

# Foster Focus

Volume 7 Issue 3 August 2017

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## This Issue's Contributors



*Dr. John DeGarmo*



*Lynn Tonini*



*HeartShare St. Vincent's Services:*



*Michael Olivieri*

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## Aging Out Institute Awards

*Former foster youth and Founder of the Aging Out Institute comes to Foster Focus to share AOI's very first awards. Learn more about the process.*

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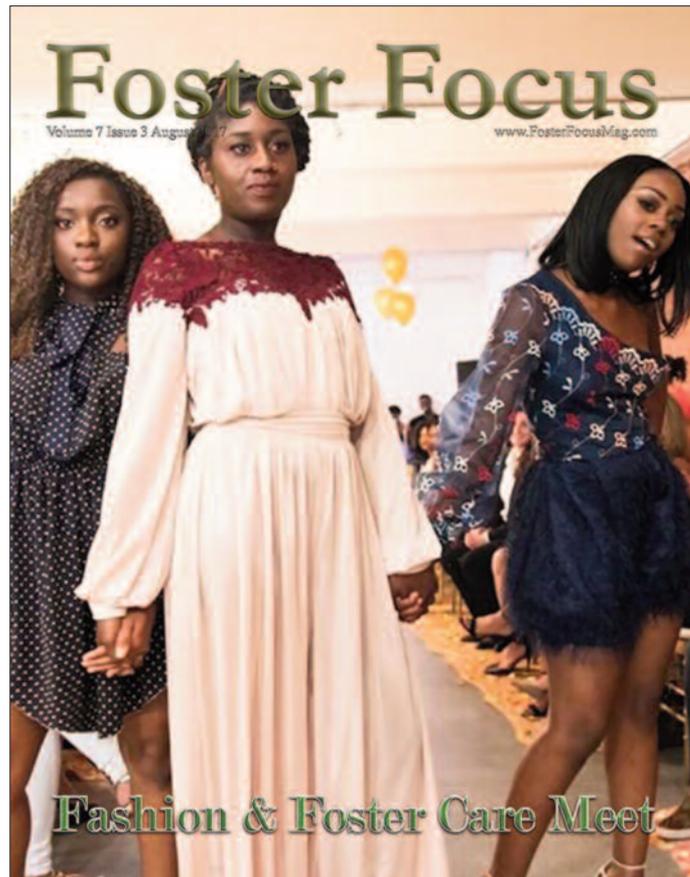
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## What Makes a Great Foster Parent?

*As a former foster youth, Michael Olivieri knows a little something about what a great foster parent looks like. He stops in to share some key attributes you may have.*



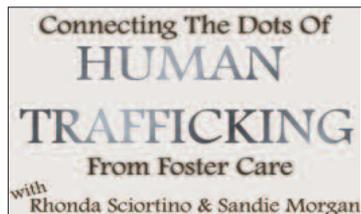
*On the cover:*

Foster youth, (from left to right) Models Vanesha, age 15 a volunteer, Tyseania, age 16 walk the runway at the Heartshare fashion show. Photo credit for cover and article: **Andy Moeller**

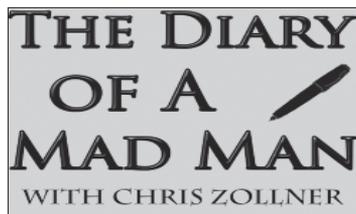
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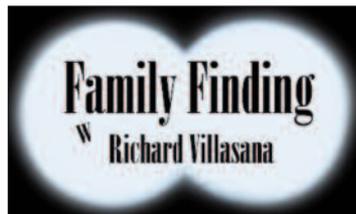
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**Foster Focus**  
An In-Depth Monthly Look at the Foster Care Industry

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# EDITOR'S NOTES

## In This Edition:

### On the Road Again



*Chris Chmielewski is the Creator, Owner and Editor of Foster Focus Magazine, America's only monthly foster care magazine. He spent five years in foster care before aging out. He created Foster Focus so that others in care would have the most up to date information. The magazine has consistently grown as Chris is entering his sixth year of the magazine. He has interviewed celebrities such as Maia Mitchell and Jimmy Graham. And writers from all over the country contribute articles to the magazine, making it one of the leading sources of foster care news and information in the country.*



Last month's Notes were just a mess. Awful. I didn't have it. Not sure where it went but it clearly vacated my possession. In fact, a lot of my writing has been spotty garbage for the better part of a year. There were some good articles, I like what I did with the foster care and deportation article, but the rest has hidden whatever talent I have. It happens. Peaks and valleys. This is the life of a writer. It's about the balance I've been lacking. It's about changes of scenery. It's about inspiration. I've been lacking most of these, especially the balance. When it isn't working, you need to do everything, anything you can to get it back. So that's what I'm going to do. I searched for answers all year and I finally stumbled upon it.

I found the missing piece to me doing the best job I can do; road trip!

It started out innocently enough; I was feeling off, couldn't get right, then the phone rang. On the line was a woman representing a group bringing together business owners and foster youth in Los Angeles to raise money for a foster care agency on the west coast. She asked if I'd be interested in coming to speak at the event. It's well documented that I rarely speak in public and when I do it's for friends I've made or for former foster youth. Nothing against talking, I just rarely have anything to add to the conversation. In life, I talk my ass off. In business, I'm a lot more introverted. Maybe it's the GED but even though I run a national magazine with moderate success, I still feel like the odd man out.

But like I mentioned, I've been feeling off for a while and a change of scenery couldn't hurt. So, I waived the bulk of my speaking fee (I've done this before, I get yelled at a lot for it, takes money to run a business, but if kids are involved I'm an easy get. I've since taken up with a Speaker's Bureau, to keep me from telling anyone yes or no.) and agreed to come back out to the west coast. The mag is big out there even though I'm on the other side of the country. Lots of the Foster Focus Contributors and Columnists come from out that way. Many reasons to go.

I have some health issues. No need to go into it further than that. I dread the idea of being stuck in that metal tube the rest of you call an airplane, yet I'm more than comfortable driving for one hundred hours. I'm a complex man. Not really, I just need the ability to completely control my travel. My wife hates this. Just hates it. Not flying is a bit more expensive. Not by much mind you. After flights, rentals and rooms, it costs about the same or just a bit more than driving yourself. Time is the difference. Spending X amount of dollars to fly gets the job done in about half the time driving out takes. But it's worth it to me to spend a few extra days on a trip in my car than passing over the country in a plane. Can't see the people from a plane and people are the whole reason I do this.

In a very cynical world, I may be one of the last people around who stands in awe of us. I have a genuine love of all people. I'm constantly impressed with what we can do, what we can create, what we can dream up and then make reality. I've got a childlike wonder for people and places and I can't experience either with any enjoyment from a plane. You know what I remember on a trip? It's not the cool things I get to do or the movie locations I wander off to check out. It's the little old lady sweeping her sidewalk in little town Nebraska. Or the guy on the bench in a park I drive by in Topeka. The plateaus and the houses near them in Texas. Why do they live so close to that rock formation? Do they dig the look or do they know something I don't? The dirt roads that shoot off the main roads to reveal houses and ranches in Oklahoma. I like the onion fields in California. The tobacco farmers tending to their crops in Kentucky.

I love all that stuff. As I drive I imagine their lives. Ironically, I think very little about the magazine or foster care when I drive on these voyages; it's all about the people and the towns they've built. I prefer backroads to highways and driving behind a horse and buggy as opposed to sitting in traffic. Bottom line; I can't enjoy travel in a plane, my mind and body won't allow it. So, I drive.

This time it's 47 hours to California and 56 back. That's a lot, huh? Not to me. I dot this country with intentions. Intentions of seeing people to learn their foster care stories. Intentions to nab new subscribers and advertisers. Intentions to grow Foster Focus (slow and steady so I can contain it) into a household name. Not just foster care households, all households. If I agree to come across the country to talk, you can bet your bottom dol-

lar I'm coming home with more subscribers, advertisers and stories than I left with.

Like I said, my wife isn't a big fan of the way I travel but this magazine, for better or worse, grows through me. This ugly mug needs to be in front of people to explain the worth of this mag. My awkward (often adorable) demeanor is what creates the relationships that lead to ads and connections. Every ad you see in this mag is the result of meeting a decisionmaker, becoming friends, that person seeing my work ethic and intent and investing their money in what I do. That's how it happens. Rarely does a cold call work, mainly because I lack the time to attack the phones the way you need to, and though people come to me to advertise, they need to feel taken care of and looked after, foster care never really advertised before me apart from conferences or a classified ad in the local paper. This stuff takes time I don't have.

But on these long road trips, I get time. I talk into my recorder, things I could say to potential advertisers or pre-write an article as I drive. I get to think of ways to grow or improve the mag while a book on tape plays.

In the rush to put out a quality product, I don't get the chance to think beyond the task at hand. The road gives me that chance. Not to mention the boost to my spirits, but I think I'll write about that when I get back.

For now, I'll give you a snapshot of the itinerary for the trip. I'll start in western PA visiting a potential location for a future village designated for victims of human trafficking. Then, it's deep into West Virginia to check out a future college for kids from care. Next is Santa Cruz to see the Foster Youth Museum, a travelling display, in person with the curator.

Then to San Jose, California to learn about an incredible new way to look at care. I'll meet some of those folks that run care for one of the richest counties in the nation while I'm there.

I'm interested to see how an affluent county that boasts Silicon Valley as one of its service areas, fares in the world of care. My hunch is that it's similar to the rest of the country, but I'll find out. That's why we make the trip.

From San Jose, it's off to LA to speak at [www.FosterFocusMag.com](http://www.FosterFocusMag.com)

that event, meet with some Columnists and do a little Karate Kid sightseeing.

I've been invited by the A Sense of Home folks to watch them create furnished rooms in a warehouse that will then be recreated in the new living space for a former foster kid. Looking forward to that one. Can I fit in a stop at the world-famous Comedy Store on the Sunset Strip? I can and I will.

I run back up to northern Cali to see family before making the turn east to go home. But there are people and places to see on the way home too. I'll make stop in Nebraska to see how the Foster Care Closet expansion is going and then to Oklahoma to check in on a 100 year old foster care community.

And then I come back home to my office, put together the September issue and share all my adventures with you.

Should be a great trip to refresh the soul and lead to great future issues of the mag. And THAT is why I drive.

Enjoy the issue. I think you're really going to like.

See you when I come back with a tan and a ton of stories. Be safe out there.

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Connecting The Dots Of  
**HUMAN**  
**TRAFFICKING**  
From Foster Care  
with  
Rhonda Sciortino & Sandie Morgan

**In This  
Edition:  
Will You  
Know it  
When You See It?**



*Rhonda Sciortino, author of Succeed Because of What You've Been Through, is the National Child Welfare Specialist for Markel Insurance Company. Rhonda is a foster alum who chairs the Successful Survivors Foundation and serves as a spokesperson for Foster Care Alumni of America. Her weekly radio show can be heard at*

[www.RHONDA.org](http://www.RHONDA.org)



*Dr. Sandie Morgan, Ph.D., is Director of Vanguard University's Global Center for Women and Justice, overseeing the Women's Studies Minor, as well as teaching Family Violence and Human Trafficking and producing the Ending Human Trafficking Podcast. Sandie's background as a Pediatric Nurse brought her into contact with her first victim of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children. She is committed to equipping our communities to be a safer place for vulnerable youth.*

[Live2Free.org](http://Live2Free.org)

When I picked up the phone I heard the calm yet urgent voice of my daughter, Sarah. "Mom, what's the number to call when you suspect that someone is being trafficked?" Without asking who, what, why, or where, I rattled off the number that Dr. Sandie Morgan, director of Vanguard University's Global Center For Women And Justice, "made me" memorize— 8883737888. Sarah thanked me and promptly hung up.

