

**Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute**

# Angels in Adoption®

## COMMUNITY RECOMMENDATIONS

**Updated February 9, 2026**

What is the program's purpose? The Angels in Adoption® Program allows Members of Congress and their staff to learn first-hand about adoption, foster care, and child welfare efforts taking place within their state and across the country. The Angel honorees have the opportunity to travel to D.C. to meet with congressional offices and other child welfare advocates to hone their advocacy skills, share their experience and expertise, and leave feeling empowered to continue on their good work and inspire others to do so as well. The program also draws national and local media attention to raise public awareness about the positive difference safe and permanent families make in the life of a child. Every child deserves a family, and every family deserves a caring community.

How are Angels chosen? To help identify and create a pool of the top child welfare advocates across the country for the CCAI Angels in Adoption® selection committee to consider, there are two different periods – community recommendations (first) and congressional recommendations (second). Anyone in the community may submit a community recommendation using the steps outlined below. Only congressional offices are able to submit a congressional recommendation. Senate offices are provided the list of recommendation's from community members outlined below for their consideration to recommend as well.

*Please note the following Angels in Adoption® community recommendations were submitted by members of the community and reflect their perspectives and insights. The ideas and opinions expressed in these recommendations do not necessarily represent those of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI).*



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## ALABAMA

### **Jana Lombardo**

Birmingham, AL 35242

For over 30 years, Jana Lombardo has been a steadfast advocate for children, always ensuring the best interest of children remain at the forefront of the adoption process. Beginning her career as a social worker, Jana guided adoptive families through the emotional and logistical challenges of adoption with compassion and expertise. From 1996 to 2002, she supported hundreds of women facing unplanned pregnancies, providing them with vital resources and guidance. In 2002, Jana transitioned to the role of Eastern Europe and Central Asia Program Director, where she worked closely with families navigating international adoptions, including during the significant changes brought about by the Hague Convention in 2008. Her tireless advocacy for international adoption, especially during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic, ensured that children in need of families still had a path to loving homes, even when domestic placements weren't possible. As Senior Program Director at Lifeline Children's Services, Jana now oversees 19 international adoption programs, continuing to prioritize the well-being of children. She trains and mentors social workers, integrating trauma-informed care practices into her work. Certified in Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) through the TCU Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development, Jana has been a constant, unwavering presence in the evolving world of international adoption. Her lifelong commitment to children and families stands as a testament to her enduring passion for creating forever families and advocating for children's futures.

### **Terry and Nick Saban**

Tuscaloosa, AL 35401

Nick and Terry Saban have built a powerful legacy of support for children, both as adoptive parents and through their philanthropic work with Nick's Kids Foundation. Adopting their two children, Nicholas and Kristen, the Sabans exemplify the transformative power of family. In honor of Nick's late father, Nick Saban Sr., the couple founded the foundation, which has since raised funds for organizations that support children, families, and teachers in their community. Through Nick's Kids Foundation and their personal commitment to child welfare, they continue to make a profound difference in the lives of children and families, demonstrating how individual action can create lasting, positive change.





## **Dora and Marcus Wilson**

Anchorage, AK 99501

Dora and Marcus Wilson have been Resource Family Parents (foster parents) for the past 19 years, during which time they have helped raise more than 50 children. Dora has been a strong advocate for children's rights through her service on the Resource Family Advisory Board, where she has worked to create meaningful, collaborative improvements within Alaska's Office of Children's Services. She also serves on the Anchorage School Board, dedicating countless hours to advancing positive, lasting change for students across the Anchorage School District. Marcus is the Principal of Wendler Middle School and has spent his career supporting at-risk youth through mentorship and leadership, helping young people make positive choices and become engaged, productive members of their community. In addition, he has coached Pop Warner Football for more than five years, encouraging youth to reach their full potential both on and off the field. Together, Dora and Marcus are deeply committed to their community and are known for their compassion, service, and unwavering dedication to their family, friends, and the many children whose lives they have touched.

## **Alaska Adoption Services**

Anchorage, AK 99503

Alaska Adoption Services (AAS) was established in early 2019 by Tami Watson and Victoria Ross in response to the closure of Alaska's only other domestic infant adoption program. Recognizing the critical need for a local agency to guide Alaskan families through the adoption process, AAS was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and became a licensed Child Placement Agency in July 2019. As the only domestic infant adoption agency in Alaska, AAS is committed to serving families statewide and ensuring that every Alaskan child has the opportunity to find a permanent, nurturing home. Since its inception, AAS has expanded its services to better support both adoptive and birth families. In 2021, the agency was awarded the Wendy's Wonderful Kids Grant from the Dave Thomas Foundation, enabling AAS to assist legally free children and youth in finding permanency through adoption. That same year, AAS received the Adoption and Guardianship Home Studies for Resource Families Grant from the State of Alaska, allowing the agency to collaborate with the Office of Children's Services in conducting adoption and guardianship home studies for families adopting through the foster care system. In addition to its adoption services, AAS is dedicated to supporting families in need. Most recently, the organization launched a community diaper pantry to provide essential supplies, such as diapers and wipes, to families facing financial hardship. Through its growing initiatives, AAS remains steadfast in its mission to connect children with their forever families and provide critical resources to Alaskan communities.

