

Mar. 07, 2008  
Copyright © Las Vegas Review-Journal

## IN SEVENTH HEAVEN

### St. Jude's Ranch turns to special couple to keep five brothers, two sisters together

By LYNNETTE CURTIS  
REVIEW-JOURNAL

Robin Dione was expounding on Wednesday afternoon about the challenges of caring for seven young children when, as if on cue, 1-year-old Lucy attempted a gleeful escape through an open patio door.

Dione stopped mid-sentence and chased the mop-haired girl, who in turn was chasing Fluffy, the family dog, around their home at St. Jude's Ranch for Children in Boulder City.

Meanwhile, Lucy's five brothers and one sister were scattered around the spacious house, finishing math homework, helping prepare a spaghetti dinner or chatting loudly with each other.

"It's a lot of fun, but there are days when it's not so fun," said Dione, smiling.

She and her husband, Amadou Dione, serve as "family teachers" and live with the seven siblings, ages 1 through 12.

The children are the largest group of siblings that current staffers at St. Jude's remember housing at the 40-year-old facility at one time. Staffers say it's also the first time siblings of the opposite sex have been able to live together in one house at the shelter.

"With a sibling group this large, there was no place in Southern Nevada where they could be kept together," said Jennifer Becker, a St. Jude's spokeswoman. "These kids deserved to be together."

Child welfare workers often struggle to keep siblings from being separated. So it seemed a monumental task to house together Damien, 12; Dominic, 10; Alex and Adelina, 8-year-old twins; Julian, 6; Michael, 5, and Lucy.

"In looking for foster placements, it isn't finding people with a big enough heart, it's finding a big enough home," said Christine Skorupski, spokeswoman for Clark County Family Services. "They need to have enough space for the children. Additionally, if one or more children has a greater need of medical or developmental care, it can compound things and siblings can be separated."

Being able to keep the seven children together, she said, "is all-around wonderful."

Christine J. Spadafor, CEO of St. Jude's, called it "the right thing, the human thing to do."

"It's also the therapeutic thing to do," she said. "Children come to us with nothing but their brothers and sisters. That's all they have left."

St. Jude's provides shelter for about 40 abandoned and neglected 5- to 21-year-olds placed there by Family Services. They live family-style in homes on the 40-acre campus with full-time "family teachers."

Children are usually segregated by gender.

The Diones, who've been working at the campus since November, were asked about a month ago whether they would be interested in overseeing the seven siblings.

"They had all been placed in different places for years," Amadou Dione said. "They had lived separately. We wanted to give them the comfort and love they weren't getting at home."

He said the children's mother was unable to provide a stable home for them, and their father is currently out of the picture.

The siblings face special challenges because of frequent moves over the years, said Roland Gant, St. Jude's campus director. Some of them struggle in school.

"This is the first stable place they've ever had," Gant said.

Robin Dione said the children have just begun to trust her and her husband enough to unpack.

"They lived out of their suitcases at first," said Robin Dione, a former probation officer. "Now they're putting clothes in their dresser drawers."

"They were acting like they were still in a shelter," Amadou Dione said. "We told them, 'This is your home.' "

Also sharing the home is the Diones' 16-year-old biological daughter Jennifer, and a 17-year-old St. Jude resident who is transitioning out of foster care. That adds up to 11 people and a \$350-a-week grocery bill.

"It's controlled chaos," Robin Dione said. "Sometimes uncontrolled."

Jennifer takes the whole seven-sibling thing in stride.

"I always wanted sisters and brothers," she said. "It's cool."

Amadou Dione said the siblings have adjusted well to their new home but still show signs of nervousness and anger. It has mostly mellowed to regular sibling stuff, though.

"We just argue," said 10-year-old Dominic, who on Wednesday was the least shy of the seven siblings.

Otherwise, "it feels good" to live with his siblings, he said.

But he's grateful that he has to bunk only with Julian and Alex.

"If I had to share with all of them, I'd be sleeping on the floor."

Damien, the eldest child, said he's also glad to have his six siblings within shouting distance.

"They get in trouble sometimes," he said. "I have to look out for them."

Little Lucy shares a room with her sister, Adelina. There's a baby monitor near Lucy's crib so the Diones can hear her when she cries.

"But she doesn't cry anymore," Amadou Dione said. "She just sings."

Contact reporter Lynnette Curtis at [lcurtis@reviewjournal.com](mailto:lcurtis@reviewjournal.com) or (702) 383-0285.

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.lvrj.com/news/16378056.html>

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright © Las Vegas Review-Journal, 1997 - 2008

Go Green! Subscribe to the electronic Edition at [www.reviewjournal.com/ee/](http://www.reviewjournal.com/ee/)