I later learned that as Sarah was pulling into the grocery store parking lot after work, she noticed a girl of approximately 17 years of age walking through the parking lot, or more accurately, she was being pulled along by a much older man. Sarah drove slowly, acting as though she was looking for a parking spot so she could get a better look at the two. She tried to make eye contact with the girl to see if she could sense some kind of a signal that the girl was in trouble, but the girl couldn't focus. In fact, her eyes were rolling up into her head as she stumbled along behind the man who was pulling her arm.

In Sarah's words, "They didn't match. The young girl looked 'higher than a kite' and the older man appeared to be totally sober. She was dressed in a spaghetti strap tank top, black yoga pants, and slippers. Her behavior wasn't right. She kept lifting her top and acting as though she was out of it. The man looked creepy."

Sarah parked and kept her eye on the two as they continued to walk across the parking lot toward the grocery store. Oddly, they never went in the store. They lingered outside the store, standing around as though waiting for someone. Sitting in the car acting as though she was going over her shopping list, Sarah called the Human Trafficking Hotline and gave all the information to the operator. As she glanced at the girl, she asked that the woman please send someone right away. The operator told her to hang up and dial 9-1-1. Sarah immediately did so, and gave a complete description of the man and the girl and their location. The police were dispatched, but when Sarah looked up, she saw that the man was now nearby looking right at her. And the girl was gone.

We don't know what happened after that, but we trust that Sarah was at that place at that time to see and report what she noticed. The operative word here is "noticed." She noticed something that didn't look right to her. She memorized everything she could about that man and that girl. She was able to give a detailed description of their faces, hair, height, and clothes, as well as the exact location of where the man was, which was the last known location of the girl.

THAT is what's supposed to happen. We're supposed to be aware of our surroundings and the humans within those surroundings. We're supposed to have our "danger radar" turned on and tuned in so that if we see someone or something that could be a danger to us or others, we're able to take action. Importantly, we're supposed to have the courage to make the call.

Too often we're in our own little worlds. We drive with only half a brain on the road in front of us, while the other half is talking to someone on the phone, listening to music or some impassioned argument on talk radio, or we're thinking about what we have to do before we can finally collapse into bed later. If we are totally honest, some of us can't recall a single detail about the ride home from work. I'm not saying this to point a finger at anyone. I'm perpetually guilty of this. But receiving that call from Sarah and hearing this story makes me wonder what we're missing.

Who's being hurt right in front of us?

YOU are the best protector of the vulnerable people around you. You can be a voice for someone who has no ability to speak up. You can make the call that could save someone's life. Will you know it when you see it?

Will you be willing to set aside fears of being politically incorrect and go with your gut when something or someone doesn't look quite right? Will you be brave enough to make the call when you have only a feeling with no hard evidence? Will you take the time out of the busy-ness that's your life to memorize the person or people well enough to give a detailed description? Can we all commit to look up from our lives long enough to NOTICE what's going on around us?

# **YOUR SON HAS ASKED A CALCULUS QUESTION YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND AT ALL**

---

**Do you:**

- (A) Create a diversion.**
- (B) Look up the answer on your phone but pretend you knew it.**
- (C) Hire a tutor. For yourself.**

**When it comes to being a parent, there are no perfect answers – just being there is enough. So don't worry, you don't have to be perfect to be a perfect parent. There are thousands of teens in foster care who will love you just the same.**



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# THE DIARY OF A MAD MAN

WITH CHRIS ZOLLNER

## In This Edition:

## The Thing About Jenna



*Mary and I were foster parents. Over a six-year period, we took in eighteen kids, all infants. Some stayed for months, others only a couple of days. Two of them are still part of our lives.*

*I started the process as a reluctant cynic, my wife began as a starry-eyed idealist, but we both adapted. Even if you think you've seen everything, foster care will open your eyes.*

*Diary of a Madman is an encouraging but honest tale that will help anyone interested in doing foster care.*

*It is divided into thirty-one fast-paced chapters. It begins when an intake worker drops a baby off at two in the morning. Chapter two describes the events leading up to our involvement in the Social Services System, and foreshadows the effect foster care will have on us. The next several chapters describe the roller coaster interaction between our family, the children, the system and the birth parents. The action culminates in a custody battle with a grandmother who exposed children to an alleged child molester. The book ends with an adoption. The memoir alternates gritty specifics and grim humor with moments of improbable triumph.*

*There are almost half a million children in foster care in the United States, yet the subject remains a literary desert.*

Jenna woke up and threw off the covers. Some kind of rattling noise, she thought. Maybe the wind, she hoped. The rattling grew louder and scared the eight-year-old girl. Mom and Dad would still be gone. She was on her own.

Jenna flicked the light switch on and off several times. No luck. The power was off again. The rattling turned into a loud crashing noise. Jenna jumped up and scurried through the dark hallways, feeling her way, hands on the walls.

She reached the front room and peered out the window. Two strangers, both big, wild-eyed men, were trying to break in the house. One of them used a long, metal pole, trying to wedge the door open. Jenna was getting that “crippled inside” feeling, like she would freeze and do nothing.

Jenna clenched her hands and remembered what Mom told her. If anyone breaks in, hide under the sink in the kitchen. It worked the last time!

With a crash, the door burst open. Jenna ran to the dark kitchen, hitting her leg on a table. She opened the cabinet door under the sink and pushed some things aside. She squeezed her way in, but the door would not close all the way. The hinge on the top of the cabinet door worked, but the bottom hinge did not. She squirmed around, pushing the garbage can aside until she could shut the door. Her leg hurt so bad. You can cry later, she told herself. Her dad had told her that many times.

“Where is it!?” shouted one of the burglars. She shook at the sound of glass shattering. Jenna’s head bumped into something metal, one of the pipes that came down from the sink. Her teeth were chattering. She told herself, Be a good girl, and don’t be afraid. “You said it was in here!” one of the men shouted.

For a moment she thought they were tearing up the house. There was so much banging and clanging. She imagined them opening doors and drawers, knocking tables and lamps over.

Jenna caught her breath and covered her ears. Make it stop. Leave! Go away! Her head went dizzy with confusion.

It’s never going to end, she thought. She was terrified she would cough or sneeze. She felt a terrible tickle in her throat and struggled hard to keep from coughing. Won’t they ever leave? This seemed to last for hours.

The cabinet door opened, not the side she was in but the other side where the trash was. Her whole body felt numb. She held her breath. After they closed the cabinet door, they stomped away and slammed the front door on their way out of the house.

Her teeth chattered. Tears ran down her cheeks. She didn’t realize she had been crying. She pushed the door open, crawled out, stumbled to her room, clambered up on her bed and tossed and turned. A sharp pain seared through her head.

She didn’t remember falling asleep.

Early the next morning, Jenna’s eyes opened wide, and she sat up straight. Her leg ached where she bumped it the night before. She dreaded getting up, thinking the burglars came back.

She tiptoed into the front room. They were back—her parents, that is. Mom snored on the couch. Dad had collapsed on the floor near the front door. That was just his way. sometimes he did that at night. Jenna sighed with relief.

She sure was glad to have them back. She was excited, thinking she would do such a good job cleaning the house. She imagined Mom or Dad telling her she was a good girl. As usual, she picked up the trash cluttered around her sleeping parents first. Then, she found a dustbin and swept up the glass that had been knocked over by burglars the night before. She pushed some chairs back where they were supposed to go and headed into the kitchen.

Except for the broken glass, this was what she did every day. She checked for ants, and saw a trail leading from the trashcan to the pantry. She put what little food they had in the fridge so the ants wouldn't ruin it. Jenna grabbed the squirt bottle with the smelly blue liquid and sprayed it on the line of tiny bugs, driving them away. She cleaned the sinks and found the big pot and the oatmeal. She knew just the amount of water and lit the gas stove. The lights could be off, but the stove would still work. She smiled to herself, proud that she was taking good care of Mom and Dad.

She took a break and stared out the window. A family of squirrels sat on top of a metal garbage can. She loved animals, Jenna grinned as the rodents made faces at her and tried to imitate the Jabber-Jabber-Jabber sound they made.

Twenty minutes later, Mom sat at the kitchen table, leaning over on her elbows looking like she might throw up. Jenna placed the oatmeal in front of her. Dad coughed and hacked as he walked in the room and sat down across from Mom. He scratched his scraggly beard while Mom pushed her longish bangs away from her face. Mom cringed as she glanced down at her breakfast and started to whine, "Do we have to..."

"It's all we have," said Jenna. She said it in her best grown-up voice so Mom wouldn't argue.

Dad's hand shook as he reached for his spoon. His right hand always trembled. He stared at the spoonful of hot cereal, unsure what to do next.

Dad took a bite, chewing slowly as if his jaws ached. He was a big man with blond streaks throughout his thick, red hair. From his ear to his chin was a jagged, red scar that he wouldn't talk about.

"You have to eat," insisted Jenna, quietly but firmly. Dad started to eat again, and when Jenna stared at Mom, she obeyed as well.

Jenna took a deep breath. Giving simple orders was easy. Her next statement would not be. She felt like she needed to say something.

"Someone broke into the house last night while you were gone," stated Jenna. Mom started to say, "Did you--"

"I hid under the sink," interrupted Jenna. "Like you told me... just like the last time." She felt that eager trembling inside, hoping they would say, I'm proud of you. Thanks for being a good girl!

Dad slammed his fist down on the table, making the bowls shake. "It's not my fault. We had to go. It was important."

"Jenna," Mom said. "We had to drive into another town and get some things. You'll understand when you're older. You'll get to go along too."

"It's not our fault," growled Dad.

Mom and Dad looked each other in the eye. Mom snapped, "Did they take anything?" Her parents jumped up with a sudden energy and ran to the fake heater vent, a metal grating in the floor where they hid things. It was the one spot in the house Jenna was not allowed to go.

Mom and Dad lifted the grating and the metal plate below that. They stared down into the dark opening and sighed with relief. "Good. Everything's there," whispered Mom. Dad nodded in agreement.

Jenna did not get angry with her parents very often. It was her job to take care of them, but her face turned red. Her fists clenched, and her fingernails dug deep into the skin of her palms. Before she realized it, she screamed, "You didn't ask about me! You didn't ask if I got hurt or scared or anything!"

Her parents looked confused. Mom shook her head. "You said they didn't find you." "Yeah, what's the problem?" Dad muttered, not looking her in the eye.

Mom and Dad closed the grating for the hiding place, shuffled over to the table and sat back down.