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## ARIZONA

### **Advocacy 31nine**

Tempe, AZ 85282

Advocacy 31nine advocates for children in foster care who move from family to family. Many foster children "fall through the cracks" because they are moved from school to school. A recent study showed that children who live with trauma early in life are 32 times more likely to struggle and have learning difficulties in school. Advocacy 31nine tracks the children, advocates for them, attends and educates the foster parents on IEPs and attends meetings about said IEPs. Children have benefited from this organization by receiving the services that they need to be successful and to live a full life after they leave the foster care program. Since its inception, Advocacy 31nine has unlocked over \$3 million dollars of services. They have served over 1,000 students and have the backing of over 25 community partners. Without these interventions, many of the foster children will end up in jail or dropping out of school because they had no one to advocate for them. Nicole Marshall and Jenny Mullins are the co-founders of this organization and have already helped multiple families unlock services that otherwise would not be available.

### **Jessica Graves**

Marana, AZ 85658

Jessica Graves is a dedicated advocate in the field of child welfare, adoption, and foster care, providing exceptional legal representation to foster and adoptive parents, as well as birth mothers. As the owner of the Law Office of Jessica C. Graves, PLLC, she takes a compassionate, client-centered approach, always prioritizing the best interests of children and families. Jessica's personal experience as an adopted individual fuels her passion for helping others navigate the complexities of adoption. In addition to her legal practice, she actively serves her community, including as Vice Chair of the Board of Directors for More Than a Bed, a nonprofit supporting foster and adoptive families with essential resources. Through her tireless advocacy, Jessica works to strengthen and support families, making a profound impact on the child welfare system.

### **Amelia Valenzuela and Arnoldo Nevarez**

Tucson, AZ 85705

Amelia and Arnoldo have been foster parents since June 2015. They helped a young man maintain contact with his step-siblings while he was in their care and helped him transition to an permanent home via adoption. Currently, they are working with siblings, ages three and six. This is their fourth placement since being in the foster care system for two years. Amelia and Arnoldo are loving, patient, resourceful and, most of all, inclusive. They continue to support the children having a meaningful relationship with their parents.

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## **Julie and Peter Bartolini**

Scottsdale, AZ 85255

Julie and Peter Bartolini have made a profound impact on child welfare through their unwavering commitment to foster care and adoption. Since 2004, they have provided a nurturing home for over 30 foster children, adopting three and expanding their family to five children. Their dedication extends beyond their own home; Peter has worked with organizations such as Royal Family Kids' Camp and Hope & A Future, offering life skills, mentoring, and summer camps for children in foster care. Julie is a trained practitioner of Trust-Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI®). Together, they maintain strong relationships with their foster children's families, ensuring continued support for the children even after they leave their home. Through their ongoing advocacy and care, Peter and Julie demonstrate an enduring commitment to the children and families within the foster care system.

## **More Than A Bed**

Tucson, AZ 85719

More Than a Bed provides free essentials to Southern Arizona foster, kinship, and adoptive families because a child that has been removed from their home often arrives with little to no belongings. More Than a Bed provides car seats, underwear, shoes, and, yes, beds. More Than a Bed understands it is the basics that give children and their families dignity, a sense of value and hope. More Than a Bed's 5000 sq. ft. warehouse of donated clothing and household goods is open to foster, kinship and adoptive families to shop for what they need. They also provide urgent services and goods for families that receive an emergency placement. More Than a Bed has seen exponential growth in the number of families and children they serve, growing from five families served in 2014 to 796 families in 2020. On average they serve 27 new families per month. The COVID-19 pandemic did not slow the need of the community's children and More Than a Bed adopted the necessary protocols to safely keep their doors open. Time and time again, families credit More Than a Bed with providing an invaluable service to them during their foster care journey.





## ARKANSAS

### Arkansas Voices For Children

Little Rock, AR 72207

Arkansas Voices offers a range of services to aid in supporting parents, caregivers, and families affected by incarceration. This includes parenting classes conducted at various institutions such as Arkansas State Hospital, ACC units, ADC prisons, and the Pulaski County Jail. They facilitate the development of co-parenting agreements between incarcerated parents and caregivers, while also providing support groups and services for kinship caregivers. School-based services cater to children impacted by parental incarceration, those with a returning parent, and those in foster care. Additionally, they offer reunification and re-entry services for prisoners and their families, alongside education on risky behaviors like substance abuse and unprotected sex. Family literacy programs cover financial and health literacy, with referrals to state and community resources. Advocacy efforts extend to children in foster care with incarcerated parents and relative caregivers, including those seeking to remain involved with their relatives' children in foster care. Community resource development and collaborations further support these families, children, and youth.

