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Sent: Wednesday, January 25, 2012 12:15 AM
To: test3@afamilyforeverychild.org
Subject: AFFEC Family Finding January 2012



Family Finding Program

<http://www.afamilyforeverychild.org> (541-343-2856)

880 Beltline Rd. Springfield, OR 97477

A Family For Every Child

January 2012

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2012 Volunteer Training Schedule

- February 18
- March 17
- April 21
- May 19
- June 16
- July 21
- August 18
- September 15

Family Finding Success Story

When children enter their teens, their drive to know who they are and where they come from increases dramatically. Carly is a prime example of a young woman determined to connect with her parents no matter what the consequences.

The teenage Carly was a bit rebellious and was having difficulty in her placements. She had been in and out of the local Safe Center several times during her adolescent years and seemed restless. The case was referred to Family Finding by the Department of Human Services caseworker, with a focus on the paternal side of the family.

In the interim, Carly decided to take matters into her own hands. Having a name and location, she ran away to Idaho to find her biological mother. She was successful. Unfortunately, the experience was less than what she expected and she ended up being restrained and unable to get back home. Her biological mother's lifestyle had not improved much from when Carly was a child when parental rights were terminated. Carly eventually managed to get away and returned home more traumatized than ever.

While this was occurring, the Family Finding volunteer was hard at work investigating the files, researching the paternal side of the family, and making connections. Parental rights for the father had been terminated when Carly was two years old. Dad lost custody to the maternal grandmother and when he was unable to maintain a safe, drug free environment for his children. He had not seen nor heard about Carly since.

The Family Finding volunteer first spoke with Carly's paternal grandmother who filled in the family tree and shared phone numbers and contact information for two sisters and Dad. When the family was contacted, they expressed excitement that Carly had finally been 'found'. However, there was nobody more surprising (or surprised) than Dad. A quiet, reserved kind of man, he spoke at length about how his life was out-of-control when Carly and his other children were born. He admitted mistakes but had made a serious effort to turn his life around which was evidenced by the powerful references provided to the Family Finding volunteer. He was remarried, held a successful job, and led a quiet life in another state.

Although the caseworker was reluctant to proceed with the connection after the profound incident Carly had experienced

- October 20
- November 17
- December 15

Each training is held on a Saturday from 9am until 12pm. It covers file mining, Internet research, calling and engagement, follow-up, and a DHS orientation.

In order to reserve your place for our upcoming training in January, please email the Local Family Finding Director at: caitlin@afamilyforeverchild.org

We look forward to seeing you there!

How To Refer Cases

Caseworkers can refer a child's case to A Family For Every Child Family Finding Program by visiting our [web site](#) and clicking on the "Case Worker Referral Form" link.

Once there, one can fill out questions that help determine the specific goals of the case for Family Finding.

Family Finding is an integral tool for finding placement and supportive connections for children in Lane County. There are over one thousand children in the Lane County foster care system, and many of them do not know their biological family. As many children reach adulthood and near aging out of foster care, they are in need of permanent support systems that will assist them post foster care.

Family Finding helps build this support system by discovering connections and creating a plan to maintain relationships for the child. Such connections are not limited to family members, but include former foster parents, mentors, and teachers. Children and teens who know their family members and are in touch with others from their childhood are generally more successful in school and more stable in their adult lives.

Help support AFFEC's Family Finding Program in Lane County by encouraging a

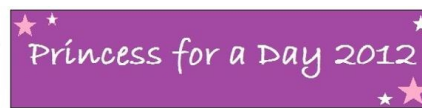
with her mother, eventually a meeting occurred and Carly was re-connected with her father and the other safe family members who so much wanted her in their lives.

What Can You Do To Help?

Would you like to help other children like Carly? Then apply to be a Family Finding volunteer! We encourage individuals to apply for all of the volunteer jobs we offer. You can be a file miner, a calling volunteer, an Internet researcher, build family trees, and much much more!

