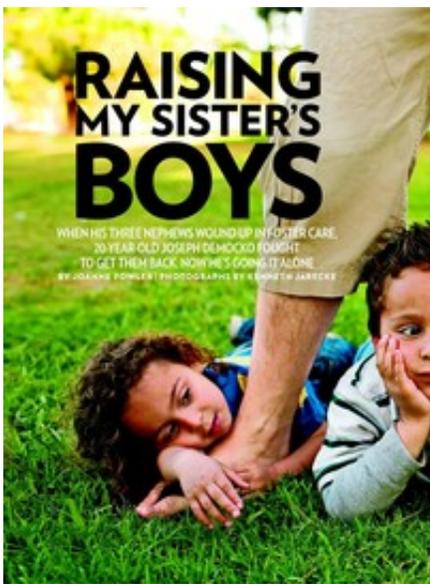


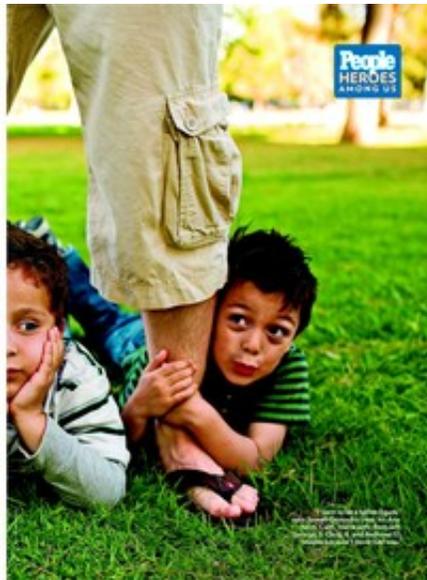
Raising My Sister's Boys

By JOANNE FOWLER

When his three nephews wound up in foster care, 20-year-old Joseph Democko fought to get them back



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On a recent Wednesday evening, Joseph Democko had already clocked a full day as a medical billing clerk. Then his real work began. In the kitchen of his

Anaheim, Calif., apartment, he tossed chicken breasts onto a skillet, dumped a packet of freeze-dried potatoes into boiling water and kept a watchful eye on his

that there are three children," says Linda Reuter, adoption program manager for the Orange County Social Services Agency. Julie Akau, a social worker there, adds, "He's always been very committed to the boys—and they adore him."

That devotion is something Jody Democko—the boys' mother—appreciates even as it sometimes pains her to watch her brother bring up her sons. "It hurts," says Jody, 23, who now lives nearby and visits several times a week. "But the boys are better off. It's more stable. He's always been the more responsible one." (The boys have little contact with their birth father.) Democko, who periodically asks his sister to take a home drug test when she comes over, has mixed feelings about her role in the boys' lives. "They sometimes call her Mom," he says. "But I can't count on my sister for anything, so the way I look at it, it's just me and kids."

Relying on himself is nothing new. He was just 6 when his father walked out, leaving the family to fend for themselves, living for years in a cramped motel room. Though his grandfather supported them, Democko helped out with chores and a part-time job. "That experience made me realize what kind of person I wanted to be," Democko says now. He and Jody, once close, drifted apart after she ran away at 15 and eloped in Las Vegas—but that didn't stop Democko from falling in love with his nephews from the moment they were born. "The bond was instant," he says.

Now, Democko is doing his best to be the kind of father he never had. Between his \$14-an-hour job and his \$2,000 monthly stipend from social services, many weeks it's a stretch to make ends meet. He's also put some dreams of his own on hold. In a few years, when Chris is old enough to catheterize himself, Democko hopes to start night classes, maybe learn about the film industry. "I didn't get to go to college, but I want to," he says. "My time will come." For now, he's too busy to think much beyond the boys' immediate needs. "The only time to myself is from 9 p.m. to midnight," he says. "I'll check e-mail or watch a movie. When I need to scream, I walk out the front door and hold it shut." Still, Democko has no regrets. "I enjoy being a dad so much," he says. "I don't want to miss a second of it."

FULL HOUSE

(at home, May 27, 4 p.m.)

"I don't want to force them to call me Dad. Whatever they want to call me, they

can call me—as long as it's nothing bad. In the beginning, Chris would say, 'You are not my father.' This weekend, he kept saying, 'Dad, Dad, Dad.' It just rolled off his tongue, which was kind of cool. Then George said, 'No, it's Joey.'

A SPECIAL TREAT

(with Anthony at a local fair, May 27, 2 p.m.)

"On the weekends I take the kids to the park or to a \$2 movie. I have dated, but right now it's too much. I'll meet friends for a drink or two every three months or so. But I've never been one to go out. I get more enjoyment doing something for the boys. Seeing them happy makes me happy."

SEPARATE WAYS

(with twin sister Jody, 1998)

"We were really close before she ran away. I don't understand what happened."

SPECIAL NEEDS

(putting on Christopher's leg braces, May 27, 10 a.m.)

"Taking care of Christopher is gigantic. He used to go a couple of times a week for physical therapy; now he goes every three months for an evaluation. And every six months he goes to a spina bifida clinic; I take the day off, unpaid. Then there are other doctor appointments, ultrasounds for the bladder. I try not to dwell on it. I can't change it. I love Chris the way he is."

A SHOULDER TO CRY ON

(with George at a local fair, May 27, 1 p.m.)

"The first time I got a notice saying I was late for an appointment, I thought, 'Oh my gosh. This is not a game.' I realized I was responsible for everything in their lives. Those moments, they start to feel like your kids.... the moments that make it worthwhile? When I go home. When I pick them up from daycare and see how happy they are to see me. When they come out screaming, 'Joeey!!' As hard as you work, when you finally see that, it makes everything worth it."

HOPING FOR MORE

(outside their apartment, May 27, 7 p.m.)

"My dream is to live in a nice little house with a white picket fence in a cul-de-sac—where the kids can go to school around the corner and run out on the front lawn. I don't want them to have a hard life and grow up quick like I did. I want them to enjoy their childhood. I want them to be responsible and have good

jobs. I want them to follow their dreams and never give up."

GOODNIGHT KISSES

(at home, May 26, 8:30 p.m.)

"For the longest time they would all sleep with me, but I'm trying to get them out of that. I get pushed off the bed. They jump on me. But if we are snuggling up watching TV together, we'll all cuddle, one in front of me, one on top of me, one next to my head. They are my boys—my little monsters."

Know a hero? Send suggestions to HEROESAMONGUS@PEOPLEMAG.COM

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