### Immerse Arkansas

Little Rock, AR 72204

Immerse Arkansas was founded in 2008 to address the pressing needs and challenges faced by youth aging out of foster care. The organization was born out of a deeply personal experience when Eric and Kara Gilmore, serving as houseparents at a local group home, witnessed a young woman who had spent six years in foster care and endured 50 different placements, being dropped off at a bus station with only one bag of clothes and a night's worth of medication. This heartbreak moment propelled Eric and Kara to take action, and with the support of businesses, churches, and community members, Immerse Arkansas opened its doors in 2010 to provide housing and support for youth aging out of foster care. As the organization grew, Eric and Kara realized that there were many more youth, including those who were not in foster care, who were in desperate need of similar services. They expanded their reach to serve runaway, homeless youth, and later, youth exiting the Department of Youth Services (DYS) and survivors of trafficking and sexual exploitation. In 2016, Immerse Arkansas adopted the term "youth in crisis" to encompass the broad spectrum of vulnerable young people they support. Immerse Arkansas has played a crucial role in filling gaps in the child welfare system, particularly for older youth transitioning out of care. The organization continues to evolve, addressing emerging needs and working collaboratively with other stakeholders to ensure that Arkansas becomes a place where every child, especially those in foster care, can thrive. Through its efforts, Immerse Arkansas is not only providing essential services but also advocating for systemic change to better support youth in crisis across the state.

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## CALIFORNIA

### **Tyerae Bailey**

Santa Ana, CA 92706

Tyerae Bailey has overcome many of the challenges faced by foster youth. With the support of Kidsave and its CEO, Randi Thompson, Tyerae found his forever family after spending his childhood in the foster care system, living in foster homes in Dallas, Texas, and group homes in Van Nuys, California. A national advocate for foster youth, Tyerae is known for his message of unity and perseverance, often saying, "We must progress together, no matter how long it may take." He has served as a spokesperson for Kidsave International for more than two years and has been a lifelong child advocate. Through his work, Tyerae has traveled across the country from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., helped launch a new Kidsave program in Houston, Texas, and appeared in the Emmy Award-winning A&E series *The Day I Picked My Parents!*. He is deeply committed to improving the lives of children and communities, and he finds purpose in spending time with young people as a reminder of why his advocacy matters. Tyerae currently serves in the U.S. Air Force.

### **John Burton Advocates for Youth**

San Francisco, CA 94104

John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) has been the pioneer when it comes to legislation and advocacy for youth that have experienced homelessness and foster care. They championed many bills that have positively impacted the lives of these populations, such as cosponsoring AB12 (Extended Foster Care), AB153 (Housing Investments for TAY Foster Youth), AB153 (Expectant Parent Payment for Pregnant Foster Youth), AB132 (Establish a Basic Needs Center in CA Community Colleges), and much more. This organization proactively addresses the challenges and opportunities youth face from housing and homelessness, K-12 and higher education, economic security, health, and basic needs. When COVID-19 hit, they were in the frontlines of advocacy sharing the outcries of current and former foster youth through their publication: *JBAY: Hanging By a Thread*. This publication exposed the trauma and deficits of resources that youth in care encountered. In our nation's crisis of COVID-19, JBAY was able to spread resources and awareness about youth in care. Youth were able to remain in the foster care system beyond age 21 (through December 31, 2021) which helped prevent them from being homeless during a health crisis. JBAY doesn't just stop at passing bills but prides themselves in implementation. One great example is "Homekey" which California Governor Newsom's \$2.75 billion program to reduce homelessness. JBAY successfully advocated for 8% (\$220 million) of this funding to address youth homelessness. Recently, JBAY launched their Critical Needs and Opportunity Fund which pays for critical needs for youth, ages 16-26. This organization doesn't ever stop thinking big and continue to be the heroes in our communities.

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## **Helena Lopez**

Rancho Palos Verdes, CA 90274

Helena Lopez's service to children in need began when she was a child. She was inspired through her mother's work in the child welfare field, finding deep connections with those her mother worked with in the child welfare system. After law school, Lopez worked in real estate law in San Francisco. The County of San Bernardino needed an agency in their community, as no other providers would travel to the High Desert at that time. Through her leadership and tenacity, Lopez launched a foster family agency called A Greater Hope in Barstow, California. Demonstrating her characteristic compassion, Lopez told her mother "yes" and moved to Barstow, California. Lopez put her expertise in management, contracts, and research to work as she served as A Greater Hope's Executive Director for 17 years. In January of 2019, Lopez was appointed CEO. Under Lopez's leadership the organization has grown to four locations with multiple programs, over 50 employees and is the largest provider of safe and loving families for foster children in San Bernardino County. Since 2002, more than 6,000 children have found loving foster homes through A Greater Hope. A recognized leader in foster care, Lopez is the 2021 President of the California Alliance for Children and Family Services. She is also a member of the Alliance's Leaders of Color group. She served as the past President of the Inland Empire Alliance and is currently the Co-Chair of the Association of Foster Family Agencies.

## **Celeste Liversidge**

Altadena, CA 91001

Attorney Celeste Liversidge has been practicing exclusively in the field of adoption law since 2001. She is a fellow of both the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys and the Academy of California Adoption Lawyers and a member of the National Association of Counsel for Children, Christian Adoption Legal Services, National Council For Adoption, and the North American Council on Adoptable Children. Celeste earned her law degree from Pepperdine University School of Law and her undergraduate degree from Westmont College. She has served on numerous boards and was an adjunct professor at Pepperdine School of Law. In 2023, she was recognized with National Council For Adoption's "Friend of Adoption" award. Celeste founded Ethical Family Building, a nationwide nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that encompasses AdoptMatch, which is committed to promoting ethical standards in domestic adoption; TruAdopt, a nonprofit law firm that exists solely to provide free legal representation to expectant moms considering adoption; AdoptConnect, a platform where adoptive parents and birth parents can securely share photos and communication in an open adoption; and Adoption Law Group, a law firm dedicated exclusively to adoption. Celeste is a powerful advocate for safe, child-centered adoptions and providing support for birth moms after placement. Celeste is an impactful leader among adoption attorneys nationwide, always pushing for higher ethical standards in the adoption field. A large part of her work is promoting policies that protect parties involved in an adoption and promote transparency in the adoption process. She is a speaker at adoption events across the country and often trains others on adoption-related topics. Her colleagues in the field look to her as a leader and mentor on issues related to adoption law, adoption policy, and adoption practices. She has tirelessly advocated for positive change in California law, helping to prohibit unlicensed facilitators in California in 2023, a monumental feat that will positively impact Californians affected by adoption for generations to come. Celeste has been a driving force behind federal legislation, including legislation in the current congressional session.