While all of our volunteer jobs are invaluable to our program, we are in need of calling and engagement volunteers. This position requires you to call contacts we have found for the child, connect with them, discover other positive contacts, and be an integral team member in reconnecting the child with family and friends at the Family Meeting.

This is a very rewarding position that allows you to experience first hand just how beneficial Family Finding can be!



Help us with the Princess for a Day Event 2012!

On March 4, 2012, we will be hosting our 4th annual Princess for a Day event. This special day is an opportunity for Oregon girls to be treated like a princess for a day.

It is designed to be a gift for foster children in the community as well as to raise awareness of foster children in Oregon. Each princess will take home a gown, crown, and slippers. She'll have her hair and nails done, and be in her very own photo shoot. She and a guest will then attend a tea party fit for a queen.

We are accepting donations of new or gently used dresses, shoes, and accessories to fit girls ages 2-18. Bring donations to 880 Beltline Road, Springfield Oregon.

Also visit our [Amazon Wishlist](#).

Want to help transform girl into princesses for a day? If you are interested in volunteering for the event please e-mail linzy@afamilyforeverchild.org.

Register a princess, and give her a special day she deserves. The success of this event depends on you!

For additional information about A Family For Every Child or Princess for a Day visit us online at [by clicking here](#) or contact us at 541-343-2856.

Is a Child Always Better Off with Relatives, Even After Bonding with a Foster Family?

By Leonora LaPeter Anton
Times Staff Writer
12/27/2011

TAMPA - Long before they worried about losing him, he was a small bundle swaddled in a zebra blanket, delivered to them by a caseworker in the parking lot of a Steak 'n Shake. Hours before, the 5-month-old had been removed from his mother's arms outside a Hillsborough County courtroom. Brian and Rachell Strawser took turns that night two years ago

County by encouraging a caseworker you know to refer cases, volunteering, or being an advocate for Family Finding!

Family Finding Volunteer of the Month: Linda Tharp



A Family For Every Child has given me a small role in improving the life of children in foster care. As a teacher for over 20 years I saw the devastating effect of children without families, bouncing from one foster home to the next. They were the ones with behavior problems, low self esteem, and poor grades. My heart went out to them.

Since retiring three years ago, I have continued to enjoy outdoor activities like bicycling, kayaking and skiing. It has also been great spending more time with my three grandchildren, and to have the time to travel. Still, I didn't feel I was being as useful as I could be, so I began looking for volunteer opportunities. A Family For Every Child has been a perfect fit.

The organization is small and local, with a dedicated staff and I feel I can make a difference in the family finding program. Connecting children with extended family members that will give them support and supply roots necessary to keep them grounded is important work. It feels good to be a part of this organization.

Linda is a long time volunteer. She participates in Family Finding, and has assisted AFFEC in other realms, such as our Winter Wonderland Event. She has successfully worked on individual family finding cases, in which she has found a number of relatives

wiping the baby's runny nose and rocking him to sleep. As the months passed, the Strawzers and their three children grew to love the little boy they nicknamed J.J.

The baby's mother, Elise Martinez, 23, wanted to remain a part of his life. But the judge was terminating her parental rights. Caseworkers tried to find other family members who could step in, but her father had spent time in prison for killing someone. Her mother, she said, had been accused of child abuse. The Strawzers were happy to keep J.J. And when his mother later gave birth to twin girls, the Strawzers said they would be willing to take them, too. Then one day last April, after the Strawzers had cared for J.J. for almost 18 months, just as they were expecting to bring home the twins, Elise's father spoke up. There was one more relative. J.J.'s great-great-aunt on his mother's side was 69. She had never met the children. But she said she would take all three.

In the past, if no close family stepped up to care for a boy like J.J., caseworkers might deliver him to foster parents like the Strawzers, sometimes for years, while they figured out what to do with him.

Because it can take up to a year for parents to earn their children back, the state would not address his future until the parent either succeeded or failed.

