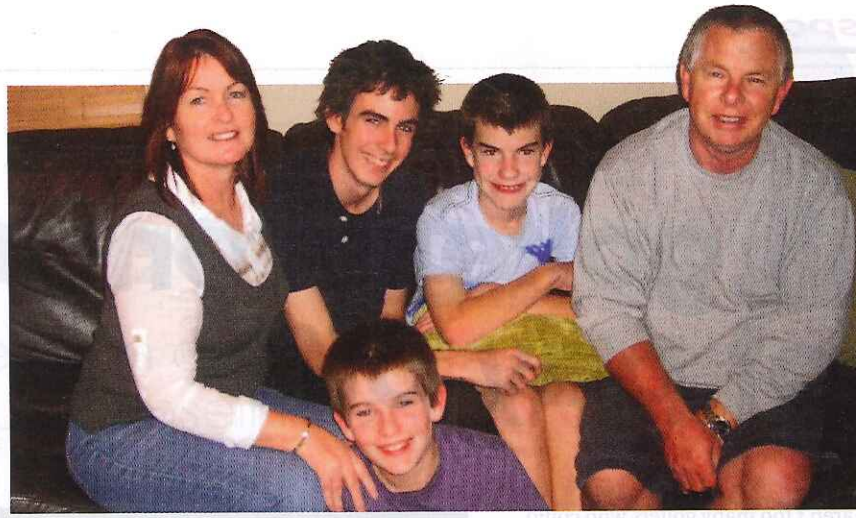


BRISBANE PERSON OF THE YEAR CANDIDATE

Bryan Smith



Big Daddy

As a foster parent Bryan Smith has cared for more than 150 children but the future of thousands of others are in his hands. Interview by **Alex Bernard**

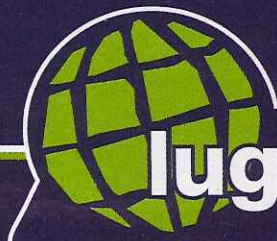
As I walk into the office of Foster Care Queensland, Bryan Smith gives me a strong handshake. The first thing I notice is the large Broncos tattoo on his forearm. "Love your ink!" I say. Bryan laughs, "I've been a Broncos fan ever since they started and my wife wouldn't let me have a mid-life crisis! She wouldn't let me have a Commodore or buy a Harley so I went for the cheap option."

Jokes aside, at 54 Smith has hardly had time to have a mid-life crisis. As foster parents for almost 20 years he and his wife Linda have cared for more than 150 children and, as executive director of Foster Care Queensland since 2004, the future of thousands of others are in his hands. It all began when the couple's own children were getting older and Smith, a plant manager all those years ago, felt he wanted to do more with his life. They started as foster carers

while Smith was still at the plant but long before Patti Gow, working with the Department of Families in those days, his commitment and approached him more. He jumped at the chance and to leap to work in safe houses and then a trainer for foster carers

"I wouldn't be doing this work now wasn't for Patti. She believed that I could put to good use in child protection and my willingness to achieve more for carers worthwhile and able to be fulfilled."

"I remember talking to her about it light went on that told me that when we were born they not only deserved but absolute right to be nurtured in a caring environment free from harm and I was thousands of children who were and harmed by adults every day. I believe



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suddenly that I could try to make a difference and Patti did too."

By the late '90s the Foster Carers Association was funded for the first time and Bryan was appointed to its executive committee as secretary. "During that time a lot of young mums came to the bright lights of the Gold Coast and the South East corner. The social issues have got worse; domestic violence, drugs, alcohol, mental health issues and damaged kids are the side effect of that. So now more than ever we need to have these services as the whole South East corridor has continued to get worse, unfortunately."

In the early days, Smith was faced with the challenge of a fractured system. "Foster carers were not seen as professionals because they were volunteers. How was I going to change it? That was part of the challenge. We had no funding back then, apart from around \$6000. We were working from home but I was lucky to be around very motivated people and, as time went on, I could see more could be done."

Smith himself is from a large family. "I had a great childhood, six brothers and sisters. We never wanted for anything but we weren't rich." But the nature of giving clearly runs in the family. "All my sisters are nurses, one of my brothers is a fireman and another spent 25 years in the Air Force, so we all wanted to contribute in some way."

Queensland has around 8000 children in foster care, the second largest number in the country (behind NSW), with just 4400 carers to look after them. There is a critical shortage of carers simply because the number of children coming into care continues to grow – a problem that is not unique to Australia but is spread across the western world.

Latest figures show there are almost 1000 children and young people in the Brisbane City Council region in out-of-home care with just over 500 foster and kinship carer families. Approximately 30 per cent of these families are kinship carers (meaning they are related or known to the children).

Foster Care Queensland has come a long way since the early '90s. "When I first started in 1992 there were approximately 800 carers in Queensland. Today we have more than 4000," says Bryan. "Ideally we would like to see the numbers of carers double from current levels." However, realistically, he believes that increase is more likely to be about 25 per cent or another 1000 carers.