## **Sari Grant**

Northridge, CA 91325

Sari Grant is a passionate, committed advocate for foster youth. She is a licensed clinical social worker who has worked for the Los Angeles County Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) for over 30 years. Sari is currently a DCFS Children's Services Administrator III responsible for child-specific, targeted, and general recruitment of adoptive families. She also oversees DCFS's Permanency Partners Program, which is responsible for family finding and engagement services for LA County. Sari is DCFS's Liaison for Kidsave's Los Angeles Weekend Miracles program (LAWM), an innovative family visit program that helps older foster youth in LA County (ages 9-17) find adoptive families and lasting connections with caring adult mentors. LAWM provides a unique opportunity for children and prospective families to meet, and for relationships to form naturally. Once people meet and get to know the children, their challenges become something the families want to help them overcome. Participating youth in care are given a choice as to which families they want to form a weekend hosting and/or permanent relationship with. LAWM is changing how child welfare systems search for families for older children. Sari was largely responsible for changing DCFS social worker reluctance to referring children to LAWM, many of whom did not believe that families could be found for these youth.

## **Theresa (Terri) Marcroft**

San Jose, CA 95126

Terri Marcroft's passion for adoption originated over 21 years ago, when she became a mom. Terri's daughter's birthmother made an adoption plan in 1999. Terri and her husband witnessed Sydney's birth and brought her home from the hospital when she was only 24 hours old. They have cultivated and enjoyed an open adoption since then. Terri's passion for adoption goes far beyond being an adoptive mom. In 2008, Terri identified the need to actively advocate for adoption. Many of her friends were exploring adoption, but found it difficult. After ten years of parenthood and 25 years in high tech marketing and communications, Terri founded Unplanned Good Inc. to highlight adoption as an option during unplanned pregnancies. Unplanned Good partners with local pregnancy and medical clinics to provide information and encouragement about adoption. The Unplanned Good website offers testimonials from birthmothers, adoptees, and adoptive parents so that young women can learn more about this option. They publish a monthly newsletter, advertise online, and speak at both local and national conferences. Terri and her team spread the word that open adoption can be a huge blessing for all involved. Terri is also on the Board of Pharaoh's Daughters, a community serving orphans and vulnerable children.

## **Amanda and Joe Gutierrez**

Bakersfield, CA 93307

Amanda and Joe Gutierrez had a desire to build their family through adoption from foster care. Since their journey began in 2016, they have adopted five kids. In addition, they have fostered children and supported those children and their birth parents through reunification. They have adopted children of different ages from a baby to a teenager. They have been open in adoption supporting and preserving relationships with siblings and previous foster families.



## **Mausami Momaya, LCSW**

Long Beach, CA 90814

For nearly 30 years, Mausami Momaya, LCSW, has been a steadfast advocate for children in the foster care and adoption communities. As the Director of Social Services for Bal Jagat, Inc.—a globally recognized, Hague-accredited adoption agency—she played a transformative role in shaping best practices and improving the lives of thousands of children worldwide. Mausami's impact spans Vietnam, Thailand, Moldova, Romania, China, and India, where she worked to reduce the child-to-social worker ratio in orphanages and ensure that children with physical and mental disabilities received the critical support and therapy they needed to thrive. Her unwavering commitment to ethical adoption practices was instrumental in securing Hague accreditation for the agency. Her legacy is profound: more than 5,000 children have found loving, permanent homes thanks to her relentless dedication. Even after Bal Jagat's closure in 2023, Mausami remains deeply committed to her mission—advocating for policies, practices, and placements that prioritize the well-being of every child in need of a family.

## **Junely Merwin**

Fullerton, CA 92831

Junely Merwin's journey is a powerful testament to her extraordinary resilience and unwavering commitment to improving the child welfare system. As a former foster youth, she understands the challenges of lacking family support, which fuels her relentless advocacy. While attending college as a single mother with no familial support, Junely not only excelled academically but also became a powerful voice for change, helping create opportunities and programs that benefit foster youth. Her advocacy began as a teenager when she testified in Sacramento, compelling legislators to pass bills supporting teen parents in foster care. Despite the demands of school and parenting, she coordinated programs for parenting students, ensuring they had the community and resources needed to thrive. Junely sheds light on the foster care system from the lived perspective of someone who has navigated its challenges. Junely's impact extends to collaborations with leading non-profits such as Public Counsel, United Friends of The Children, and the Alliance for Children's Rights. She has championed reforms in mental health, life skills, reproductive health education, and support for teenage mothers within the foster care system. In 2021, Junely participated in the Foster Youth Internship (FYI) Program® run by the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI), where she co-authored the report *Building the Path Forward for Change in the Child Welfare System*. Her contributions focused on strengthening support and services for pregnant and parenting youth in foster care, advocating for federal policy changes to provide better access to childcare and specialized resources. Junely also helped persuade the California State University's Chancellor's Office to remove age restrictions on foster youth support services, opening doors statewide for former foster youth to pursue higher education. Her tireless dedication, achieved while balancing the challenges of single motherhood and education, makes Junely Merwin an exceptional candidate for this honorary recognition.