A practice known as "family finding" is changing that. Now if a mother or father loses the right to parent - even temporarily - caseworkers are supposed to create family trees of as many relatives as they can find.

This shift started a decade ago when a Washington child welfare director named Kevin Campbell began using the Red Cross' family-tracing techniques to help older foster children. There was the 17-year-old with mental illness who had been in foster care for a decade. A search revealed 100 family members, including a U.S. senator.

Stories like this made it clear that caseworkers needed to start looking for relatives sooner. In 2008, it became a federal law to search for family members within 30 days of a child's removal. "What I've seen in the country is that a majority of the states have not yet addressed that mandate," said Campbell, who consults on family finding.

Florida - second in the nation for placing neglected children with people they know - is actually doing a good job of locating family and friends for these kids. As of this month, 53 percent of the 19,772 children who have been removed from their parents are with relatives or family friends.

Family Finders, which in Hillsborough, Hernando and several other counties is funded by a federal grant, has produced heartwarming stories. A pair of teen boys reconnected in Texas with their father, who they thought had died. A toddler whose mother was in jail went to an older cousin in Tampa. A 9-year-old boy whose mother overdosed was placed with a Kentucky aunt within 72 hours.

"It depends on the people involved, but ideally kids should be with family," said Sunny Hall, chief operating officer of Hillsborough Kids Inc. "I really believe that."

But sometimes those connections are happening too late.

A prime example: J.J.

He had spent most of his life with the Strawzers. He had a quirky habit of holding his foster father's ears while drinking his chocolate milk in the morning and hid behind his foster mom's legs when strangers showed up.

Was he better with a 69-year-old great-great-aunt who shared his Puerto Rican heritage and his dark skin but whom he had never met?

One day in October, J.J. stood on his foster dad's lap in the living room of their North Tampa home. He giggled and tried to squirm away.

J.J., now 2 ½, called the Strawzers Mommy and Daddy. Trevor, 12, was a playmate. Payton, 14, was like another mother to him. Dezani, 6, wanted to change his diaper all the time.

"We've fallen in love with him," Rachell said.

Brian, 41, and Rachell, 40, have been married for 19 years. Brian is a business consultant for technology used by insurance companies. Rachell, a stay-at-home mother who homeschools

and connections for foster children. She also regularly conducts follow-up for our family finding cases, ensuring that connections for foster children are maintained.

Linda is an invaluable member of our team, and we are honored that she has chosen to work with us at A Family for Every Child.

Online Matching Event

Hosted By A Family For Every Child

We are excited to announce that we will be holding our first online matching event on January 26th.

A Family For Every Child has partnered with the state of Washington to help foster children find permanent placements.

During this online webinar event you will have private access to 10 special children, where you can view photos and/or video.

Caseworkers will be on hand to answer your questions and give families feedback and information about the type of families that would be the best match for these children.

In order for you to attend this special event you will need to fill out the online sign up form and insure that you have uploaded your homestudy with us.

Only Adoption workers and Families with completed homestudies will be approved to attend to this event due to the personal and detailed information that will be provided about the children during the event.

Go to this link to view the children who will be featured.



her kids, had eight foster brothers.

The Strawzers had talked and prayed a lot about what was best for J.J. They didn't want to deprive him of his family. The boy's great-great-aunt, Emilia Bell, and her granddaughter, Demetris Boyrie, 36, seemed nice and caring.

Still, they worried.

Was Bell able, at almost 70, to care for three toddlers? Who would be their primary caregiver? Why wasn't Boyrie adopting them?

The Strawzers believed that J.J. would be better with both a father and a mother. At the same time, they wondered if they were doing what was right for him.

"We never came in to cause ill will to the family," Rachell said. "At the same time, I just didn't feel comfortable releasing him." But Hillsborough Kids and its case managers from Camelot Community Care told them one day this summer they were going to recommend that J.J. and his twin sisters live with Emilia Bell.