"I was scared," whispered Jenna.

"You have to learn to deal with it," said Dad, shaking his head like there was something wrong with her. "I had scarier things happen to me when I was your age."

Mom's eye twitched. It was what she did when she started to get mad. "She's just a kid," snapped Mom. "She can get scared. You don't care!"

"You didn't care last night when we had to leave in a hurry!" shouted Dad.

Jenna's stomach twisted and turned. She never should have said she was scared. This fight was her fault.

Mom leaned forward, her lip quivering as she hissed, "What kind of a father are you!?"

"What kind of a mother are you?" snapped Dad.

It was Jenna's turn to raise her voice. "It's all right!" she yelled, so loud that her parents turned toward her and stared, open-mouthed.

"It's all my fault, okay. Finish your breakfast," insisted Jenna.

Mom and Dad went back to nibbling at their breakfast. "I won't go to school today," she said. I better stay home and make sure they're okay.

Jenna walked over to the window, staring past the garbage cans and out to the street. A girl her age rode an adult-sized bike, oh so slowly down the road. The girl worked hard, standing up as she struggled with the pedals. She rode out of sight. Jenna watched other kids ride their scooters and play jump rope.

Mom and Dad slept most of the day. They were like that after one of their "fits." That was what Jenna called it when they would be up for two or three days at a time without sleep, always moving and talking and acting ridiculous. After the fits ran their course, they would "crash," Mom's word for a sleeping binge that might last a day or two.

Mom and Dad slept on Jenna's bed for a change. Mom's snoring rumbled into the living room. Jenna thought about school. She was in third grade and was good at math, but she could not read. Now, her math scores were going down because her teacher was giving more and more word problems. Not fair, thought Jenna. Math was math, not reading.

Jenna was done cleaning the house. "Good job, Jenna," she whispered to herself. She sat on the stool near the window and stared outside. She saw Mrs. Quemada taking out her trash. She liked Mrs. Quemada's kids and ate dinner with them a few times. Jenna quit being friends with them when Mom ordered her to stay away, because

*Continued on page 27*

# Family Finding

with Richard Villasana

## In This Edition:

### Hispanic Foster Kid's Rights Are Being Violated



**Richard Villasana**, a proud Navy veteran, is a leading international authority on reuniting children in U.S. foster care with their relatives.

Villasana is an author and international speaker who has been featured by the San Diego Business Journal, the Union-Tribune Radio Network show, San Diego Finest Business Radio, and EFE, the world's largest Spanish language media company.

He is the founder of Forever Homes for Foster Kids. For more than 20 years, the organization has been building stronger families and communities by locating relatives of foster children so they can move out of foster care into forever homes.

Forever Homes for Foster Kids has handled foster care cases for several agencies and nonprofits including Casey Family Programs, Seneca Center and CASA of Travis County in Texas.

Villasana's insights on locating families have been taught to social workers around the country. He specializes in cross-cultural and "family finding" training for universities, social service agencies and nonprofits. To have Villasana speak to your company, school or association, email him at [info@ForeverHomesforFosterKids.org](mailto:info@ForeverHomesforFosterKids.org).

Visit [www.ForeverHomesforFosterKids.org](http://www.ForeverHomesforFosterKids.org) to become part of the growing number of supporters of foster children because every child deserves a forever home and a happier, healthier life.

Contact Richard via email at [rvillasana@FindFamiliesInMexico.org](mailto:rvillasana@FindFamiliesInMexico.org)

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September 16th begins Hispanic Heritage Month. According to CNN, Hispanics "are the largest minority in the United States" with more than 58.6 million people or one out of every six people you will meet today. Roughly two-thirds of Latinos are of Mexican ancestry.

While you may know these statistics, you may not be aware of the tens of thousands of Latino foster children whose civil rights have been and continue to be violated year after year by foster care agencies.

The vast majority of Hispanic foster children are U.S. citizens and not the children that are reported to have been brought across the U.S.-Mexican border. The only "crime" these foster kids have committed is being Latino. As such, these American-born children are entitled to their civil rights. Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII), this federal law makes it illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex. The civil rights of Latino foster children are being violated specifically because of their Hispanic ancestry.

The Fostering Connections Act of 2008 (FCA) Sec. 103 Notification of Relatives of the Fostering Connections Act of 2008 states:

"... that, within 30 days after the removal of a child from the custody of the parent or parents of the child, the State shall exercise due diligence to identify and provide notice to all adult grandparents and other adult relatives of the child (including any other adult relatives suggested by the parents), subject to exceptions due to family or domestic violence..."

Many states have since passed foster care laws with similar wording - in part to qualify to receive federal funding to support family finding efforts. These states receive millions of dollars in federal aid that is then passed on to county foster care agencies and contracted non-profits. The majority of offices have some process in place for performing family finding due diligence. Some even have a well-oiled machine that does exceptional work.

Agencies are also able to take advantage of massive national databases at very economic costs from companies such as Intelius and LexisNexis. When you put together the resources available to foster care agencies, it should be no surprise that offices get about an 85% success rate when searching for a foster child's family members. Of course, this success relies heavily on a foster child having two parents whose relatives have been in the U.S. for generations.

Knowing the whereabouts of both parents is critically important because the laws have been written to protect the rights of parents. This concerns aspects of their children's lives ranging from their daily diet, doctor visits, school attended, and outside activities. For example, California Regulations under the Welfare and Institutions Code 302 (b) state:

"Unless their parental rights have been terminated, both parents shall be notified of all proceedings involving the child... The social worker shall also provide both parents, whether custodial or noncustodial, or any guardian, or the counsel for the parent or guardian a copy of the report prior to the hearing, either personally or by first-class mail."

Unfortunately, tens of thousands of Hispanic foster children are not so lucky. Despite being U.S. citizens, these kids often have a grandparent, other family members or even a parent who is still living outside the U.S. While some foster kids can provide their case worker with names, addresses and phone numbers of relatives, many others have little to no information about their family members living abroad. To make matters even more challenging, a parent may, as some do, provide inaccurate information on the whereabouts of the other parent or their relatives.

Agencies also have to contend with other issues when a case involves a Hispanic child. Legal documents may be Spanish. The names of family members will be in Spanish, and they will have two last names. Relatively few case workers read or understand Spanish. To give you an idea of how critical the situation is, in 2011 a grand jury delivered a

scathing report about the Napa County California's child welfare services. In a county where one-third of the residents are Hispanic, the agencies only had two employees who were bilingually certified.

However, despite any obstacles, foster care agencies are still mandated to "provide notice to all adult grandparents and other adult relatives of the child." Yet foster children of Hispanic ancestry are most likely being discriminated against because agencies are either not performing due diligence in locating and notifying family members, or are performing what could be considered deficient diligence because of the national origin of these children.

Remember that these local agencies are receiving millions of dollars to locate a foster child's family members. If someone says they will do a job and then just takes the money without providing the service, that's theft. Unfortunately, that is what is happening in foster care offices across the country.

Right now you may be thinking, "But it's going to cost so much money to find those relatives." The argument by agencies that it's too costly to locate relatives of a Latino foster child is groundless. Each year a child spends in a group home can cost as much as \$84,000. These high numbers are supported in the decisive report, "Institutions vs. Foster Homes: The Empirical Base for a Century of Action," which states:

"The costs of institutional care far exceed those for foster care or treatment foster care. The difference in monthly cost can be 6 to 10 times as high as foster care."

So let's say it costs \$1,000 to find a child's relatives in Mexico. For the \$84,000 that would be spent on a single year of foster care for one child, the relatives of 84 children could be found, saving the state almost \$7 million (\$6,972,000) per year. Our organization, Forever Homes for Foster Kids, specializes in such cases. Our success rate is about 78% in such cases (65 children), representing a potential savings of more than \$5.7 million (\$5,770,800) per year.

Foster care agencies don't have to spend thousands ramping up efforts to do family finding abroad. Just as they do for family finding in the U. S., counties can contract out the work. So why don't they? It's because – sad to say – in too many foster care agencies, a Latino child isn't seen as

being as deserving as a non-Latino child, and it appears that these agencies have decided that Latino kids aren't worth the effort to find their families.

An official with the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, admitted to me in a private conversation that the rights of Hispanic foster youths are likely being violated. The worst part of this terrible crisis is that, as far as we know, no Latino organization has stepped up to address these civil rights violations on behalf of the 80,000 Hispanic children in foster care.

But there are ways to help. What can you do? Write and share a post on social media. Call your local politician. Look for solutions. My purpose in writing this column is the hope that you, the reader, will share this with others. Maybe this time next year, organizations such as the League of United

Latin American Citizens (LULAC), La Raza or other Hispanic groups will become involved.

Family finding clearly and quickly moves the needle from desperate to hopeful, from a child's despair to the promise of a better life. This life change doesn't need to take months or years; it can happen within weeks. One day a child is alone, and the next they are talking with their aunt, grandmother or older sibling.

All foster children deserve to be treated equally. Parents and relatives can be found! Each child can be given the opportunity to be placed with a loving, caring family member instead of left to languish for years under the care of a government entity. Taking away their chance at a brighter future simply because these foster children are of Hispanic ancestry is obscene.



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## Building Alliances - Preserving Families

# More About Foster Parent Retention

By **Dr. John DeGarmo**  
*Foster Focus Contributor*

Retention is an ever challenging issue for foster care agencies; the retention of keeping good, positive, and healthy foster parents.

According to 58 % of foster parents surveyed, foster parents feel that they do not receive the training or the resources they need from their caseworkers. To be sure, that is a troubling percentage, and may help to explain why retaining foster parents is an issue today. Yet, is that the only reason why? Why is there a problem with retaining good foster parents? Why do so many agencies across the nation, both state funded and private, struggle with the challenge of foster parent retention? Over 400 foster parents from across the nation in 2016 took part in a survey conducted by *The Foster Care Institute*. The makeup of survey participants included a wide range of experienced foster parents. 8% of those surveyed had only been foster parenting for one year or less. 34% of foster parents surveyed had been fostering between 1 and 5 years. 29% taking part in the survey had been foster parents between 6 and 10 years, and an additional 29% had been caring for children in foster care in their homes for over 10 years.

The survey found that foster parents feel very strongly about the relationships they have with their child's caseworker. We shall examine the results of the survey in full in this regard. First, though, let us look further at the description of a caseworker.

One of the key elements to retaining foster parents is the relationship they have with their caseworkers. Indeed, foster parents often rely upon their caseworkers for a great many things, including support, training, assistance, updates, and much more. In order to be a truly successful foster parent, one will need to work closely with one's foster child's caseworker and the child welfare agency.

It is important for the well being of each child in foster care that foster parents work alongside the caseworker and the agency, and help to build an effective partnership and strong working relationship with both. With this strong relationship, each will have a much better chance of guiding the child in need through the many difficulties and challenges he will face, as well as work together to see that his future is as bright and successful as possible. To be sure, this is a team, and how a team works together is important for success.

