For children in foster care, loss is a routine part of their life experience and whether they reconcile the reasons for those losses, there's a hole that can never be filled and people that are difficult to replace.

Because she understands all too well, the complexities of these losses and because she served as a foster care provider for many years, Sue has introduced a new project within the Rutland County Foster Association. She is now a Community Partner with a company called Lavender Life, based on the Vic and Vicki Bennett family farm in West Michigan. Believing deeply in the mission of foster care, Lavender Life’s founders now provide a lavender-filled stuffed bunny named “Xander” to each child entering foster care. Sue has accumulated several hundred Xander bunnies that are now camping out in one of her spare bedrooms looking for homes.

As someone who dedicated more than 20 years to supporting children and youth in care, Sue has a keen sense of smell when it comes to the needs of children in foster care. I say “smell” because in addition to becoming a Lavender Life ambassador, she has the track record that helps new foster care providers understand the importance of their role in children’s lives. It’s also important to Sue that foster care providers know how their contribution can make a difference for the child while fostering them and years later. It is the recollection of one specific teenager who Sue and her husband fostered many years ago and who remembered Sue not only for her skill as a caregiver but because she invited the young teen to bake bread with her.

Sue explains the connection to this former foster child, “I took this girl in when she was a teenager. It was a typical story. She’d come from a traumatic background, had been a runaway multiple times; and, in the middle of the night, she was brought to me not wanting to be there. I convinced her to stay for just the night, which she did.” Sue recalls that the teen didn’t live with Sue’s family for very long but she’d come back from time to time and visit.

“I’m big on making homemade bread for all my kids. And this girl made bread with me that first day.” Sue then jumped the story ahead many years forward and said, “I bumped into the girl again, who, by now, had children of her own.” She had, Sue recalled, struggled over the years, and shared that she was doing better. Sue says, “She mentioned my grey cat and the rose-colored carpeting in our living room.” “Mostly,” the young woman said, “When I think of
you, I think about making bread.”

For Sue, this was a watershed moment. It became a story she would share with foster parents repeatedly—the difference one person can make when you sometimes wonder if it’s all been worth the effort.

The story culminates in this poignant memory for the retired mother and care provider. “When I ran into her, she shared a story of just weeks before buying frozen dough and bringing it home to make bread with her little girl. And,” Sue recalled, the woman said, “My house smelled like your house, and I told my daughter all about you.”

Sue explains the meaning of the connection with the young woman who then, years later, made the same connection with her own child. “It was an attachment to me and the child that was meaningful to her,” Sue explained. “I was so happy to see her and make that connection after all those years.” Sadly, Sue explained, the young woman was tragically killed by a car a few weeks later. “My heart broke, but I knew I had given this young woman a memory to share with her own child. I hoped that the little girl might always remember making bread with her mom.”

The deeper message for Sue was this, “I’m not a religious person,” she admitted, “but I think seeing her again after all those years and her sharing the story of making bread with her daughter was so meaningful. It’s a story foster parents really connect with, and they’ll ask, “Was it worth it?” And so, I share the story with them and say, “Yes. It’s worth it. When you least expect that you’re making a difference, you are.”

So, what is the connection to a company called Lavender Life? To date, the gift products company has donated more than 64,500 stuffed animals to children in foster care. They rely on ambassadors like Sue to distribute their lavender-filled bunnies to children. This super-soft stuffed bunny has a warmable insert filled with lavender flowers to provide a relaxing, therapeutic scent that’s great for bedtime or anytime they need an extra bit of comfort. For each Xander plush animal purchased, the family-owned company from Caledonia, MI, donates one to a child in foster care.

For Sue, being a Lavender Life Community partner is a meaningful way for her to continue the mission of supporting children in foster care.

“Because Sue’s family has such a rich history in our county of serving children and families,” she explained, “many foster care providers reach out to me with questions and concerns.” From this, Sue poured her energy into searching for ways to support children beyond placement. And that’s where the connection to Lavender Life developed. So, for any family within the State who wants or needs a Xander bunny, Sue can get you one.

Sue T. is a foster parent with the Vermont Department for Children and Families (VDCF). To learn more about becoming a foster parent with VDCF, visit its website: https://dcf.vermont.gov/foster