Rachell Strawzer walked into her home one Sunday in October. "Elise is here," she said to her family.

J.J.'s mother sauntered in shyly. She wore a red Elmo T-shirt, jeans and socks with Nike flip-flops. Her kids' names were tattooed on her forearms.

She moved to the twins, who were sitting in high chairs eating Chex squares. She touched each of their arms gently. The girls lived with other foster parents but were visiting for the day.

J.J. was at the piano, slamming the keys with his middle three fingers. She reached down and touched him too, gave a tiny smile.

For months, Rachell had picked up Elise and brought her over for dinner on Sunday. She had taken her to their church. She had invited her to the park to celebrate J.J.'s second birthday. Sometimes Elise showed up. Sometimes she didn't.

Rachell knew Elise was hurting. "I knew I had to build that relationship," she said.

Elise had gotten caught up in the child welfare system two years ago. Someone had reported that she was doing heroin. She denied it, but she said child protective investigators began watching her. Allegations, which she has a hard time articulating, piled up.

She left her kids with her mother one day when she shouldn't have; someone said in court her boyfriend posed a threat; the twins had a bad rash and she was accused of not taking them to the doctor soon enough. Now her children were living with other people. And the state was trying to find a permanent home for them with someone else who would get about \$400 a month per child in public money to care for them.

Elise said she passed five drug tests and attended all of her parenting classes. Nevertheless the state continued the process of terminating her parental rights. They said she had an IQ of 55. "My IQ has got nothing to do with my kids," she said.

Where did she want her kids to go?

She paused.

"I don't know her that well," she said of her great-aunt. She had only seen her once or twice growing up.

"I want them to go where they are going to be safe," she said. "I just want to see my kids and be there. I know they'll be okay here and they let me see them every Sunday."

Emilia Bell opened the door of a tan ranch-style house in a resurgent corner of Seminole Heights. She had gray hair, a slight frame and suspicious eyes that creased into a frown. But when she was asked about the little boy who might come live with her she lit up and invited two journalists into her spotless living room.

On the walls, there were tapestries of Jesus covered in rhinestones. She said she had made them herself. A large statue of Mary sat in the center of the room, next to some small porcelain black angels.

Bell talked about how much she loved being around the three children. Since the state had decided to give her the kids, the Strawzers had been bringing them over almost weekly. But Bell couldn't remember the kids' names. She thought a moment and then called her 11-year-old great-granddaughter into the room.

"I don't know how to say their names," she said. The girl obliged her with the names. She nodded and continued. "My nephew called me on the phone and said he's got a problem," she said. "He said (Elise) was going to lose the kids." She had raised four daughters and lived with her granddaughter, Demetris Boyrie, for 26 years. Bell said she was used to taking care of kids. She even had custody of Boyrie's 11-year-old daughter.

"I swear if they gave me the pleasure to have those kids, I think I'd live a little bit longer because I love kids," she said.

She paused, twisted the edge of her dress in her fingers.

"I'm getting so scared that they will tell me I can't have the kids," she said. "They're my blood. They belong in my family. Why are you going to split a family?"

This isn't the first time that extended family and foster parents have fought over a child in Florida.

Often the argument comes down to how much the child has bonded with the foster family compared to the importance of raising the child with his biological family.

In 2010, the Department of Children and Families issued a memo that advised caseworkers to be careful when removing children from their caregivers up through age 2.

"According to researchers, the child experiences the removal as a death," wrote Alan Abramowitz, then state director of child welfare at DCF.

The bonding argument has come up often enough that Florida lawmakers passed a law limiting DCF's power to take a child from foster parents if the child has been in their home for more than six months.

Now, to do so, they would need a court order.

A couple of days before Thanksgiving, Brian Strawser sat next to his wife outside a courtroom in downtown Tampa. Across the waiting room, Elise sat between her father, her great-aunt, Bell, and her cousin, Boyrie.