## Shawna and Edward Whittingslow

Victorville, CA 92394

For nearly 18 years, Shawna and Edward Whittingslow have been the go-to family for the County of San Bernardino and A Greater Hope Foster Family Agency when a home could not be found for a child in need. Shawna and Ed take the hardest to place kids and with an incredible amount of patience, kindness, and unconditional love, they have transformed the lives of 47 foster children. Many of the children they foster would otherwise be placed in group homes or they are "step down" kids who are coming from residential treatment due to their behavior and profound needs. They have taken Legal Guardianship of two children, adopted seven youth and currently have four foster children in their home – a sibling set of four girls. Many of the children Shawna and Edward foster would otherwise be placed in group home residential facilities or they are "step down" kids who are coming from residential treatment due to their behavior and profound needs. As A Greater Hope's Child Placement Worker Isela Camacho said, "Shawana and Ed never say no to taking in a child. When I call them about a child in need, and share the child's history, they don't blink. They say yes. I remember calling Ed about a pre-teen who was bounced from home to home to home, eventually landing in a group home. When I called about taking in an 8-year-old boy, and I shared his long history of trauma, Ed's response was, 'Bring me my son. I have heard what I need to.' When the boy arrived at their home they had a bike and his favorite food ready for him." Within three days of taking in this child, his twin sister was placed with the Whittingslows and five months later, two more sisters were placed with the Whittingslow family. These youth, who had been through so much, were finally reunited in the safety and security of the Whittingslow home. "There is nothing like helping your child to catch their first fish, to ride their first pony or to ride their first motorcycle," Ed said. "I feel so honored to be a major part of their lives and to share our love with them." Shawna said as foster parents of dozens of children, newborn to 17 years old, the couple has learned that "unconditional love and a mountain of patience" are the main components to being foster parents.

## Douglas Donnelly

Ventura, CA 93003

Doug Donnelly is a highly respected adoption attorney based in Santa Barbara, California. For the past 40 years, he has represented birth parents and adoptive parents in every type of adoption proceeding across the state. Known for his sharp wit, brilliant sense of humor, and passion for due process, Doug is also an extremely kind and generous person. He lives by the principle that freely sharing knowledge and experience will never detract from one's success, but only enhance it. For instance, Doug and another colleague developed an adoption lawyer training program to ensure that his vast knowledge could be passed on to future generations. This program includes very detailed instructions, proprietary forms, case management processes, and litigation strategies developed over decades. Doug is a member and past president of the Academy of California Adoption Lawyers; a member of the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys; and a member of the Santa Barbara Barristers. He has an AV rating with Martindale Hubble; an A+ rating with the Better Business Bureau; and the designation as a Super Lawyer, a recognition granted to only the top 3-5% of practicing attorneys - and rarely do those include any adoption attorneys! More than 4,000 adoptive families have benefited greatly from Doug's skill at bringing people together, mediating difficult situations, and fighting for the right result when needed. This includes families adopting from foster care; birth parents fighting for their rights to make adoptive placements; and adoptees seeking information about their family history. Now facing a medical retirement, Doug continues to practice part-time and to make himself available to adoptive families and to other lawyers, young and old alike. He is also a valuable resource to judicial officers around the state who have been known to reach out to him when researching tricky adoption-related questions.

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## Angelica and Will Cross

Sutter Creek, CA 95699

Angelica and Will Cross have been foster parents for over 13 years, providing a safe haven for more than 26 vulnerable children in emergency care. They have cared for children with feeding tubes, comforted babies through detox, and have made countless trips to downtown Sacramento for therapy appointments to support family reunification. Every child that has passed through the Cross home has left with a photo album, baby book, and documents of their firsts. The Cross family's journey of attachment and unconditional love as a temporary home for foster babies has been truly selfless. They have not only cared for 26 temporary placements but have also adopted two children into their family. Both adopted children have healthy relationships with their biological parents, supervised visits, and are supported by Angelica and Will with ongoing efforts to continue building connections with their biological family. Angelica and Will selflessly support each child's best interests, setting aside their own emotions and attachments to do what is best for each child. Angelica's dedication to the foster care community led her to create "Our Caring for Kids Kits" which are gifted to children in emergency foster care. Thanks to Angelica's vision, X Hope Inc. has donated over \$3 million worth of services and resources to vulnerable kids and families. From diaper bags full of items, to backpacks and school supplies, extra-curricular activities, clothing and shoes; foster kids in their community are seen and loved. The Cross family truly deserves to be honored for their love and support of countless children who have temporarily called them "mom and dad."