Caseworkers have a most difficult job, as they work in what is a difficult and stressful environment. While your foster child is your main focus in regards to the child welfare agency, caseworkers have a large amount of children in their caseload. They will see, on a daily basis, children who have been abused and neglected. They will have the responsibility of taking a child out of a home, against the strong wishes, and sometimes hostile conditions, of both child and parent. They will be required to work with the birth parents, instructing them how they can be reunited with their child. At times, caseworkers will sit in a courtroom, as attorneys and birth parents battle over the custody of a child. The amount of paperwork that corresponds with each caseload can be daunting, as well.

A caseworker is an employee of the child welfare agency who is assigned to the foster child, generally for the entire time the child is placed under the care of the agency. Caseworkers will work in conjunction with the state, as well as the court system, as they place the child into a foster home. The caseworker selects a foster home placement for the child, attempting to find the best suitable home situation for both the foster child and the foster parent. Foster children are often enrolled in a new school when assigned a caseworker to assist them in the foster care process. Eventual reunification with their parents and family is the hoped for goal. Caseworkers are specifically trained to provide mental health relief, as they often work with troubled children. Caseworkers ensure that the medical needs of the child are met.

Caseworkers are required to visit the home of each foster child once a month in an attempt to see how the foster child is progressing, as well as to gather information from the foster parents and answer any questions they might have.

Caseworkers also work alongside the child's teachers, therapists, doctors, and any other caregiver. A caseworker will often times have to testify in a juvenile court of law in regards to the safety of the home the foster child is placed in, as well as provide information about the child.

Difficult working conditions, poor compensation, larger caseloads due to reductions in staff, and the responsibilities of providing continuous support to the birth parents, foster children, and foster parents result in many caseworkers failing to continue employment in this line of work past the first year.

Along with this, caseworkers often deal with children who have serious behavioral problems, and those children who are emotionally depressed due to the situation they are in.

Caseworkers may also have to work with angry birth parents who blame the child welfare agency, or even the caseworkers themselves, for the removal of their child, or for their own personal issues.

Trust between a foster parent and a caseworker is essential to the wellbeing of the relationship. 66% of those surveyed by *The Foster Parent Institute* indicate that they feel their case worker trusts them, while 70% feel as if their case worker

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respects them. 20% feel as if they are not respected nor appreciated by their caseworkers. When it comes to feeling comfortable enough in regards to approaching a caseworker with a problem or concern, 57% feel comfortable in doing so, while 41% hesitate or do not feel comfortable enough.

As indicated earlier, over 50% of foster parents feel that they do not receive the information and resources that they need in a timely manner.

Along with that, those foster parents surveyed also feel that they do not hear from their caseworkers enough. 54% state they only have contact or communication from their caseworker once a month, with only 21% stating they hear from the caseworker more than once a month.

When asked if they feel included in and all decision making in regards to the child in their home, only 24% feel that they do, while 47% state that they sometimes do, and 29% stated that they never do.

During this survey, The Foster Care Institute asked foster parents, *"What does your caseworker do that helps you the most?"*, a number of varied responses were received.

*Following are a sample of these responses:*

#3 "He trusts us I guess? We do not see him or hear from him very often."

#7 "Nothing."

#11 "Listens, asks questions, and spends sufficient time in my home."

#14 "She is very up front about her direction with the case."

#15 "Explains what's happening, steps ahead, and role of the various people involved.."

#26 "When the caseworker keeps us up to date on the plan; when the caseworker refers us to resources like foster parents night out; and when the caseworker volunteers to help with paying for extracurricular, like swimming lessons."

#32 "Nothing at all."

#35 "Attends court and keeps us updated on changes."

#43 "It's hard to get in contact with them."

#48 "Nothing. She was a complete waste. She even said, I don't do paperwork! She never followed thru on anything. She lied."

#55 "Takes an interest in our child, family, and then answers our questions or finds answers to our questions (he is a great advocate)."

*When asked "How can your child's caseworker help you better?" some of the responses included:*

#6 "Return my phone calls or emails in a timely manner, i.e. 24 hrs."

#7 "He can communicate with us more and visit child more often."

#8 "Be more forthcoming with information."

#14 "Sometimes, not all workers put himself in the child's position, as in having a normal childhood and being able to participate in activities. Usually it is just a yes or no reply instead of seeing what can be done to involve children in activities."

#15 "Pay attention to case plan and make sure it's appropriate."

#16 "Check in a little more often. Maybe once a week, shoot an email or text just to let the foster parent know they are available and care."

#23 "Respond to emails in a more timely manner, especially for health-related concerns."

#28 "I have the most amazing caseworker she can do no better! Really lucky."

#56 "Better communication - Just respond when an email is sent promptly, even if it's "I'm tied up, but will get back to you within 48 hours..."

#62 "More information on child before placement, specific information/training as situations arise (self-harm, etc.)"

Finally, foster parents were asked "What would you like to say about your child's caseworker, and your working relationship?" Some of these responses are as follows.

#1 "He backs us up on the tough decisions we need to give the children to help them

learn healthy boundaries."

#11 "They could be more understanding of what we foster parents go through with these teens and less judgmental of us too. And when we advocate for our teens don't be so nasty to us."

#22 "We have traditionally had a very warm relationship with our caseworker.

But, overnight, the case worker got a new supervisor, and all of the sudden, the relationship got very icy. The case worker, who had previously praised our care when we followed up for extra services for our child, all of the sudden chastised us for getting a specialist medical opinion without her prior consent. (It turned out that we did get her consent -- she just forgot.)

She also started refusing to tell us what the agency's plan was for the case. All of this changed without any explanation. When the caseworker turns on a dime like that, and refuses to share information about what the agency is doing, it makes us feel like we're not part of the team, and makes us want to quit fostering."

#47 "Current caseworker keeps me informed and tells me if she can't tell me something. She treats me as part of the team. Past caseworkers did not keep me informed and appeared to resent any input I gave."

#54 "Feel like she doesn't value my time or opinion."

#61 "It is strained; I have to overlook her rude comments."

#62 "I feel that our case worker does not listen or value the input we give her. She puts it off indicating that everything we see relating to our foster child behavior is due to transition rather than considering that it just may be due to the fact that his birth mother beat the daylights out of him."

#63 "It is good. Most importantly my caseworker really seems to care. Her caseload may be too great and that is why she can't be more proactive."

#81 "They are heavily worked, just like the foster parents. Thank you for all that you do."

Like any healthy relationship, it is important that the relationship with between foster child's caseworker and the foster parent

is an open one, and is built on trust and mutual respect.

It is important that foster parents share all information with the caseworker and the agency about the child in care.

Caseworkers have the responsibility of documenting everything when it comes to each of the foster children in their caseload. Foster parents should not be afraid of holding any information or concerns.

Instead, the more they share with the caseworker, and the more honest they are, the stronger this important partnership will become, which only benefits the wellbeing of the child.



**Dr. John DeGarmo** is an international expert on foster care. He has been a foster parent for 15 years, now, and he and his wife have had over 50 children come through their home. He is a consultant to foster care agencies, child welfare organizations, and legal firms, as well as a speaker and trainer on many topics about the foster care system.

He is the author of several foster care books, including *The Foster Parenting Manual: A Practical Guide to Creating a Loving, Safe, and Stable Home* and writes for several publications. He can be contacted at

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# 2018 Aging Out Institute Awards

By Lynn Tonini, M.Ed., CPLP  
*Foster Focus Contributor*

## About the Founder

I've always been an optimist - a silver lining, light at the end of the tunnel, glass is half full kind of person. Even when I was young and was placed in the North Carolina foster care system with my younger sister (I was in 10th grade and she was in 9th), I was able to tap into my optimism and remain hopeful for the future. First, we were put in a group home for a few months, leaving the school where we had attended for years and saying goodbye to all our childhood friends. Then we were moved to an emergency shelter where two year-long beds had opened up, and we lived there for several more months. In the middle of my junior year, our uncle was able to make arrangements for us to move from North Carolina to Maryland, where we moved in with our grandmother, changing schools yet again. However, she felt she was too old to take care of two teenagers, and in the summer before my senior year, my uncle again stepped in and made arrangements for us to move in with his in-laws (my aunt's brother and sister-in-law). This couple - whose children were grown and out of the house, happened to be foster parents at the time. They took in babies who were placed in foster care until custody decisions were made. We didn't know them, but they opened their home and took us in, and I am happy to say that we have been part of their family ever since.

With our extended family's support, my sister and I both graduated from high school. Of course, I think that was going to happen anyway as I was obsessed with getting A's in school. I think that may have been because it was the one thing that I felt I could control in my life, or it could have been that my mother instilled in us the importance of education before things went bad...or maybe a combination of the two. In fact, we both went on to college, as well, and we had our foster parents' home to come back to over breaks and the summer. After I finished college, I moved in with my father and found a job in Maryland while my sister finished college in Pennsylvania. (My father had been estranged since I was 7 years old, but we got back in touch and decided to try to repair the relationship.) My sister and I then got an apartment together and I found stable employment at Milton Hershey School, a residential school in Pennsylvania for at-risk youth. I could go on, but you get the point - we had family rooting for us and helping us when we aged out, and with that support, both my sister and I were able to transition to adulthood successfully.

## About Aging Out Institute

We were among the fortunate ones. As you know, too many youth in foster care do not have much, if any, support when they leave the system and they struggle tremendously with the transition to adulthood. That is why I started Aging Out Institute (AOI) in 2010. I wanted to give back. I wanted to create a way to connect foster youth across the country with resources that can help them prepare for aging out and that will support them after they age out.

AOI is a website that serves as a central repository for resources (programs, nonprofit organizations, projects, tools, training, events, etc.) designed to help youth age out of foster care and into adulthood successfully. AOI provides resources primarily for four groups of people:

1. Foster youth approaching the age of 18
2. Former foster youth who recently aged out of the system
3. Foster parents
4. Professionals who work with foster youth (e.g., social workers, psychologists, guidance counselors)

The database of resources that the AOI website houses is continually growing as organizations find out about AOI and add information about their programs and services through the website's submission form. I have been quite pleased with the progress, but I still want to do more. I want to raise awareness about aging out of foster care, but not necessarily about all the challenges and difficulties that youth face when they age out. I see plenty of stories about the hard time these youth have when they leave care. No, what I want to do is to align my work with my optimistic nature and focus on the good things - the success stories.

## Resilience, Knowledge, Skills and Support

Although the statistics for youth aging out of foster care are grim and so many struggle with homelessness or unstable housing, drug addiction, early parenthood, etc., we know there are foster youth out there who are successfully aging out of care. This doesn't mean that they are having an easy go of it. I don't know if it is ever easy to leave home and start life on your own. However, the successful youth are more proactive, make decent choices, and work through the challenges that come up. So the question is...why do some foster youth succeed when so many don't? Although many of these youth may have a resilient nature that enable them to handle their circumstances with strength and positivity, resilience alone is not enough to succeed when trying to live on your own. They also must have the knowledge and skills necessary to live an independent life, as well as at least one supportive adult who can help them make good choices.