A bailiff called the case, but Elise stayed outside with her father. Once her rights were terminated, she no longer had a right to attend the closed proceeding.

About 10 minutes passed and then suddenly, the courtroom door flew open and out walked Boyrie. She swept across the room, her large eyes angry, a forefinger pressed to her lips. Elise and her father stood up, looked at Boyrie. She didn't have to say anything.

Elise began moaning. In the past two weeks, her allegiance had shifted. She hadn't returned the Strawser's calls or come to her weekly visit. She wanted her kids to go to her great-aunt and her cousin.

Tears slipped down Elise's face.

"They did everything the guardian ad litem said," Boyrie said loudly, "because we're not qualified. I feel like my grandmother is being age-discriminated against."

They turned and disappeared noisily into an elevator.

Minutes later, the Strawser's emerged. They smiled tensely.

"Let them cool off," a guardian ad litem attorney told them.

Rachell Strawser called her daughter, who squealed upon learning the news. They would get all three children. The adoption would take place in a few months.

"As the children grow up, we want them to know who their mom is," Mrs. Strawser said. "My heart tells me it's the right thing to do."

Her phone vibrated. It was a text from Elise.

Thanks a lot. Now I won't see my kids until they're 18.

Rachell stopped in the sidewalk. She texted back.

That's not true. We want a relationship.

Federal law wasn't followed in this case.

If case managers had performed the search for J.J.'s relatives in the first 30 days, the last eight months of emotional turmoil likely would have been avoided. No judge would have needed to decide whether J.J.'s bond with the Strawser's was more powerful than his genetic link to Emilia Bell.

But for Sunny Hall, the chief operating officer of Hillsborough Kids, the outcome of this case hasn't changed her mind about this practice. Placing children with family can affect who their

friends are, who they marry and where they live.

"When we make these types of decisions, we have to consider the long-term implications," she said. "When he is 70 years old and in the last years of life, he'll remember these decisions. So we have to be cognizant of that every single day."

But Hall acknowledged that implementation of the practice has not been consistent. The federal grant has provided family-finding coaches to about 25 percent of her agency's case managers. The rest have had some training, but not everyone has been doing it right.

"The old ways of doing business, sometimes it takes a while for that to move," Hall said.

In July, the agency required all of its case managers to do some form of family finding within 30 days.

Two weeks after the judge's decision, Rachell Strawser picked up Elise and took her back to her house, back to a little boy and his twin sisters.

Though Elise was still angry - not only had she lost her children, her family had, too - this was the second visit she had made since the ruling. The Strawasers also reached out to Emilia Bell and Demetris Boyrie. They haven't heard back.

But they are determined to keep J.J.'s family connections alive.

Times researcher Shirl Kennedy contributed to this report.

Leonora LaPeter Anton can be reached at lapeter@tampabay.com or (727) 893-8640.

By the Numbers:

Of the 19,772 children in Florida who have been removed from their homes, 53 percent are with relatives or friends of the family.

Of the 1,291 children removed in Pinellas, 58 percent are with relatives or friends.

Of the 1,928 children removed in Hillsborough, 50 percent are with relatives or friends.

Of the 643 children removed in Pasco, 49 percent are with relatives or friends.

Of the 236 children removed in Hernando, 73 percent are with relatives or friends.

It Takes a Village and We Need You!

We want and need your help to spread the word! Here are ways you can help us recruit for kids:

- Link us on your website. Contact:

Dennis@afamilyforeverychild.org

- Email us any supports, training's, activities, blogs, anything that could help. Contact: Christy@afamilyforeverychild.org

- Become a [volunteer](#)

- Donate, attend, or become a sponsor at our [event](#)

- Host a Heart Gallery. Contact:

Heather@afamilyforeverychild.org

- Become a mentor. Heather@afamilyforeverychild.org

Questions? Ideas? Christy@afamilyforeverychild.org

How can you contact A Family For Every Child?

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