

Foster care director dives into sensitive topic with gentle book

Bronx, New York native Dr. Steve J. Rios has worn many hats in his life.

He's dabbled in journalism and studied political science. He's worked for local school districts and taught at the college level.

But his true life's work spans three decades -- helping children and families in the foster care system in Florida. More specifically, Rios has been working to bridge the gap between foster children and quality education.

After receiving his master's degree in political science from Florida International University, Rios began his doctoral work in adult education and the faith sector. As he worked through his studies with a goal to become a public speaker, he happened upon what would later become his passion while doing some editing work for a newsletter for a foster care agency.

"After about a year of working with these children and their families, I had become well known to them. I started working for this agency, and I fell in love with the children and their families," he said. "And I never looked back."

He turned his focus in completing his doctoral work into helping foster youth.

Building on his 30 years of experience in the field, Rios is adding a new chapter in his life, as an author of a series of children's books to help foster kids and the adults in their lives gain a better understanding of their circumstances. He describes his most recent book, ["Oly & Opi: The Curious Octopus Twins,"](#) as a gentle book for a sensitive topic. The 14-page illustrated book features a whimsical yet important tale of twin dumbo octopuses as they navigate their journey within the foster care system under the sea.

"I wanted to write a book that did three things," Rios said. "I want the book to help little children in foster care realize that you can have a different parent figure who looks different from you but can love you deeply. I want them to see themselves in a book that draws them in with wonderful animals."

Secondly, Rios said he wanted to create the book to appeal to other children who are not in foster care, to help them understand the dynamics of differing family structures. And finally, Rios' additional goal with the book is to give adults an outlet to begin the conversations with children about foster care and encourage healthy discussions about the natural curiosity that comes along with it.

Rios draws his inspiration for the book from his many years working with children, families and outside influences as part of the Extra Mile Learning Center, a foster care tutoring program for which he was instrumental in securing funding. He is the senior director of Positive Pathways, a program of the Florida Department of Children and Families that is dedicated to helping foster youth succeed academically.

Throughout his years of working in the two agencies, Rios recognized a need to address a lack of confidence and motivation among foster children that hindered the ability to see opportunity in the future. He has also worked to break down the external barriers from non-empathetic teachers, uniformed caseworkers and foster parents who were not education minded. It is his hope that the adventures of Oly and Opi, in his current book and the books yet to come, will play an inclusive role in helping foster youth succeed academically.

“The state of Florida offers free college tuition to foster children until the age of 28, but only 50 percent of them ever get out of high school,” he said. “If I can be part of the process of getting these children early on to build their skills and motivate them to go to school, then I will do whatever I can.”

The book is available on [Amazon](#) in both electronic and paperback formats.