This is where the adults in their lives do (or at least should) make the difference. While youth are in care, foster parents have the opportunity to teach them the knowledge and skills they will need to be successful in adulthood, including things such as how to apply for college, how to look for a job, and how to apply for an apartment. They can teach from experience, utilize packaged life skills programs that help guide foster parents through the teaching process, and/or partner with organizations that have services designed to help prepare youth for adulthood. After aging out, youth have the opportunity to take advantage of services that organizations or states offer to support them as they figure out life on their own. These organizations' services are varied and include helping youth get into and complete college or other vocational programs, transitional housing, life skills training, help finding employment, and connecting youth with mentors. The idea situation is for foster youth to have engaged foster parents who take the time to help teach them about the things they need to know and be able to do in order to live on their own, organizations with solid support strategies to lean on after they leave the foster home, and a strong relationship with at least one supportive adult who would be there for them before and during their transition to independent living.

### The AOI Awards Program

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With several years of experience running an annual global awards program focused on identifying and sharing effective workforce training strategies, I knew that I could leverage my background and design, develop and implement an annual awards program for AOI. So, I decided to move forward and started planning in early 2017.

The goal of this awards program is to identify and share effective strategies that foster parents and organizations are using to help prepare youth to age out and support them after they age out. The awards program isn't a research study, and I don't claim that the awards program will identify the global "best practices" in foster care. Rather, I want to use the awards program to get down to ground level and find out exactly what is being done on a day-to-day basis to help youth age out successfully. For example, I want to find out which tools or programs are being used, what organizations foster parents are partnering with, at what age certain skills are taught, how youth are practicing their new skills, what kind of follow up is being done to see if the youth are applying what they've learned, and so on.

As mentioned, foster parents and organizations play a critical role in ensuring that youth can succeed out in the world after they leave foster care. AOI wants to call out these hard working professionals and publicly thank them for their dedication and creativity. In addition, we want to identify and share their successful strategies with the foster care community. If certain strategies are working for the winning foster parents and organizations, then they could work for others in the foster care community, too.

### Application Categories

Research studies focused on youth aging out of foster care show that there are key factors that impact long-term independent living success. These factors include 1) completing their education, 2) finding steady employment, 3) acquiring stable housing, and 4) having a strong, supportive relationship with an adult (or adults) who can help them through the transition. In the AOI Awards Program, there will be awards for both foster parents and organizations that are using strategies in one or more of these four categories to successfully prepare youth for aging out of foster care. There will also be awards for organizations that are using successful strategies to support youth after they have aged out.

This awards program is not one in which people nominate others for an award.

Rather, foster parents and organizations must apply on their own behalf, submitting a detailed description of their programs, services or strategies that help foster youth age out of care. If you are a foster parent or work for an organization that is helping youth move through the transition to adulthood successfully, be bold and apply!

To give you an idea of what we'd be looking for, here are a few examples of the types of strategies that foster parents and organizations would describe in the awards application:

- *Education: Strategies* to help youth understand the importance of education, finish high school, get a GED, get into college, trade school or vocational program, prepare for life in college, finish college, etc.
- *Employment: Strategies* to help youth understand the importance of steady employment, find job opportunities, interview for a job, attain a job, keep a job, etc.
- *Housing: Strategies* to help youth understand the importance of stable housing, provide transitional housing, find an apartment, ask the right questions of landlords, read a rental agreement, find roommates, budget to pay rent, etc.
- *Relationships: Strategies* to help youth understand the importance of having a supportive adult relationship in their life, connect with a family member or mentor who can serve as their support person, etc.

If the strategies to help the youth in one category cross over or directly support strategies in one of the other three categories, there will be space on the applications to explain the connection. Each category will be reviewed by different judges, and it is possible to win more than one award if the judges in different categories independently select the same foster parents or organizations for an award. Because of this, we encourage foster parents and organizations to apply for as many categories as they can.

### Schedule

The awards program is currently in development. Although the 2018 timeframe and process is outlined below, the AOI web-

site will continually be updated as the program details are developed throughout the remainder of 2017.

- January-February: Award applications and instructions will be posted on the website. Applicants will go to the AOI website to download the application(s).
- March-June: A panel of judges will review the applications and select the winners.
- July: Awards will be ordered and press releases will be written.
- August: Winners will be announced.
- September-December: Winning strategies will be written up as white papers.
- December: Winning strategy white papers will be shared with the foster care community on the AOI website.

### Judges

The eight individuals who make up the panel of judges for the awards program are all experienced researchers and/or practitioners in the field of foster care. There is even a former foster youth and a foster parent on the panel. The judges for the 2018 AOI Awards Program are listed below with the category that they will be judging noted at the end of their biographies.

**Chris Chmielewski** is a former foster youth and the Owner/Editor/Creator of Foster Focus Magazine. After leaving care,

Chris found himself at a loss for information on foster care and its after effects. He came to the conclusion that a monthly magazine devoted to foster care was needed. Established in 2011, he has since positioned the magazine as a top resource for foster care news and information in America. He currently handles all aspects of the magazine while traveling the country covering stories, attending conferences and events in support of the magazine. (Employment)

**Dr. John DeGarmo** is a leading international expert in foster care. Dr. John is a consultant to several foster care agencies and to law firms across the nation, and is a popular speaker and trainer on all things foster care. He is the founder of The Foster Care Institute, as well as the residential group home Never Too Late, a home for boys in foster care in Georgia. He has also been a foster parent for 14 years, now, and has cared for over 50 children, and have adopted three from foster care. (Housing)

**Dr. Amy Dworsky** is a Research Fellow at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago whose research has focused on vulnerable youth populations. Her research interests include youth aging out of foster care, pregnant and parenting foster youth and youth experiencing homelessness. She is currently the Principal Investigator for an implementation evaluation of a home visiting pilot program for pregnant and parenting youth in foster care and is a Co-Investigator for Voices of Youth Count, a national research and policy initiative focused on runaway, homeless and unsta-

bly housed youth. (Housing)

**Dr. Johanna Greeson** is an Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy & Practice. She is passionate about using research to build better futures for youth who age out of foster care, and realizing the power of connections to caring adults for all vulnerable youth. Her research agenda is based in the strengths that enable foster youth to not only survive, but thrive. She is committed to ending the aging out crisis through innovative intervention development that prioritizes interdependence over independence. (Relationships)

**Dr. Judy Havlicek** is an Associate Professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Illinois in Urbana Champaign. Her research has focused on systemic barriers to well-being of foster youth without permanence. In order to better understand child welfare system barriers, she has used child welfare administrative data in Illinois to uncover the real life experiences of foster youth with respect to maltreatment allegations prior to and during foster care, placement moves and other adverse events, and receipt of services (i.e. vocational training, mental health, etc.). (Employment)

**Susan Punnett** is the Executive Director of Family & Youth Initiative, a DC based non-profit that helps teens at risk of aging out of foster care develop lasting relationships with caring adults. She has twenty years of experience in child welfare and related social services. Prior to founding Family and Youth Initiative, she served for five years as Director of the Kidsave Weekend Miracles DC program, piloting a new approach to helping older children in foster care find adoptive families with funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (Relationships)

**Tina Raheem** is the Director of Scholarships and Grants at Foster Care to Success. Ms. Raheem joined Foster Care to Success in 2000, and under her management the FC2S Scholarship Programs have seen over 800 students receive their degrees – a 61 percent graduation rate. She has also helped to develop the Academic Success Coaching Program, and has authored three books on academic success and independent living for foster youth and mentors. Ms. Raheem is a graduate of The Catholic University of America. (Education)

Award Category	Preparation Before Aging Out: Foster Parents & Organizations	Support After Aging Out: Organizations
Education	 	
Employment	 	
Housing	 	
Relationships	 	

**Steve Walsh** is the Director of the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at California State University, Bakersfield. For the past 20 years, Mr. Walsh has served in EOP and Summer Bridge—a transitional program for admitting first-generation, low-income, high-potential students. Since 2011, he has been the Director of the Guardian Scholars Program, which provides housing support and independent living curriculum for former foster youth. He believes that higher education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty that affects a disproportionate number of young people in California's San Joaquin Valley. (Education)

We are very excited that they have joined the AOI team to judge the inaugural awards program, but why did they do it? It will take time and energy to review and judge all the applications, and these are all very busy people, so something must have struck them as being important about this awards program. Well, here are quotes from two of them that might shed some light on their motivation:

*"I don't think we fully understand the experience of fostering for older adolescents who developmentally are gaining independence and trying to figure out who they are and who they will become. Recognizing and acknowledging the hard work and commitment of those that do this work is critical to developing understanding of how to do this better than we do. Foster parents and other organizations have a lot to teach the field. Recognizing their hard work is the first step in this process."*  
-Judy Havlicek, Ph.D.

*"Today's youth in foster care face many challenges and difficulties when they age out of the system. It is important for them to realize that there are, indeed, people who care about them, that there are people who want to help them, and that there are people who are cheering them on to succeed."* -John DeGarmo, Ed.D.

### Getting the Word Out

We know there are many foster parents and organizations across the country that are doing great things to help foster youth age out of foster care, and we definitely want them to apply for an award. However, if they don't know about this awards program, they will miss this great opportunity. So, I am asking you - the readers of Foster Focus Magazine - to please share the link to the

AOI website page that describes the award program with your own networks. Tell colleagues about it. Tell foster parents about it. Let's spread the word far and wide so that the AOI Awards Program - even in its inaugural year - receives dozens of dozens of applications and its results are anxiously anticipated throughout all 50 states! Being the optimistic person I am, I'm sure we can do it!

[www.agingoutinstitute.org](http://www.agingoutinstitute.org)



*After being placed in foster care at age 15 and aging out at 18, **Lynn Tonini** went on to earn a BA from Gettysburg College in Psychology. She worked over 12 years at Milton Hershey School (MHS), a residential K-12 school for at-risk children in PA, where she developed an interest in training and development. She earned a Master's of Education from the Pennsylvania State University while at MHS, and spent a few years working on the team that provided training for the Houseparents. She then moved into a career in corporate training for employers and clients in a variety of industries. During that time, she spent five years running an awards program that recognized corporate training organizations from around the world for their successful employee learning strategies. She began Aging Out Institute in 2010, and continues to focus on broadening its services and impact.*

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# FASHION FOR

By **Jennifer Reiser**

*Foster Focus Contributor*

(Brooklyn, NY)—HeartShare St. Vincent's hosted its "Slay II" Fashion Show featuring and benefitting its young men and women in foster care at Sanders Studios on Thursday, July 13.

For young men and women in care, walking down the runway is a staging area for confidence in college and career. "I've seen my friends model and enter competitions. I've always wanted to try it," shared Ericka, who is completing her Associate's degree at LaGuardia Community College. "I gained the confidence I need to get started in broadcast journalism," she said.

Another American Dream Program (ADP) Scholar Timothy, who has participated in the "Slay" event for the past two years, developed confidence that he brought back to the classroom. Studying business this past year, Timothy found that his favorite class is public speaking.

The event raised funds for youth development programming, including HSVS American Dream tuition scholarships for college and vocational school. Youth Development Programs also connect young people in foster care to much needed resources, like in-house workshops on how to budget, cook and manage the competing demands of college life.

In addition to the runway show, the sixteen participating models performed a spoken word selection. The event also featured "Cocktails for a Cause," a social hour hosted by the HSVS Junior Board, a group of young professionals volunteering their time to support the agency's development and programming efforts.

