



Patricia Russell

Meant To Be Mom

By Jenna Caputo | Photos by Angela Mia Photography & Contributed by Patricia Russell

Patricia Russell always knew she was meant to be a mom. “My lifelong dream was to be a mother. From early on in my childhood I always knew I *would* be a mother,” she says. “It never occurred to me that I might not be able to have children. After years of infertility treatments, miscarriages, and divorce, I had all but given up. I was single, nearing 40, and losing hope.” She decided to try adoption, but quickly learned that was too cost prohibitive. Her last hope was fostering to adopt, but she was turned away from that too because she traveled often for work, and children in foster care have to remain either in a certified foster home or an approved respite home at all times. There is also an annual limit to the number of nights a child can be in respite care, and before COVID, Patricia’s schedule would exceed that number. Her chances were not looking good.

Originally from Tupper Lake, NY, Patricia knew what it was like to travel around. Her father, Tom, was a brands manager in the food service industry, working in distribution, and had to relocate often. They moved around the country about every five

years throughout Patricia’s childhood before hitting the Capital Region 31 years ago.

As a child, Patricia always enjoyed spending time with their large, extended family and relaxing in their summer home in the northern Adirondacks. She went to school with the intention of becoming a teacher with an ultimate goal of being a superintendent, but as she was leading a classroom project one day, she realized she did not want 30 kids at once. Switching tracks, she fell into anthropology, concentrating on the sociocultural aspect. After receiving her undergraduate degree from SUNY Potsdam, she went on for her MBA from Union College. She had always held summer jobs in the insurance industry, so after graduation, Patricia continued her work there before deciding to follow her father’s footsteps into the food industry.

Now the Business Director of Food Service Corporate Accounts at Bunge Lodgers Croklaan, a manufacturer of food service fats and oils, she manages the corporate relationships with customers like

Sysco and US Foods among others. It is work that she truly enjoys every day. “I love that every day is a new challenge,” she says. “I also really enjoy the relationships I build with my customers. The trust I have earned helps navigate challenging conversations from pricing increases to product shorts.” Pre-COVID, she’d travel 1-3 nights per week. Now, all that is on hold, but it was a real problem when she was looking to become a mother.

It was on one of these business trips where she met Jennifer, the woman Patricia now looks at as her guardian angel. They were flying home late at night and both exhausted, but they began talking, and Patricia soon learned that Jennifer worked for Berkshire Farm Center (BFC), a foster agency here in the Capital Region. Patricia was already familiar with them from her research into the foster care system and shared with Jennifer her story. Jennifer was touched and vowed to help her find a way to make her dream happen. She put Patricia in contact with a manager at BFC, and they soon came to the conclusion that a nanny may solve the issue. If the nanny became an “approved resource” and stayed in the home with the children, Patricia would meet the requirements to be eligible as a foster parent.

The process to become a foster parent is arduous, but worth it. Eligible candidates need to first complete a 12-week set of MAPP classes—Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting. These classes include role playing while teaching potential foster parents how to handle the various scenarios that might come up in a fostering situation. Since the goal is always to reunite the children with their birth parents if possible, the classes also teach methods for supporting both the children and the biological parents throughout the process. In addition to this workshop, there is a lengthy application packet, essay, health exam, background and financial check, CPR training, interview, home study, and multiple references required before an approval can go through.

Finally, after Patricia completed the paperwork and MAPP classes, her home was cleared to be “open.” Four months later, she received a voicemail saying two pre-adoptive brothers had just come into care. It sounded like everything she wanted, but something just didn’t feel right. She hesitated before calling back, giving herself time to think. However, when she returned the call just a short while later, the boys had already been placed elsewhere. Relief washed over her.

A few days later, she received another call. A baby boy had just been born and was probably going to need a forever home. Not knowing anything more other than his name was Ezariah and he was 5 lbs., 2 oz., she just *knew* this was the right one. She instantly said yes, and four days later, she

finally got to meet the boy who would become her son in the NICU at Albany Medical Center. Sixteen short months later, they welcomed a new baby girl into their family as well. It took two years for Ezariah’s official adoption to go through, and they are hoping her daughter’s adoption will be finalized by the end of this year. Until then, she is not allowed to publicize her daughter’s name or show her face in pictures.

More than fifty people attended Ezariah’s ceremony at the courthouse—more than any other adoption in Albany County history! “I have been blessed with an amazing village of people supporting me through this entire process,” says Patricia. “Friends, family, neighbors, fellow foster parents, and St. Edwards parishioners, along with friends from both Ronald McDonald House and BFC joined us that day. It was heartwarming to see so many people who have supported me throughout my journey join me in celebrating such a special day.” Each year since, they celebrate adoption day, and she reminds her children that they are wanted, chosen, loved, and adopted.

Berkshire Farm Center was founded in 1866 with a focus on healing and strengthening children in a family setting. They are now one of NY’s largest child welfare agencies, serving over 2,000 children and their families across 53 counties daily. All of the children who pass through their doors come with a trauma history and are placed with one of their 550 foster families. In 2019, 47 of those children found their forever homes through adoption, including Ezariah.

