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Gloria W. Fletcher: Going above and beyond for foster children

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The numbers are staggering. More than 14,000 kids across Florida are in foster care, and thousands more are considered at risk. Yet for advocates, guardians, involved childcare attorneys and citizens, solutions to help abound; if you get creative.

Panera Bread franchise owners Gavin and Annette Ford long ago considered what they could do for foster kids in Florida. Their solution was to open their doors and proceeds. The couple offers mentoring and a summer jobs program. In the past year, they've donated almost \$400,000 to local charities, including those that help foster children, according to news reports.

Earlier this month, their Panera Bread restaurants in Orange, Osceola, Seminole, Lake, Brevard, Volusia, Martin, Indian River and St. Lucie counties sold ribbon-shaped blueberry bagels hand-crafted for foster kids. The Fords then donated 100 percent of the proceeds from the "Blue Ribbon Bagel" sale to the Foundation for Foster Children. They also were lauded by the Florida Department of Children and Families.

Their largesse and commitment is admirable. Groups like the Foundation for Foster Children and Florida's Children First, the state's leading advocacy organization for foster and at-risk children, operate primarily on the kindness of volunteers and donors.

At a time when public funding for foster children programs often is in short supply, the Fords' example should spur other business owners to consider how they can help society's needy and at-risk populations. Whether through donations, volunteer or pro bono efforts, or helping promote special causes, the ability to help is no further away than the commitment to do so.

We are surrounded by children in need. As the Fords showed, a commitment to help starts with the desire to do good. What can you do?

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