## Angela Featherstone

West Hollywood, CA 90069

Angela Featherstone experienced abuse and neglect growing up which continued when she was put into the foster care system in Canada at the age of 16. The abuse and neglect stopped when she was emancipated at age 17.5. Within a year of emancipation, Featherstone became one of Canada's top models. However, the effects of her traumatic past continued and she did not have the coping mechanisms to handle all of life's ups and downs. This led her to start a nonprofit called Fostering Care in 2020. Fostering Care is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based on Featherstone's first-hand experience with trauma and the foster care system. Fostering Care offers a holistic healing school for youth aging out of foster care. This school is the first of its kind and hopes to alleviate the negative outcomes that many youth experience after aging out of the foster care system. To do this, Fostering Care ensures each student receives a teaching certificate in a healing modality, such as yoga, meditation, or breathwork. Additionally, Fostering Care hosts guest lectures on topics such as drug dependency, nutrition, and various life skills. Featherstone hopes each student is able to achieve self-sufficiency, positively contribute to society, and help others heal upon completion of the healing school. In addition to starting Fostering Care, Featherstone volunteered with the Children's Action Network to help curate their Heart Gallery from 2011 to 2019 and served on their Winter Wonderland committee from 2014 to 2015. She also mentored a child in the foster care system from 2011 to 2020. Featherstone uses her firsthand experience with criminal neglect and foster care to help youth heal and advocate for children in foster care all while being a phenomenal actress and director.



## **Jessica Petras**

Fullerton, CA 92831

Jessica currently serves as the Director of Education at John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) where she oversees the organization's initiatives to improve postsecondary educational attainment and sustainable career pathways for youth who have experienced foster care or homelessness through policy advocacy, technical assistance, training, and research. Prior to this role, Jessica served as the Associate Director at JBAY for nearly eight years, during which she spearheaded the Foster Youth College Advancement Project, an initiative of the L.A. Opportunity Youth Collaborative. In this role, she convened a robust network of leaders across L.A. County to co-design systems improvements to increase postsecondary attainment for youth with experience in foster care, as well as other regional efforts to address homelessness among college students. Jessica is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and, prior to her work at JBAY, spent nearly 15 years working directly with youth and young adults in direct clinical practice, program management, and program design. Jessica earned her Master's in Social Welfare, with an emphasis in Organizations, Communities and Policy Settings from UCLA.

## **Mara Ziegler**

Fullerton, CA 92831

Mara Ziegler, LCSW is a senior social worker with the Child Youth & Family Advocacy team at Public Counsel, a nationwide nonprofit law firm dedicated to advancing the rights and well-being of children, youth, and families. In this role, she provides trauma-informed, client-centered social work services that complement legal advocacy and support for vulnerable populations, including children in foster care, transition-age youth, and families navigating complex systems. Mara's work involves collaborating with multidisciplinary teams to secure services and protections for youth, advocating for systemic change, and supporting clients through crisis and transition. She is engaged in outreach, training, and coalition efforts that address critical issues in child welfare, youth transition services, and access to government benefits, and she contributes to legislative advocacy and policy development aimed at strengthening equity and opportunity for underserved children and families. Her expertise includes empowering pregnant and parenting teens, assisting youth transitioning out of the foster care system, and advocating for access to essential supports and stability. Through her leadership, Mara Ziegler continues to influence child welfare practice and policy to promote lasting change for children, youth, and families.

## **Dr. Ana Aguayo-Bryant**

Fullerton, CA 92831

Dr. Ana Aguayo-Bryant has worked in higher education for over 30 years. She has managed different student programs such as Dream Centers that support undocumented students, foster youth programs, services for students with disabilities, and other programs that support students in achieving their academic goals. She is dedicated to promoting a collaborative culture that supports underrepresented, first-generation, and disadvantaged students. She is the first in her family to obtain a doctorate on both sides of the Mexican border. In her personal time, she launched the Alumni Alliance as a mentorship program for former foster youth, but it has evolved into more than just a mentorship program. She holds a doctorate degree in organizational leadership from the University of La Verne, a master's degree in public administration, and a bachelor's degree in criminal justice from California State University, Long Beach.



## **Jeze Lopez**

Walnut, CA 91789

Jeze Lopez, M.P.A., serves as the Director of the REACH/Guardian Scholars Program at Mt. San Antonio College, where he leads efforts to support current and former foster youth in their transition to and success in college. REACH (Reaching, Empowering, Achieving & Completing with Heart) provides wrap-around services—including mentoring, counseling, emergency grants, life skills development, and community building—to help foster youth overcome barriers to academic achievement and stability. The program serves hundreds of students each year and is recognized for fostering a sense of consistency and community for students who often lack traditional family support. A first-generation college graduate and proud Mt. SAC alumnus, Jeze joined the college in 2015 as part of the REACH initiative to serve foster youth. He holds an Associate of Arts degree from Mt. San Antonio College, a bachelor's degree in psychology from California Polytechnic State University, Pomona, and a master's degree in public administration from the University of La Verne. Jeze's personal philosophy centers on the responsibility to help others when given the opportunity, a commitment reflected in his longstanding work with underserved student populations. In his role, Jeze champions equitable access to education, fosters supportive campus environments, and collaborates across departments to enhance resources for vulnerable students. His leadership has contributed to the growth of REACH and its impact on student success, retention, and community engagement.

