

# Former Foster Child Honors Her Foster Mom by Paying It Forward with Holiday Cheer

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LeeAnn Petersen remembers the relief she felt when she was removed from her California home at 15 and placed with loving foster parents, Karen and Dave Schwartzkopf, who lived in a large and compassion-filled house in the mountains near San Bernardino.

Both of Petersen's now-deceased biological parents were alcoholics, and her mother had assaulted and even bitten her in a drunken rage before friends called authorities for help.

"The first time I set foot in the Schwartzkopf's home, I knew that I could succeed there," Petersen, now 47, recalls.

And there, living on a lake, she thrived, playing sports, earning good grades and later attending college, all with the support of a family — "my real parents" — who believed in her potential.

"I wouldn't say that at that age, I was ambitious, but I would say that I was stubborn," Petersen tells PEOPLE of her determination to push beyond her circumstances. "My stepfather, when I was 13 years old, told me that I would either be pregnant or in jail or both by the time I turned 16. Imagine saying that to a 13 year old. My stepfather said to me, 'You are a waste of time,' and everything I did from that moment on was to prove him wrong."

Now living in Potomac, Maryland, Petersen, who does marketing, communications and support for lobbying groups, has not only succeeded, but is giving back. In 2014, she created a non-profit called [Stockings from Karen](#) that honors her foster mom's grand gesture of giving her a gift-filled stocking that first Christmas away from her family.

It was the first time she had ever celebrated the holiday in her life. And a special stocking chosen just for her meant so much.

"The thought occurred to me that there are kids who go into foster care every day and they have the clothes on their back and that is it," she says. "They don't even have the basic staples. If they don't get it from their social worker, they don't have it. You need those things — these are young ladies going to high school."



She started on the local level four years ago, delivering 40 carefully curated stockings to teen girls in a Washington, D.C.-area CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates) program. The second year she created 150 stockings and this year, she hopes to deliver 300 hundred in six counties, assembling them in her overflowing garage with help from board members and plenty of giving friends.

Her sister-in-law Kristan Trugman, who has worked with the foundation to fill the stockings, chokes up when she talks about Petersen’s compassion for children.

“She looks back to use her past to make her a better person, but she is always looking forward. She is always thinking about others, always. To think of all those children out there who didn’t have the support of their biological families and to be able to use her own path, her history, to benefit others, well, that’s an understatement... She says her foster family gave her life.”

Trugman says that while a Christmas stocking might seem a small thing to most, for a foster child with nothing, “I think these little things are huge to them.

“These stockings are put together with care and with thought,” Trugman adds. “LeeAnn makes them personal, too. Not cookie-cutter. They are filled with necessities (toiletries and make-up, for example) but also little gifts that are picked out and purchased just for them.”

As for the real-life Karen, she says ‘I just cried’ when Petersen told her she was creating a namesake non-profit to honor Schwartzkopf’s special role in her life.



“She’s not of my womb but of my heart,” Karen, 70, a retired real estate agent who along with her husband, Dave, a retired police officer, fostered 100 children, tells PEOPLE.

“She was absolutely gorgeous,” and spirited, Karen recalls of welcoming a teenaged Petersen into her home more than 30 years ago. “There are kids you could make a difference for and kids, no matter what you did, weren’t going to make it on their own. Karen was one of those kids who we knew would make it, no matter what. There was no doubt in my mind. I couldn’t have asked for a more inspiring child.”

For foster children, Karen says being remembered is everything. “They may not get anything else but that stocking for Christmas. So for lot of these kids, this makes their Christmas. I think it’s beautiful that she’s passed on a legacy from her own family. Hopefully she’ll instill it in one of these kids down the road and they’ll continue the stockings, too.”

Stockings from Karen board member Rebecca Naser, a senior vice president for a polling firm, says that Petersen doesn’t judge a child’s situation. “She prefers to see the potential in all of these young girls.” She knows what it feels like to have someone step in the gap and show her love, Naser adds.

“You don’t realize how important those things are to self-esteem and confidence and just the ability to feel good about yourself,” Naser tells PEOPLE of the program, which thrives on donations of money and also items for the stockings themselves.

“She gets these thank you letters form these girls. They are so sweet. And what is behind this, it’s so powerful. It’s hard to imagine growing up and having no one think to get you a Christmas present. It makes these kids feel like somebody cares about them. For a lot of the girls, that’s so critical. They are at a tough point in their lives. This makes a profound impact.”