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Full house for retiring coach: Dodge City

'It's what keeps us young, or crazy, or both'

BY KERRY EGGERS

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Rich Dodge retired last month after 32 years of teaching and 23 years of coaching in the Portland Interscholastic League, but that's only a portion of the story.

Dodge, 55, is retiring in no small part to spend more time with a family that includes his wife, Diane, and their 10 children.

The oldest three children of the former Wilson High football/baseball star – he was inducted into the PIL Hall of Fame in 2005 – are biological, grown and on their own.

The younger seven began as foster kids. Now they are adopted, full-fledged members of the household, ages four to 17.

“A lot of my friends have said, ‘Now you’re retired, and you have all these kids,’” Rich Dodge says. “But that’s fine. That’s the point, really.”

“It’s what keeps us young, or crazy, or both,” Diane says.

Diane knew what she was getting into when she married Rich 30 years ago this November.

“We always knew we wanted to have a big family,” she says. “Rich has two sisters and a brother and a large extended family, and he remembers large holiday get-togethers.

“When we were dating, he asked, ‘You like children, don’t you?’ I remember thinking, ‘I like children, within reason.’ I didn’t know 10 was going to be the final outcome.”

After starting at both tailback and as a shortstop/outfielder at Oregon State, Dodge began his teaching and coaching career at now-defunct Jackson High. He moved to Lincoln in 1982, serving as head football coach from 1986-99 and coaching both football and baseball for 22 years.

Once the Dodges had their three biological children – twins Alyssa and Tyler, both 26, and Krystin, 23 – “I knew that wasn’t enough,” Diane says. “We always had a heart for children.”

In the early '90s, they were touched by a television news segment on Romanian orphanages. The cost at the time was prohibitive – \$10,000 per child.

One Sunday, during a service at Greater Portland Bible Church, they noticed one of their friends with a new baby.

“I asked, ‘How did you do that so fast?’” Diane recalls. “It was a foster child, and there was a real need for foster parents in Portland – especially medical foster parents.”

That means parents to take on special-need babies, usually with alcohol- or drug-affected mothers, or



The Dodge family on their recently constructed front porch. Top row from left: Kristen, Diane, Rich, Alyssa, Tyler. Middle row: Jayme, Lauryn, Gillyan. Bottom row: Ricky, Harley, Ryan.

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youngsters who were victims of neglect or domestic violence.

The Dodges attended a meeting with the state's Department of Children Services, then took extended medical training that qualified them. With the meth epidemic starting in Oregon, there were plenty of foster candidates to choose from in Multnomah County.

First there was Aly, now 17, followed by Jayme, 13, Lauryn, 12, and Gillyan, 11. Then came the boys – Ryan, 9, Harley, 5, and Ricky, 4.

The Dodges have twice built additions onto the Southwest Portland house they bought in 1983, going from three to six bedrooms. The four adopted girls each have a bedroom, while the three young boys share a room.

All but one of the foster kids came to the Dodges at four months or younger. Lauryn and Gillyan came from the same birth mother, as did Harley and Ricky.

All arrived with some degree of emotional or psychological damage. Some came with physical damage. One had seven broken bones and a skull fracture when he arrived as an infant.

“That was the hardest to see,” Diane says.

In every case, the Dodges chose to adopt.

“They begin as foster kids,” Rich says. “Then they grow on you. As the process goes on, you get more attached. Then you start thinking it will work out.”

The Dodges get stipends from the state as foster parents, and federal adoptive assistance for the special needs once the children are officially part of the family. It doesn't begin to cover the cost of living.

“There have been a lot of times when our staples are macaroni and cheese,” Diane says. “Sometimes you have to wait until the end of the month to get things.”

“But we're fine,” Rich says. “We have all our basic needs met. It doesn't mean we don't have troubles at times – just normal arguments about finances that most everybody has. But I hope the kids all know they have more than many people do in this world.”