Former ADP Scholar and founder of Foster

*The "Slay II" Fashion Show is a staging area for success in college and career.*

*Ericka has been inspired to pursue a career in broadcast journalism.*



# FOSTER CARE

Care Unplugged, Melody Centeno was a leading organizing force behind the “Slay II” event. Some of New York based designers and stylists who offered their time and couture, include Ann Claire Millinery & AYEWONSI, Dleak Bow, Rockthaloock and Shannon Shenone. NYC Administration for Children’s Services (ACS) Commissioner David Hansell and Councilman Stephen Levin also attended to support our youth.

For more photos from the event, take a look at our Facebook album. To contribute to HSVS Youth Development Programs, including the American Dream Program, please visit [hsvsnyc.org/take-action/donate](http://hsvsnyc.org/take-action/donate)

HeartShare St. Vincent’s Services had over 200 guests at its “Slay II” Fashion Show on Thursday, July 13 at Sanders Studios, featuring young men and women in care.

HeartShare St. Vincent’s American Dream Scholar Timothy, who studied business this past year at LaGuardia Community College, brought his confidence from the runway to his public speaking class.

## **About HeartShare St. Vincent’s Services:**

*HeartShare St. Vincent’s Services (HSVS) empowers children, individuals and families to overcome the challenges of family crises, addiction, mental illness and poverty. Working together, HSVS opens new doors of opportunity to help clients achieve healthy and happy lives.*

*With four programmatic divisions - Foster Care and Preventive Programs; Integrated Health Services; Residential and Housing Programs; Youth Development and Community Programs - HSVS staff members serve over 6,000 New Yorkers each year, including over 2,700 of the city’s most vulnerable youth. This continuum of serv-*



*HeartShare St. Vincent’s American Dream Scholar Timothy, who studied business this past year at LaGuardia Community College, brought his confidence from the runway to his public speaking class.*

es enables HSVS to meet clients' unique circumstances and needs, equipping them with tools and skills needed to achieve their dreams.

By offering a stable home, a safe place to go after school, a means to graduate college and the skills to achieve physical and mental well-being, HSVS equalizes opportunities for those who need it most.

HSVS is proud that 90% of all revenue directly supports our programs and services.

Follow us on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter @hsvsnyc.



(left to right) NYC ACS Commissioner David Hansell and Councilman Stephen Levin were among the community supporters at the "Slay II" event on Thursday, July 13th. HeartShare St. Vincent's Services Executive Director Dawn Saffayeh at center.

[www.hsvsnyc.org](http://www.hsvsnyc.org)



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Call 1.800.388.3888 or visit [www.CovenantHouse.org](http://www.CovenantHouse.org)





# WE ARE KIDS, NOT TRASH

JOIN US AS WE WORK TO REPLACE TRASH BAGS WITH SUITCASES

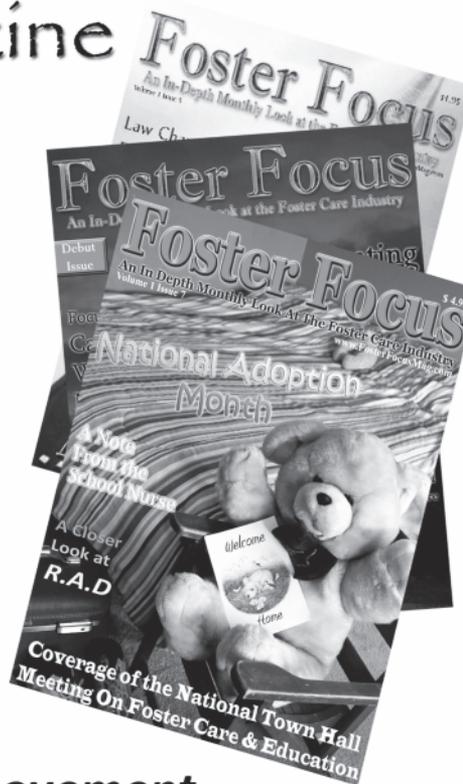
[WWW.TOGETHERWERISE.ORG](http://WWW.TOGETHERWERISE.ORG)  
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**TOGETHER  
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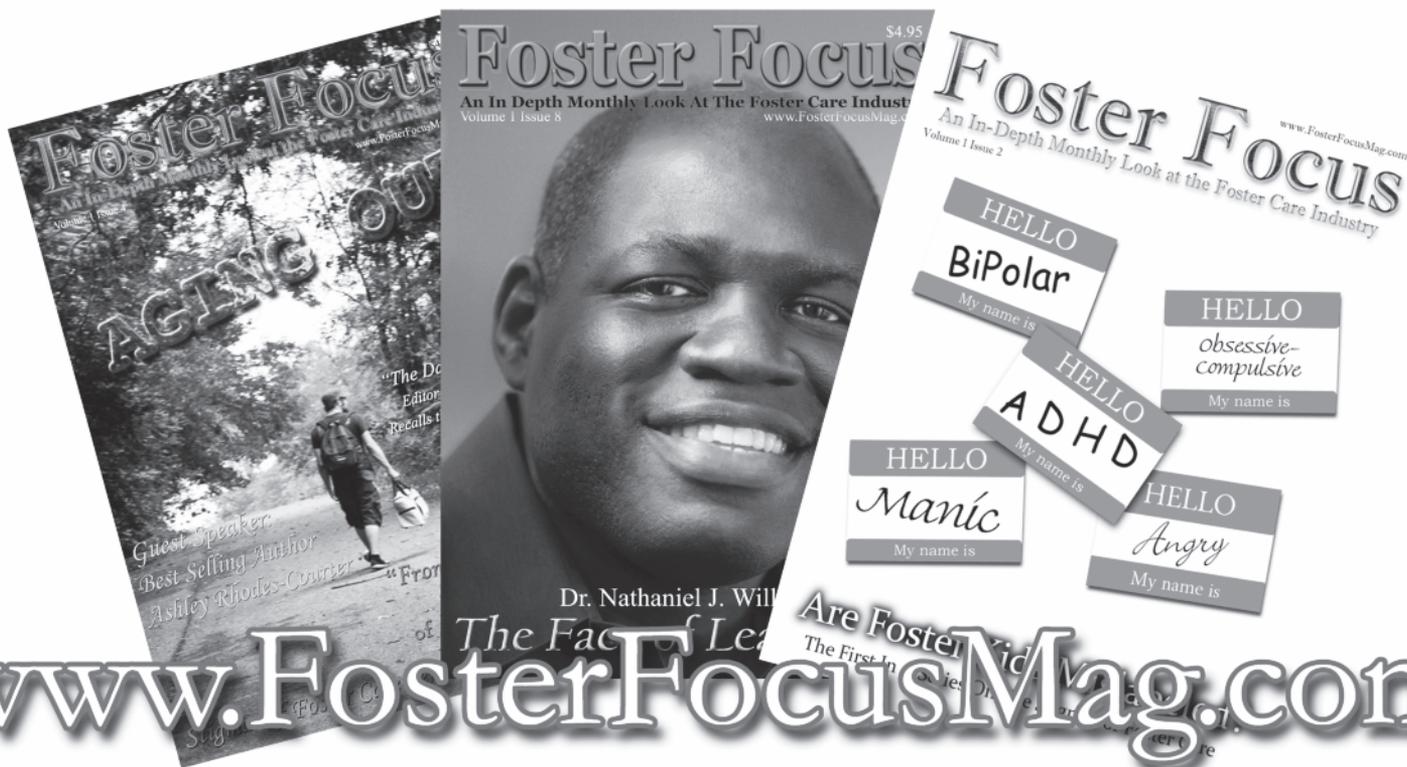
*Created & Edited by a former foster youth to help those involved in the foster care system receive as much foster care news and information as possible.*



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*Continued from page 11*

Mrs. Quemada asked too many questions: Why do your Mom and Dad leave you alone so much? Don't you get scared? Why do you miss so much school?

"Uh oh!" said Mom when Jenna told her. Mom put her hands on her hips and said, "That is none of her business. She doesn't get to tell me how to run my family. I bet she's the one who called the cops on us."

Mrs. Quemada was not the only person who asked what Mom called "nosers questions." Her teacher was always asking her, "Why do you miss so much school? Is your Mom sick? Or is she always so hyper?"

Nosers!

When Dad said they wanted to take her away to a different family and never let her see her real parents again, Jenna promised herself she'd work harder at being a good girl.

More than anything she longed for a friend or a sister. Mom threw a fit the only time she brought a classmate home from school. "What is she doing here?" Mom shouted. "Is she spying on us? Why does she need to know what we're doing? Is she some kind of a noser?" The girl ran out the front door to her house across the street. Jenna cheeks burned with the force of her embarrassment.

Once she found a doll in an alley on the way home from the store It was dirty. I'll clean it off real good! And she did. She pretended she was holding a baby brother or sister. "I'll take good care of you," she whispered.

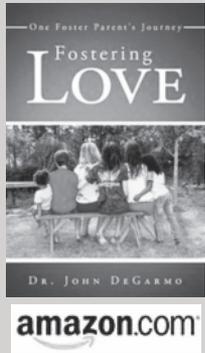
She tried to hide the doll from Mom and Dad, but Dad caught her and bellowed, "Throw that dirty thing away!" She wrapped the doll in an old towel and carefully placed it in a battered cardboard box. She left the box in the same alley where she found it. She hoped somebody would find the baby doll and take good care of her.

A police car drove down the street, very slowly. The officer inside was glancing around at the houses. Jenna leaned back away from the window, hoping he would not see her. Dad had told her to never look a police officer or deputy sheriff in the eye. It only attracts attention, and you never want to attract attention. She ducked down when the squad car stopped in front of their house. He was looking for someone. Jenna smiled when he drove away.

She walked carefully through the kitchen, carefully stepping over the holes in the floor. "The kitchen floor has potholes," Mom would say, like it was funny. The floor was a rubbery plastic patchwork of tiles with lots of blue and brown patterns. Jenna remembered waking up at two in the morning once. Her Father, yelling and pounding on the floor with a hammer, woke her. There were eight layers of gunky tile, too much for Dad to pry up. She lay down on the couch and pretended to sleep but really so she could spy on Dad and make sure he didn't hurt himself. As the sun rose, Dad yelled some more and threw the hammer on the floor, then gave up and went to bed. Jenna would pick at the tiles every once in a while, wishing she knew how to fix it.

The house was cold, she realized. The power was not working. Mom was really mad at Dad a few days ago about that. "You didn't pay the bill." She grabbed one of her Mother's sweaters. Mom was short, and Jenna was tall so it sort of fit. The gas still worked so she opened the door to the stove, placed a chair in front of it and turned on the oven. A few minutes in front of the open door of the hot oven would be enough. A few heavy raindrops clattered on the roof. Suddenly, the rain began hammering down hard on the house. Jenna was warm now. She turned off the oven, strode into the front room, and lay down on the couch, wishing she could sleep through the day the way Mom and Dad did.





### DR. JOHN DEGARMO

Dr. John DeGarmo has been a foster parent for 10 years, now, and he and his wife have had over 40 children come through their home.