But to be a foster parent does not mean you have to be ready to adopt. There are different levels to fostering, including traditional fostering, respite foster care, and foster-to-adopt



families. Volunteers can choose their own level of involvement for what will work best for their individual household. The fostering opportunity is flexible, and very important in the lives of these children.

COVID has increased the burden on the foster system. The situation has heightened depression levels, and substance abuse is on the rise as well as more volatile home situations. As more and more children need safe, temporary housing, funding is at an all-time low due to the freeze in in-person activities with the pandemic. BFC is finding ways to work around the new challenges. They are reaching out to the communities, school districts, and sponsors, working with as many as they can to support the communities they serve. One example is by providing technology and internet access to the students who need it to continue their schooling in this virtual world. In addition to holding virtual fundraising events like their Virtual 5K this May 1st-3rd, they are also exploring ways to increase their online presence and contact services.

Besides financial support needs, BFC is in need of more foster families, including respite care. However, if fostering is not an option, there are still many ways someone can help out. Donations of clothes, books, toys, sundries, and baby items are a constant need. Supporting a current foster family by assisting with pickups/carpools, making a meal, delivering groceries, helping around the house, or even just being a supportive ear can make a huge difference.

May is also National Foster Care Awareness Month, and BFC is launching a campaign to celebrate. "Shine The Light On Foster Care" begins with wearing or displaying the color purple for the month to pay homage to BFC's signature color and to spread awareness about how a child enters foster care every two minutes. To celebrate the month, Patricia's house will be lit in purple, and she'll be delivering purple tea lights with a personalized letter to friends, family, and neighbors.

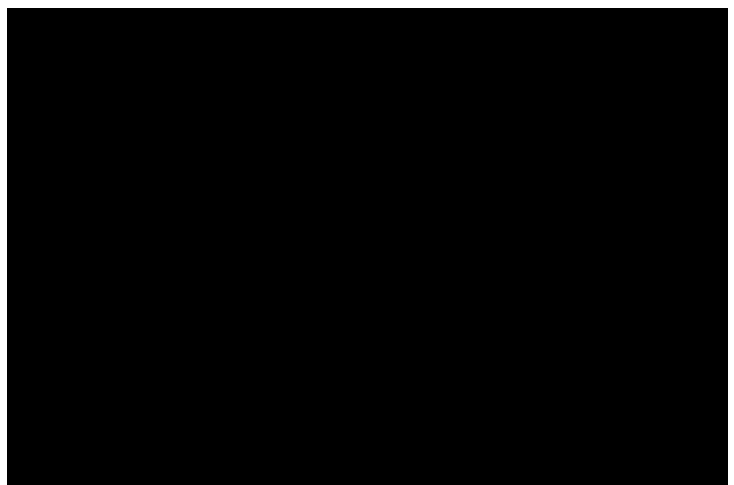
In addition to her work as a certified foster parent at BFC, Patricia also now serves on their board and is a co-chair on their Community Impact Committee. In the past, she volunteered extensively with the Ronald McDonald House



Charities of the Capital Region, serving on their board for seven years in addition to her volunteer work. She's looking forward to returning there as well.

In the meantime, she enjoys spending time with her children and closest friends and family, hosting Taco Tuesday, Pizza Friday, grilling, and sitting outside by the fire. She also relishes Girl's Night and is looking forward to golfing with friends at their weekly tee time at Van Patten Golf Club starting this month.

After COVID abates, she's eagerly anticipating family travels again as they enjoy spending time in Lake Placid in the winter, the Adirondacks in the summer, and going on cruises anytime since her favorite place is anywhere on the ocean in a tropical climate. Within the Capital Region, they love going to the many wonderful restaurants including The Glass Tavern, La Fiesta,





Mr. Fuji Sushi, Saigon Spring, Halfmoon Diner, and Lakeside Farms. The kids enjoy running around the playgrounds at Clifton Commons or George T. Smith Park, and of course, ice cream and mini golf at Pirate's Hideout.

Patricia's family is everything to her. Ezariah is a very bright, kind, affectionate, and curious little boy. Her daughter is sassy, sweet, smart, and determined. They also have an 11-year-old hound/pit bull mix, Killian. In the future, she's looking forward to advancing her career, traveling, and watching her children grow. Like all parents, she hopes they will be happy and healthy

and dreams they will be able to grow up in a world without racism and with a lot less hatred. "My journey to motherhood has taught me that God always has a plan and it's usually better than mine," says Patricia. "I firmly believe that everything—even the heartache—happens for a reason."

Each day, she and the kids take turns saying their favorite mantra to start the day off on the right foot:

I am smart.

I am kind.

I am brave.

I am strong.

I am loved.

I am respectful to others.

I make mistakes but that's ok.

I will do my best every day.

I can do anything.

I am amazing.

Today is going to be an awesome day.



"Never give up on your dreams," she advises.

"Even though there may not be a clear path, there is always a way. Also, don't stay so focused on what you think your life *should* be that you miss what it is *meant* to be. I thought I needed to birth my own children to be a mother, that having biological children was a critical component to that goal. I could not have been more wrong. I know for absolute certain that these two children were meant to be with me. I couldn't possibly love them any more than I do!"

For more information on fostering or how you can help Berkshire Farm Center, visit www.berkshirefarm.org.

