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BIG CYPRESS — Family Services

Department counselor Fred Mullins called the Foster Parent Appreciation Luncheon a “very special late morning for very special people.” He described the foster parents as the Tribe’s SEAL Team Six.

“You are the ones who, 24 hours a day, are there to go in and help no matter what,” Mullins said, comparing the room full of foster parents to the U.S. Navy’s heroic special operation mission unit.

Nearly 25 foster parents, dedicated to providing homes in a heartbeat to Tribal children removed for any reason from their biological parents, were honored at the May 28 event at the Big Cypress Community Center.

Helene Buster, the department’s director, said the annual luncheon provides an opportunity to thank the foster parents for keeping kids – often rescued from troubled homes – within the community and among loved ones.

“Some of you have not only taken one child, you’ve taken two or even 10. You’ve given them direction and the love they need to grow,” Buster said. “It really does take a village to raise a child.”

Hollywood Board Rep. Steve Osceola is a designated emergency shelter foster parent. “No” is not in his vocabulary when the call comes to serve. When he utters “yes,” his life is instantly rearranged.

“We arrange our lives to serve. Only recently my world was turned upside down again but our children are most important,” he said.

Rep. Osceola said the annual luncheon gives program participants a chance to meet and show each other support. Currently, about 55 children are cared for through the program. Since the program began, 114 adults have stepped up as foster parents.

Kristi Hill, the department’s family preservation administrator, thanked the foster parents for enduring the program’s acceptance process, which includes background checks, drug testing and home evaluations. When children are in their care, the homes are visited regularly and also spontaneously by Tribe and county caseworkers.

“You accept the children and us, DCF staff, therapists and so many more things, and you make every outside appointment. It’s a lot and for that we are grateful and that is why you are honored,” Hill told the group.

Foster mother Billie Tiger, who is the Sober House assistant on Hollywood Reservation, said her decision to become a foster parent was preceded by much thought and caution.

Tiger wanted to help, but with no biological children of her own, she was unsure about bringing a child home to live day in and day out.

As a Family Services employee, however, observing the work of the Tribe's foster system made her choice easy.

"I saw what they really do and as a Seminole, I saw the families - families that are ripped apart," Tiger said. "To take a child that needs love and support became certain."

For the past three months, Tiger has been a mother figure for an infant boy. Like any first-time parent, she came to understand what certain baby cries mean and, equally important, that a child's life is many times bigger than her own.

"I give him comfort and he helps me become a woman and a mother," Tiger said. "To provide for a child is amazing ... it's a challenge, but it's a great one."

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