Dr. DeGarmo wrote his dissertation on fostering, entitled *Responding to the Needs of Foster Children in Rural Schools*.



Children suffering from abuse. Neglect. Malnutrition. Even drug-related problems passed on from a mother's addiction. Children rejected by those who were to love them most, their parents. When placed into a foster home, many of these children carry with them the physical and emotional scars that prevent them from accepting the love of another. This journey as a foster parent is the most difficult thing John DeGarmo has done.

Through the sleepless nights with drug-addicted babies, the battles with angry teens, and the tears from such tremendous sadness, John DeGarmo learns that to follow God's call in his life means to take up His cross in his own home.

*Fostering Love: One Foster Parent's Journey* is the true-life account of his experience as a foster parent, along with his wife and their own three children, as he followed God's call to take foster children into his home. This is a story of heartbreak, sadness, and ultimately love as he came to find God in the tears and smiles of many foster children.



[drjohndegarmo.com](http://drjohndegarmo.com)



### FOSTER CARE ALUMNI

Foster Care Alumni of America is a national non-profit association that has been founded and is led by alumni of the foster care system.



We use the term alumni to describe those of us who have been in foster care during our childhood/youth.

"We wrote this book by asking ourselves, 'what do I wish someone had told ME when I was 15, 18, 25?' FLUX is our answer to that question. Those of us who aged out of foster care in previous generations would have loved this book." said Misty Stenslie, former deputy director of Foster Care Alumni of America.

"Unless you have actually lived the process of leaving foster care and trying to figure out how to be an 'independent' adult, you can't really know what it is like.

For too many of us, learning how to care for ourselves and build our own lives is a messy process of trial and error. FLUX provides context to the emotions, challenges and opportunities in a very complicated transition. While it won't make the process easy, it will help make some sense out of the journey."

[FosterCareAlumni.org](http://FosterCareAlumni.org)



[garbagebagsuitcase.com](http://garbagebagsuitcase.com)



### SHENANDOAH CHEVALO

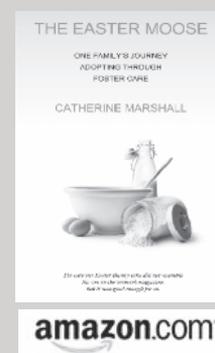
Shenandoah Chevalo is a graduate of Michigan State University, holding a Bachelor of Arts with a Major in Interdisciplinary Studies in Social Science, a Core Essentials Graduate from Coach U, and a member of the Foster Leaders Movement. She is a sought after speaker on topics surrounding youth in foster care, and has been featured as a guest locally, nationally and internationally.



She is also a survivor and alumni of the foster care system. Shenandoah Chevalo is also the author of *Garbage Bag Suitcase* about her time before, during and after foster care as well as her current advocacy work. She also wrote an e-book entitled *Setting Your Vision and Defining Your Goals*, and is also working on her next manuscript, *Hiking for Stillness*.

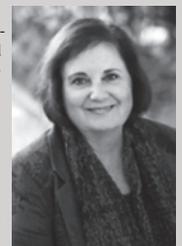


*Garbage Bag Suitcase* is the true story of Shenandoah Chevalo's wholly dysfunctional journey through a childhood with neglectful, drug-and alcohol addicted parents. She endured numerous moves in the middle of the night with just minutes to pack, multiple changes in schools, hunger, cruelty, and loneliness. Finally at the age of 13, Shen had had enough. After being abandoned by her mother, she asked to be put into foster care. Surely she would fare better at a stable home than living with her mother? It turns out that this was not the storybook ending she had hoped for. With foster parents more interested in the income received by housing a child, Shen was once again neglected emotionally. The money she earned working at the local grocery store was taken by her foster parents to "cover her expenses." When a car accident lands her in the hospital with grave injuries and no one comes to visit her during her three week stay, she realizes she is truly all alone in the world.



### CATHERINE MARSHALL

Catherine Marshall's stories about parenting and other real life adventures have been featured in several anthologies and magazines including the *Noyo River Review*, *Foster Families Today*, and *Tales of Our Lives*.

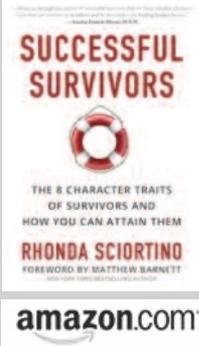


She resides in the San Francisco Bay Area and Mendocino, where she has a consulting practice specializing in helping nonprofits and community groups effect social change. She is the author of *Field Building: Your Blueprint for Creating an Effective and Powerful Social Movement*.



Catherine Marshall's story reveals the heartbreak and hope of foster parenting. Thirty-eight and newly married, Catherine yearned to be a mother and adoption seemed a viable option. The county's Foster-Adopt Program was affordable, so she and her new husband were confident they could adopt and parent two siblings. But nothing was as it seemed. The birth parents used intimidation and the court system to sabotage the adoption. The social services agency wavered in its support. Even the children, three-year old Jenny and six-year old Robert, were unaware of the ticking time bomb of genetics and early neglect that would detonate in their teens.

Would the family survive intact? Would the marriage withstand the stress? Would the children overcome the same afflictions and addictions that had plagued their birth parents? *The Easter Moose: One Family's Journey Adopting through Foster Care* provides all parents, but particularly those adopting, fostering, or caring for children with challenges, the assurance they are not alone. Social workers, teachers, people who work in the family court system, and anyone who believes in nurture over nature will get a reality check.



**amazon.com**

## RHONDA SCIORTINO

At age 15 Rhonda decided to seek emancipation. One of the prerequisites was that Rhonda have a job, so she went to work for the first person who would hire her—an insurance agent.



When her employer explained the concept of insurance, Rhonda learned everything she could about insurance. Despite being denied again and again, Rhonda repeatedly petitioned the Insurance Commissioner to allow her to sit for the insurance agent exam even though she wasn't yet 18. An exception was finally granted, and Rhonda became California's youngest licensed insurance agent at 17.

**Survivors of adversity must change their mindset from being a victim to being a survivor.**

The truth is, victims are often repeatedly victimized; survivors survive. Once we've made the powerful shift in our thinking from victim to survivor, the next step is to rise up to the next level, becoming a "successful survivor." Successful survivors don't just survive—they thrive. They grow stronger after overcoming adversity. And the pivotal step to this important progression is nothing more than one's choice of mindset and attitude.

Successful survivors are strong, capable, resilient, tenacious, courageous, resourceful, and so much more—characteristics that are valuable in every relationship, every industry, and every profession.

[RHONDA.org](http://RHONDA.org)



**amazon.com**

## SYLVIA SANTOS

S. T. Santos is the recipient of the Teacher of the Year Award for Muroc Unified School District in California. During her thirty years of teaching, she was blessed to have taught gifted, talented children—including some who lived in foster homes.



Her goal is to teach everyone acceptance for who we are and where we come from. She is honored to have worked with dedicated teachers, and fantastic principals, who all placed children at the center of their hearts. Sylvia lives in California, has two grown children and seven grandchildren, and thoroughly cherishes the priceless moments they share.

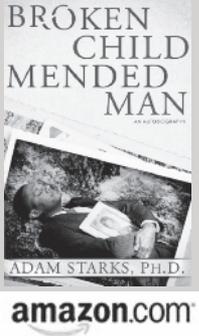
MOM'S GONE...begins on the day that Frey's mom doesn't come home. Certain that she will return in a few days, Frey takes very good care of himself, makes food, goes to bed on time, and goes to school. But when his teacher realizes that Frey is living alone, she contacts Child Protective Services, who puts Frey into foster care.

First in the Foster Heroes Series, MOM'S GONE...takes you through Frey's journey, and how he finally finds a home where he makes friends, and feels safe, until his mom can return home. First in the "Foster Heroes Series," MOM'S GONE... is followed by MY PARENTS MADE A MISTAKE, where Frey meets other foster kids.

[sylviasantos.com](http://sylviasantos.com)



[AdamStarks.com](http://AdamStarks.com)



**amazon.com**

## Adam Starks

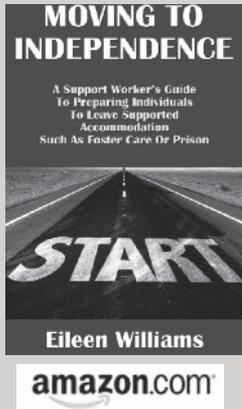
Adam Starks, Ph.D. is a former foster youth who defied the typical outcome. Against the odds, he has been married for over 12 years to his wonderful wife, Emily and they have three children; Jayden, Isaiah and Susannah.



His unique perspective and life experiences allow his catalytic leadership style to thrive in the most challenging situations. Influenced and inspired by leaders past and present, he views the world through the lens of self-empowerment to enhance optimal learning opportunities. His level of self-awareness opens him up to listening effectively and integrating the best ideas from the entire problem-solving spectrum.

Broken Child Mended Man is a remarkably compelling memoir touching on childhood neglect, years in foster care and overcoming the odds to graduate college. Highlighting the emotional and psychological ups and downs during his formative years, Adam Starks manages to reveal human resilience in its most authentic form. Through a life of trial and error, the author displays bountiful courage by achieving life's milestones without a role model.

Broken Child Mended Man is one of this year's best surprises for reader's from every walk of life. This book is for anyone having trouble with their current circumstances or just looking for ways to support the broken souls within their community. The surprisingly positive message throughout the book will help any reader establish solid footing as they seek purpose and the will to persevere through life's hardships.



**amazon.com**

## Eileen Williams

Eileen Williams worked as a full time Support Worker at a homeless project for young people and also part time with ex-offenders living within a probation hostel. Eileen began to feel she could be more help to individuals by providing full time support within a home environment, she consequently gave up her jobs and became a full time foster carer. Encouraged to focus on just one young person who had many complex issues in his life to deal with.

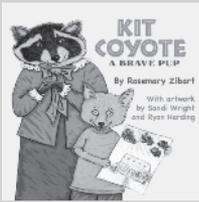


Eileen lives happily with her husband in the Suffolk countryside in the United Kingdom. She treasures precious time spent with her children and grandchildren.

Moving To Independence is an educational and insightful book, written from the heart around three Core Concepts developed by the author. The easy to follow narrative will clearly speak to you if you are involved in any way in supporting a young person on their way to independence. It can be dipped in and out of whenever opportunities arise. The book shares ideas and practical methods which help individuals to develop self-knowledge and self-respect, these then become the foundations on which they can build themselves a truly unique and stable home. Individuals are taken on a journey of self-discovery and support workers are able to fully engage with this.

After being guided through the book, young people will learn that they can be proud to own their own histories. They are encouraged to trust their own memories and feelings and have greater awareness of the validity of these. They are then able to build a future with confidence, optimism and a sense of belonging that will support them in their move on to the future.

### Rosemary Zibart



Rosemary Zibart is an award-winning author of books for young people, adoptive mom and former foster parent who earned an Angel in Adoption citation from the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute for her journalism on behalf of at-risk and vulnerable children in feature articles for PARADE, Time Magazine and other national publications.