The parents found that out recently, when they got a call from Aly, who was in New Orleans on a church mission. Says Diane: “She was crying, saying, ‘Mom, I can't believe people live like this. These people are so poor. They have nothing. Some of the kids are foster kids and don't have parents. Can I bring one home?’ ”

The state has provided plenty of training in working with the foster kids. Diane has become an expert, with undergrad and graduate degrees in early childhood development and 16 years in foster care. She has worked as a part-time teacher in the kids' preschool classes and has helped mentor families with foster acquisitions, adoptions and special medical needs.

“But more than anything, you learn by experience, living it every day,” she says.

“With me, it's been kind of learn as you go,” Rich says.

The Dodges have had to discipline in different ways than they did with their biological children.

Dealing with life

All of the adopted children have physical or psychological issues, but they've blended nicely into the family.

“With all the extra services, physical and occupational therapy over the years, they're coming along well,” Diane says. “They have a lot of learning disabilities, but with the school and all the extra help, they're doing great.”

“The best thing is, they get to be in a loving and caring environment,” Tyler says. “If they didn't have

our parents, they'd either be bouncing from foster home to foster home, or they could be with a mother and around drug or domestic abuse."

The birth mothers are involved in the kids' lives, at least for a while.

"They don't like us at first," Diane says. "They see us as the ones who take their kids. By the end, they've all been appreciative."

So, for the most part, are the kids.

"In most cases, they realize what kind of home we can provide," Rich says, adding with a smile, "by the way, we're not perfect. But generally speaking, it's safe. And I think most of the mothers believe it's a better place for their kids."

One of the mothers was visiting one day when Diane was preparing the kids for a trip in the car. "We were in a hurry, and I threw some shoes at her and asked her to help get somebody ready," Diane recalls. "Later, I felt guilty and apologized, and she said, 'That's OK, it made me feel like I was part of the family. No one has ever made me feel like that.' Many of the mothers had never been parented or experienced what a real family is like."

One of the boys' birth mothers hasn't visited for a year. "He has had numerous nightmares," Diane says. "He wonders, 'Is she dead? Are my brothers dead?' We've had to work through abandonment issues with a number of the kids."

One of the girls, who hasn't seen her birth mother in years, has had nightmares, too, along with eating-disorder and ADHD problems.

"But she wrote a four-page paper on the last time she saw her birth mother that was amazing," Diane says. "Her English teacher said it was the best paper she has seen in years."

At times, the Dodges get help from friends and church members. Normally, though, they're on their own in transporting the kids from activity to activity.

"It can get pretty hectic," Rich says. "Sometimes, the older kids step in and help."

A big-picture thing

The biological children have had to share their parents – and their home.

"I never felt cheated," Krystin says. "It felt like more love for the family. There are times where you get a little testy, but it has been mostly great."

"The more the merrier," Tyler says. "We love all of them."

There are hard times, he admits.

"When you're a teenager and trying to sleep downstairs and there are kids running around, you're not happy about it," Tyler says. "But I'm almost like an uncle to the young ones. I try to help them out with the kind of advice that adults would give to children. It makes for an interesting family, with all sorts of age ranges, and everyone doing different things in life."

The Dodges aren't sure about the future, except that there will be plenty of parenting.

"No more foster kids," Diane says, "but we are looking forward to grandchildren."

None of the biological kids are married, though Alyssa is engaged.

Rich and Tyler are hoping to coach football together as members of a PIL staff.

"It's a possibility, but nothing is lined up right now," Rich says.

Rich and Diane get enjoyment from watching the children grow.

“They have completely sacrificed their lives for 10 kids,” Tyler says. “It’s really unbelievable.”

For this set of parents, that is just fine.

“A lot of our friends through the years were getting houses and cars and boats, while we were getting the babies,” Diane says. “They didn’t understand what we were doing.

“But it was a big-picture thing. It meant more to us that we were helping these kids and our community.”

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