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✦ PENNSYLVANIA

Finding Joy, Family, and Purpose Through Caregiving

Caring for children has been part of my life for more than four decades, but these days my focus is on helping raise the next generation of my family. I spent 35 years working for UPS before retiring at 56. Not long after I retired, my niece learned she was expecting her first child. She asked if I would be willing to care for the baby when she returned to work.

It was an easy decision for me. I had already spent years caring for family members' children, friends' children, and neighborhood kids. I started babysitting when I was about 17 or 18 years old, and over the years I picked children up from daycare, cared for them after school, watched them on weekends, and stepped in whenever families needed help.

Today I care primarily for my great niece Haven, who is almost 2 years old. Her older sister Harley, who is

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nearly 4, now attends preschool, but she still spends weekends, school holidays, and special days with me. My days revolve around creating a safe, loving, and nurturing environment where both girls can learn, grow, and feel at home.

A typical day starts quietly. Haven usually arrives around 6 a.m. and often sleeps for a few more hours. When she wakes up around 8 or 9, we begin our day together. Breakfast is an important part of our routine. I try to offer foods that are nutritious and familiar, while also encouraging healthy eating habits from an early age.

One of Haven's favorite breakfasts is oatmeal with raisins. She also enjoys eggs, especially if I'm making breakfast for myself. Most mornings I eat two eggs and an apple, and Haven often wants exactly what I'm having. She loves fresh fruit, and I make sure fruit is included with almost every meal. Strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, cherries, and apples are among her favorites. If I make pancakes, I serve them with fresh berries on the side.

One thing I've learned about toddlers is that their preferences can change from one minute to the next. Sometimes Haven asks for something, takes a few bites, and then decides she no longer wants it. There are days when she happily eats her oatmeal and fruit, and other days when she picks out only the fruit and leaves everything else untouched. Like many caregivers, I spend plenty of time trying to figure out what sounds good to a 2-year-old on any given day.

Thankfully, Haven enjoys a wide variety of healthy foods. She loves vegetables and will eat almost anything I put in front of her. Broccoli, asparagus, greens, string beans—she enjoys them all. She also likes chicken, beef, and seafood. Watching her develop healthy-eating habits at such a young age has been rewarding.

Her older sister Harley is developing those habits, too. One of the values I try to teach both girls is that vegetables are a normal part of every meal. Growing up, that was a rule in our household, and it is one I continue today. When the girls are with me, they know they will have vegetables with dinner. It is simply part of our routine.

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I also believe children learn best when they participate in preparing food themselves. Both girls enjoy helping me in the kitchen, and I look for opportunities to involve them whenever I can. Harley especially enjoys cooking projects. When we make scrambled eggs, she helps crack the eggs and add the cheese she loves so much. If we are making string beans, I let her pour them into the pot. When I bake cookies, she helps measure and pour ingredients into the mixer. Even simple tasks give children confidence and help them understand where their food comes from and how meals are prepared.

With Haven, I adapt activities to her age and abilities. She likes helping with small steps and watching everything happen. Whether we are preparing breakfast, mixing ingredients, or getting ready for lunch, she is learning by observing and participating. Those moments in the kitchen are about much more than food. They are opportunities to teach patience, responsibility, curiosity, and independence.

Throughout the day we also spend time reading books, practicing letters and numbers, and singing songs. Haven already knows her alphabet and can count to 15. I enjoy watching her learn new words and discover new skills. Every milestone feels special.

While caregiving is deeply rewarding, it also comes with challenges. One of the biggest disappointments my family experienced involved Pennsylvania's Child Care Information Services (CCIS) subsidy program. When my niece first returned to work, we were told that I qualified to receive compensation as a family caregiver. I completed all the required paperwork and background clearances, only to learn later that great-aunts were no longer eligible for payment through the program.

It was frustrating because the program materials listed relatives as eligible caregivers, and we had already gone through the approval process. If I had been a grandparent or a direct aunt, I would have qualified. As a great-aunt, I did not.

My niece still gives me a small amount of money when she can, but the reality is that I would care for these girls regardless of whether I received compensation. Of course, financial support would help. Child care is valuable work, and family caregivers save parents thousands of dollars in child care costs every year. But the rewards I receive cannot be measured in dollars.

The greatest reward comes when the girls run to me with excitement, when they ask to stay longer, or when they cry because they do not want to leave. They call me "TT," and hearing them say, "We want to stay with TT," reminds me that I am making a difference in their lives. Those moments tell me they feel safe, loved, and cared for.

Caregiving has also strengthened my relationship with my niece. We were already close before she became a mother, but raising her daughters together has created an even deeper bond. She trusts me completely, and I know she appreciates having someone she can call whenever she needs help.

People often ask why I do not open a child care business. The truth is that I have never been motivated by making money from caregiving. What motivates me is helping families and being there when children need someone to care for them. If a friend or family member called tomorrow and needed help with their child for a few hours, I would probably say yes without hesitation. That said, it is helpful to sit down with other FFN caregivers to learn from and support each other. It would be helpful sometimes to have a place to go, like a community center where the kids could be around other kids and I could talk to other caregivers.

After retiring from my career, caring for my great-nieces gave me a new sense of purpose. They keep me active, make me laugh, and fill my days with joy. Through shared meals, kitchen adventures, story time, and everyday moments, I am helping shape the lives of two little girls I love dearly.

For me, that is the greatest reward of all.