” If you think you could foster or would like to know more please visit www.fiveriversireland.ie or call 01 866 5290.



SHARON WATERS: A house full of children and that’s how she likes it

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