## **Jessi Maurice**

Victorville, CA 92394

Jessi Maurice was introduced to A Greater Hope when she made a special appearance at the organization's Annual Family Picnic in 2009. Maurice was crowned Ms. Barstow, and as part of her duties she supported local nonprofit organizations, such as A Greater Hope. Maurice has been deeply involved in her community her entire life. As a teenager, Maurice completed 400 hours of volunteer service annually. She was part of a Youth Leadership Council, planned community events with the nearby military bases and coached young women on communication skills. Maurice began her tenure at A Greater Hope as the Office Assistant out of the Barstow office before transitioning to the Family Development Department, working to identify, evaluate and train new foster families. In 2017, Maurice was promoted to serve as the Supervisor of the growing Family Development Department. Under her leadership, Maurice has grown the department from one Family Developer to four full-time staff, and the department continues to grow to meet the large influx of prospective resource families that reach out to A Greater Hope every day. Maurice has led 206 families through the foster approval process. Foster care is a cause near to Maurice's heart; her Great Grandmother was a foster parent in the 1960s and one of her childhood friends was a foster child. In 2019, A Greater Hope expanded its programs from Southern California to Clark County, Nevada, and Maurice is now leading that effort. Explaining her commitment to her work, she noted, "One act of kindness or goodness toward another person has the potential to cause a ripple effect, of which we may never see the outcome. A drop in the ocean can create waves. I love what I do because every single person is valuable and has a purpose. I'm honored to be part of a small, but significant contribution to the big picture." Maurice holds a Bachelor of Science Degree in Social Psychology with a minor in Organizational Communication.





## COLORADO

### Ronald Stoddart

Loveland, CO 80537

Ronald Stoddart began his career as a business consultant, advising both a police department and a publicly traded company. As a practicing attorney, he was asked by a friend to assist with an adoption, an experience that revealed his deep calling to serve in the field of adoption. He subsequently established a private practice specializing in domestic adoption, facilitating approximately 100 placements annually. Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, Ron traveled to Russia with limited connections, no prior experience in international adoption, and no existing model to follow. Driven by the belief that Americans could adopt from the newly accessible region, he persevered and ultimately assisted with over 1,000 adoptions from Russia. What truly distinguishes Ron—and the reason for his nomination—is his visionary approach to ensuring that older children, often overlooked in the adoption process, could find permanent families. Recognizing that exposure to prospective adoptive families was key, he proposed the concept of an orphan host summer program to Russian authorities, which was approved and subsequently became a model adopted worldwide by numerous agencies. Ron's second transformative innovation was in the field of embryo adoption. Understanding that donation rates would remain limited without confidence in the process, he introduced three core adoption practices—home studies, clinical matching, and openness—into embryo donation, creating the Snowflakes® Embryo Adoption Program. This approach significantly increased embryo donation rates and served as a blueprint for countless agencies to launch their own programs.

### Virginia Frank

Boulder, CO 80302

Virginia (Ginny) Frank is a Fellow of the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys and the owner of Adoption Choices agencies, which operate as licensed adoption agencies in multiple states. Committed to empowering birth mothers, Ginny is dedicated to helping them make the choice that is best for them. She believes adoption provides women with an additional path for their child's future. As one of the few attorneys in Colorado who has devoted her legal career entirely to family formation through adoption, Ginny is a trusted advocate in the field.



## **Jen Winkelmann**

Littleton, CO 80120

Jen Winkelmann is a Licensed Professional Counselor and Clinical Director at Raise the Future, dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families. With over two decades of experience, she specializes in adoption counseling and attachment-focused therapy, helping children heal from trauma and build lasting, secure family connections. Jen has shaped best practices in adoption and permanency while mentoring professionals nationwide. Her unwavering commitment, clinical expertise, and deep empathy have strengthened countless families and redefined trauma-informed care.

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## CONNECTICUT

### **Sandra Paholski**

Rocky Hill, CT 06067

For over 26 years, Sandra Paholski provided unwavering care to Connecticut's most vulnerable children, fostering over 350 youth through the Department of Children and Families (DCF). A trusted advocate, she supported children in foster care but also supported birth parents working towards reunification. Sandy provided exceptional care, often taking in sibling groups to preserve important family bonds and sibling relationships. During her time as a foster parent, Sandy adopted two children and supported their individual journeys in reconnecting with their birth families. Even a decade after retiring, she continues to hear from the children and families she once cared for, a testament to the deep trust, love, and stability she provided.

### **Lorraine Ireland**

Windsor, CT 06095

Lorraine Ireland has been a certified foster parent since 2014 and consistently exceeds expectations to ensure the children in her care are supported physically, mentally, and emotionally. She has adopted children in her care and is currently in the process of adopting two more, while also stepping forward as an adoptive resource for two emergency placements. Lorraine is loving, patient, and consistent, and she actively advocates for the needs of the children in her home. Most recently, she initiated in-home therapy for three of her daughters after recognizing their need for additional wrap-around support. Her parenting approach emphasizes positive reinforcement, clear explanations of rules, and achievable, realistic goals. Lorraine's thoughtful and intentional caregiving promotes positive, long-term outcomes for the children she serves.