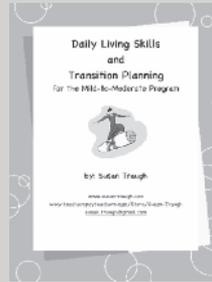
What does it feel like to enter foster care? Told from a child's point of view, *Kit Coyote: A Brave Pup* answers many difficult questions: Where are my parents? Do they love me? Why can't I live with them? What's going to happen to me? This bright, appealing story encourages children to adjust to new situations and people, speak to trusted adults, express their feelings in creative ways and believe in their own capacity to survive and even thrive in a challenging situation.

*"Kit Coyote: A Brave Pup" is a beautifully illustrated story that will be treasured by child therapists, social workers, foster parents, recovering parents and others who help children heal and grow from family disruptions."*

*~ J. Tharinger, PhD, Founding Member, Therapeutic Assessment Institute and Author; "Therapeutic Stories for Children Generated from Psychological Assessments"*

[ZProductions505.com](http://ZProductions505.com)

### Susan Traugh



Award-winning author Susan Traugh is a former teacher and holds a Masters in Education with an emphasis on curricula. Her *Transition 2 Life* and *Daily Living Skills* series have received acclaim from educators around the world. Susan is the mother of three incredible children, all with special needs. Working with both public and private schools to secure the best education for her kids, Susan realized the need for a comprehensive, age-appropriate transition program for at-risk and mild-to-moderately affected special needs teens. The resulting program has received acclaim worldwide



Aging out of foster care can be a terrifying experience for teens—especially if they don't have the skills necessary to tackle adult living. *Transition 2 Life* and *Daily Living Skills* meet federal mandates for transition education and provide the foundation teens need to address a wide variety of "real life" skills. Subject areas include Adult Living, Cooking, Social Skills, Job Skills and Character Building. Individual workbooks range from Cleaning House, Paying Bills and Grocery Shopping to Everyday Manners, Safe Dating and Making Conversation. Other titles include Interviewing Skills, Getting a Paycheck, and Time Management, to Building Character, Decision Making and Overcoming Failure. All books are written on a 3rd/4th grade reading level for easy independent use while honoring a young adult's humor and sensibilities. All pages are liberally sprinkled with age-appropriate cartoons and illustrations and bullet-point information is used whenever possible. This highly affordable series includes assessments, grading sheets, answer keys, ITP Goals, and mandated Parent/Guardian information sheets designed to meet national standards.

[teacherspayteachers.com/Store/Susan-Traugh](http://teacherspayteachers.com/Store/Susan-Traugh)



## Why visit [www.FosterFocusMag.com](http://www.FosterFocusMag.com)?

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HOW TO GET TO

# AWESOME

101 WAYS TO  
FIND YOUR BEST SELF

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# Waiting Faces



*Foster Focus* has decided to take on the task of helping the nation's aging Foster Care population find homes. *Anonymous Faces* will feature select Foster Children each month, who have been in Care for extended periods of time. These children are available for expedited adoption. It is the hope of *Foster Focus* that these very special children find proper homes to finish Care, and guidance as they make their own way through the world. Please take a few moments and get to know these children and if you feel you can help simply contact the representative from [www.afamilyforeverychild.com](http://www.afamilyforeverychild.com)



## California Child

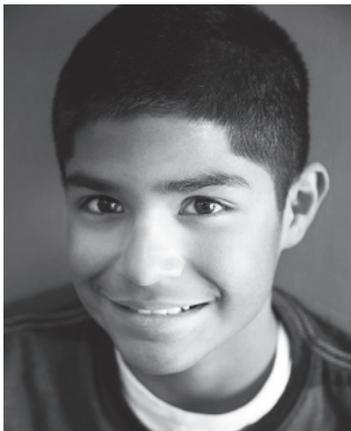
*Lisa and Latrina* are lovely siblings who desire the security and stability of an adoptive family.

*Lisa* is a personable and sweet girl who gets along with everyone. She is quiet and polite and appears older due to her vocabulary and understanding of adult matters. She is able to say what she likes and doesn't like and has positive relationships with adults and she relates well to her peers. She enjoys listening to music, writing and reading most.

Younger sister *Latrina* enjoys being outdoors and especially loves a trip to the mountains. She also likes arts and crafts and video games. She will be assessed through the school system to see if she can benefit from special services but always works hard at school. *Latrina* has some behavioral challenges that she is working on and she truly wants to belong to a family. She is learning appropriate coping skills and is making good progress. There are other siblings including three brothers that the girls would love to maintain their connections to for the rest of their lives and they would like a family that can support these important relationships.

## California Child

*Lizzie* is smart, creative and a huge lover of all animals, She is a rare gem that shines brighter with love and attention. *Lizzie* is an excellent student, achieving straight A's on her report card. *Lizzie* enjoys school and has begun to really excel in this area. *Lizzie* sees school as a means to get into college and has decided that her future will involve what she loves the most, animals. Her dream is to become a zoo keeper, helping exotic and endangered animals live healthy and safe lives. *Lizzie* hopes to find a family that will nurture her dreams, support who she is as a person and allow her room to stretch and grow into the amazing young woman she is destined to become.



## California Child

*Anthony* is thoughtful and very bright. It is obvious how focused he is when he speaks with you and looks you directly in the eye. He also enjoys lots of different sports like soccer and basketball. He is agile and full of fun and he throws himself into the games! *Anthony* loves sports such as soccer, swimming, baseball and basketball. He enjoys camping, being outdoors, playing at the park and even enjoys school. He also loves music and would love to learn how to play a musical instrument. *Anthony* is well liked and social. He states his ideal family would be a mom and a dad. He wouldn't mind sharing the love with a sibling or two.

[www.afamilyforeverychild.org](http://www.afamilyforeverychild.org)



**Texas Child**

*Julie* is usually a shy child, but it doesn't take long for her to warm up to you. Though she requires assistance in school as well as her daily living skills, she is able to help with daily chores when given simplified instructions. She is definitely a people pleaser and is always smiling. *Julie* likes to swim, listen to music, paint, and color. *Julie* loves dancing whenever she hears any type of music. Learning new things and being independent are important to *Julie* and she continues to strive to conquer new challenges. *Julie* likes being around people and gets along well with her peers and adults

*Julie* is best matched with a family who is able to understand her unique abilities and limitations in the ability to function in areas of daily life, such as communication, self-care, and getting along in social situations and school activities. *Julie's* adoptive family will understand the need for simplified instructions and be able to repeat proper behavioral experiences until it is learned.

*Child is under Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.*

**Texas Child**

"I'm thinking about learning to be a mechanic or maybe going into the military."

*Jared* is a happy-go-lucky youth who describes himself as "calm and easy going;" a guy who doesn't get upset about much. He can be quiet and shy at first, but he's just taking it all in before he decides to warm up to you. *Jared* is easy to get along with and enjoys meaningful conversations on a variety of topics. He is thinking about joining the military in the future or perhaps attending college; maybe both. *Jared* is very talented and mechanically minded. He is gifted in figuring out how things work and fit together, and enjoys working with his hands. Like many teens, *Jared* enjoys spending time with his friends and listening to music. He is well aware of how his friends are either a positive or negative influence; he tries to lean toward the positive side. *Jared* likes cars and sports, and has a heart filled with hopes and dreams of becoming a man who will make a difference in this world.

*Jared's* forever family will have realistic expectations of a teenage boy growing up in today's world. He will need a very understanding and patient family who will help and encourage him to set goals and reach them with persistence and focus. *Jared* is looking for a family who will be committed to him and cheer him on as he pursues his hopes and dreams. *Jared* wants a family who wants him, who will be there for him, and who will help "point the way."

*Child is under Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.*



**Ohio Child**

*Brittani* is a pre-teen with a ton of spunk and personality! She is very outgoing and talkative. She loves to laugh and be silly. She cares about other people and wants to help when she can. She enjoys dressing up and doing crafts. *Brittani* has an adventurous spirit and isn't afraid to try new things.

*Brittani* at times can struggle with boundaries and being bossy. She is working on these issues in therapy. She is currently in a foster home where she is doing very well. The right family for *Brittani*, should be firm and consistent with her. She would do well in a single parent or two parent home. *Brittani* would do well having older siblings who could be role models for her. It would benefit *Brittani* to have a permanent family who is comfortable with her having contact with her birth family. She is very bonded with her grandmother.

# What Makes a Great Foster Parent?

By **Michael Olivieri**  
*Foster Focus Contributor*

I recently did back to back presentations to a group of foster parents and then to a group of potential foster parents.

After the presentation to the group of foster parents, I spoke with a few of them and shared stories about what I had to overcome and many of the same challenges their children are facing. I noticed several similarities between how they are helping their children resolve the same issues I was dealing with.

The next month, after presenting to the group of potential foster parents, one came up to me and simply asked, “What do you think it takes to make a great foster parent?” I simply answered, “A desire to help a troubled, complete stranger, like you would one of your own kids”. The woman simply smiled and said, “That’s what I thought...”

I was in 10 different homes in my three years of living in foster care. Even though I had PLENTY of issues ranging from severe ADD, mental, emotional and physical abuse to lots of anger, I could tell which foster parents were there for the paycheck and which ones had MY best interest in mind.

Those three families had strikingly similar attributes in common.

The first was a desire to provide a safe place. They did not try to overwhelm me and hover over me. They simply explained the rules, said they were there for me if I needed them and just let me be.

The second thing they did was they SHOWED that they cared. They all took an active role in getting to know me. They would all ask how my day was at school, was there anything new or exciting I read or saw on TV. A simple conversation but to someone who was raised being told “children should be seen and not heard”, to actually have someone asking me questions and really wanting to know the answers was very fulfilling.

The final, and in my opinion the most important, was they all considered me part of the family. If you were to ask any of the three how many children they had, they would never say “I have two children of my own and two foster kids”, they would simply say “I have four children”.

Pretty much every child in foster care feels rejected and that no one wants them. This type of inclusion means the world to us. To hear someone include them in discussions, to actually feel and be a part of a family that wants us is indescribable. Almost 30 years later, I still fondly remember those who treated me like their own and luckily I am still in touch with two of the three.

I can truly say as an adult, if it wasn’t for those families caring for me and showing me what love really is, I would not be here today.

So what does it take to be a great foster parent??? Love like you never thought you could love...



**Michael Olivieri** was a child in the foster care system for three years. In those three years he lived in 10 different homes. With his wife’s encouragement Michael decided to share his story of bullying, addiction, homelessness, foster care placement, drug and alcohol addicted parents, a physically, emotionally and mentally abusive step-father with others to show the ability to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. Michael works with several foster care agencies, sharing his story to encourage foster parents, potential foster parents and foster children.

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*You just*  
**FALL IN LOVE**

with kids that  
need a family.  
Once you fall  
in love with  
them, you're  
not going to be  
able to let  
them go.

”



The Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption is committed to finding permanent, loving families for the 107,000 children waiting to be adopted from foster care in the United States.

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# Improving Lives.

Cenpatico's Foster Care Program works collaboratively with the child welfare system and various stakeholders to help improve the safety, permanency and well-being of children by serving as a behavioral health partner, improving quality and continuity of care.