FCQ also was an organisation with no staff and next to no funding. "But the team of volunteers was so dedicated! They provided a great service that had limits because of lack of resources," says Smith. Now there are eight full-time staff members and 35 dedicated volunteers who are part of FAST (Foster Carer Advocacy and Support Team), providing local support for carers from the Gold Coast to Thursday Island.

Annaley Clarke, a program support manager at youth organisation Pathways, has worked with Smith since long before he was appointed to his current role in 2004. The two were colleagues when Pathways was the Gold Coast Youth Service and Clarke has continued to work closely with Smith since he joined Foster Care Queensland.

"Bryan is someone who can talk to anyone, from any walk of life. He's also got an incredible work ethic. He would be taking calls in the middle of the night, replying to emails, and being a foster carer himself has been instrumental in his ability to be such a strong leader.

"To me Bryan is the picture of a strong, nurturing man. He can roll on the ground playing with a young kid or sit next to a troubled 15-year-old and really get through to them. He makes them feel safe and cared for. It's so important for kids to have men like that around," Clarke says.

Tammy Ashman, Bryan and Linda's eldest daughter, came to them from a physically violent home when she was just 13. "I remember the night I first went to dad's house. It was crazy with all these kids everywhere and it was a really warm environment but I was so scared and I didn't know what to make of it. I'd come out of this horrific situation where I'd seen my mother physically abused over and over.

"I remember dad sitting down with me and he would talk to me for hours and hours about how it wasn't my fault and it wasn't OK to be in a situation like that. After a few months I stopped jumping out of my skin if a glass broke or if I heard a loud noise, and it was then I realised that I felt safe. They saved me; I wouldn't be the emotionally stable person I am today if it wasn't for them."

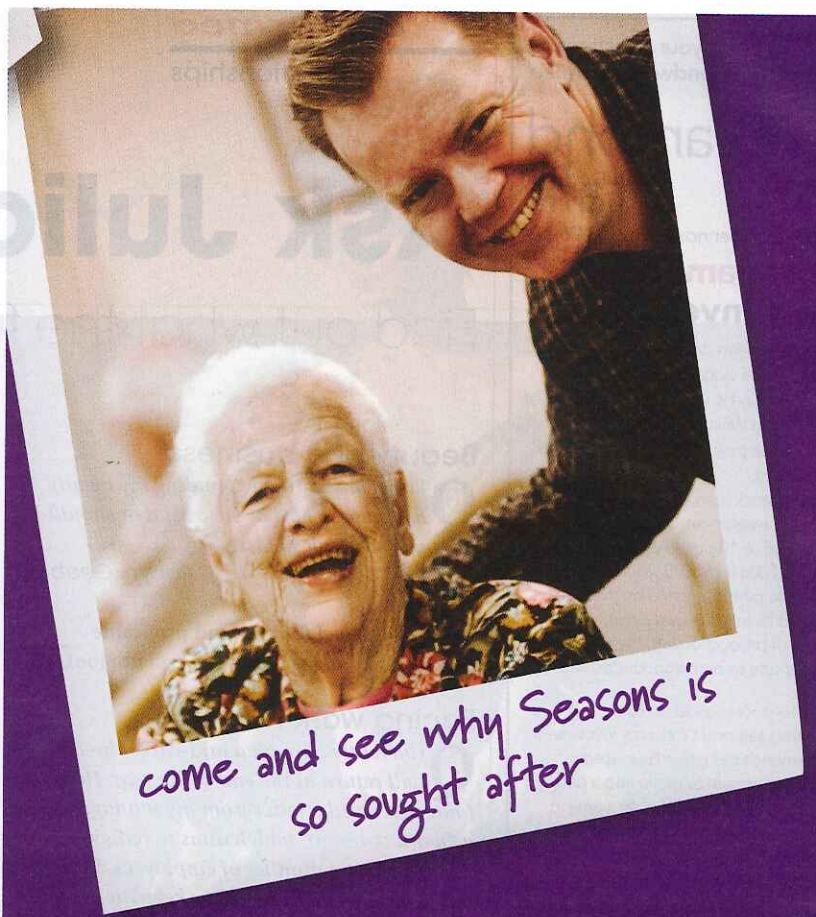
Now a mother of four children, Tammy says she would consider becoming a foster carer in the future. "My kids are still young but if I could do for some other kids what my parents did for me, I'd love to."

Bryan and Linda Smith are the embodiment of the system at work. They're currently kinship carers for their 13-month-old granddaughter. "One of our daughters was off the tracks and we got a phone call from Child Services at eight o'clock one night and here we are. We live it every day, just when we thought we were going to slow down!" Smith says.

"We've got three boys at home, 17, 11 and a 10-year-old, and our granddaughter, but we're hopeful our daughter will be able to get things together and we still support her emotionally. It's complicated for kinship carers."

For Smith, the real meaning of family isn't about blood relationships. "It's being around people you believe in and believe in you. It's providing a safe environment – having a laugh together and having a cry together."

01 Bryan Smith with wife Linda and sons Thomas (front), Luke and Christopher



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