### **Second Nurture**

Glastonbury, CT 06033

Second Nurture partners with communal institutions to open both their doors and hearts to the needs of local foster, fost-adopt, guardian, and kinship families, fostering a culture of shared responsibility for our most vulnerable children. Founded in 2016 by Susan Silverman, Second Nurture grew out of conversations with hundreds of people across dozens of cities in the U.S. and Canada, revealing both the will and capacity to build high-quality, accessible support systems for fostering families. By partnering with synagogues and other community organizations, Second Nurture creates circles of compassion and care, providing foster families with a sense of belonging, resilience, and the practical resources they need to thrive. Second Nurture is more than a support network, it is the village.





## DELAWARE

### **Amanda Aliberti**

Wilmington, DE 19806

Amanda Aliberti is a tireless advocate for birthparents, adoptive parents, and children who have been impacted by adoption. She has worked in adoption for over 10 years and previously worked for a home for pregnant teenage mothers. She is exemplary in serving the birthparent community at all stages of the adoption process. In addition to outstanding services to the birthparents she works with, she runs a birthparent support group that encourages open dialogue and support among men and women who have placed children for adoption. She never passes judgement and puts her whole heart into every interaction with birthparents. Each birthparent feels respected, heard, and supported by the atmosphere and relationships built through this group. Amanda also has become an excellent supervisor to staff who are well-trained and supervised before taking on individual cases. Staff value her opinion and admire her ability to work through difficult facts. Somehow, with all her responsibilities, she still has the energy to be the voice of the agency on its YouTube Channel, AFTH-TV. The content she creates is educational and informative to all members of the adoption triad and to the professional community.

### **Fostering Wishes Foundation**

Wyoming, DE 19934

Fostering Wishes Foundation is an all-volunteer 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to granting birthday and holiday “wishes” for children in foster care. Wishes range from bicycles, helmets, and sports equipment to educational games, musical instruments, art supplies, books, and board games. Founded in 2019 by Donna Storan, Fostering Wishes Foundation addresses a critical gap in the foster care system: foster families are not required to provide gifts for children in their care, and significant milestones, such as birthdays and holidays, often go uncelebrated. Families receive only \$150 per year from the state for extras, which must cover a wide range of needs, from school fees and books to basic necessities like socks, underwear, or sneakers. Through gifts that encourage physical activity, such as biking, basketball, soccer, or participation in school sports, Fostering Wishes Foundation promotes healthy habits that support both physical and mental well-being. Books, games, and art supplies further support children by providing tools for self-expression and coping, helping them process the trauma of neglect and abuse and fostering self-care and resilience.



## **Children & Families First - Foster Care/Adoption**

Wilmington, DE 19801

Children & Families First (CFF) has been a trusted leader in child welfare for over 140 years, transforming lives through its compassionate and innovative foster care and adoption programs. Their longevity is matched by a forward-thinking approach that centers dignity, respect, and person-first language—ensuring that every child, resource family member, and birth family member is seen and valued beyond their circumstances. CFF's staff includes individuals with lived experience—former foster parents, adoptive parents, and those who have been adopted—bringing empathy and authenticity to their work. Their expertise has earned national and international recognition, with staff invited to train child welfare professionals around the world. They are also published authors of a children's book and articles in leading child welfare publications, helping shape the field through storytelling and scholarship. CFF has also played a vital role in shaping policy, contributing to the passage of key adoption legislation in Delaware that improves outcomes for children and families. Their advocacy ensures that laws reflect the realities and needs of those directly impacted by the child welfare system. Families consistently praise CFF's support and mission. One resource parent applicant shared, "CFF offers an extensive network of support groups and resources. We strongly resonate with the mission of your agency, believing like you, that children should always come first." Another resource parent applicant noted, "I know CFF is a leader in the child welfare field and treats its staff well. I trust the organization to meet a high standard of service for the kids as well as the resource and bio/primary families." For its enduring impact, inclusive leadership, and transformative work, Children & Families First is a truly deserving nominee for the Angels in Adoption award.

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## **Taylor Adams**

Clearwater, FL 33760

Taylor is the heart of the community she serves. She works tirelessly as a Coordinator for Gulf Coast JFCS to engage the community, recruit families, work with photographers, and create social media content to bring awareness for children who need their forever home. Gulf Coast JFCS is a non-sectarian, community-based, Florida nonprofit helping the most vulnerable individuals throughout their community, from babies to seniors, find safety, comfort, and a path toward a fulfilling life. Taylor networks on her time off and is always thinking of creative ways to let the beautiful light of each Heart Gallery child shine. The Heart Gallery of Pinellas and Pasco is a program of Gulf Coast JFCS that connects children in foster care with permanent families through adoption. In addition to featuring children, they recruit and support families interested in adoption. Since the Heart Gallery of Pinellas & Pasco was created in 2006, they have helped find more than 400 adoptive families for our waiting children. Taylor is never without ideas, commitment, and determination. No matter the task, she is there with a smile, committed to supporting families on their adoption journey from start to finish. Taylor has been a strong influence, every day, behind the scenes to help kids find a permanent family. Her work goes without saying, with each glimmer of hope from a child, with each click on the Heart Gallery link, with each email, question, and answer, Taylor is an ambassador and a joyful guiding light in the walk of adoption.

## **Barbara Ginn**

Naples, FL 34119

Barbara is an adoption attorney. She has been a practicing attorney in the State of Ohio since 2008 and Florida since 2019 and has concentrated her practice almost exclusively on adoption since 2010. Barbara's practice includes representation of birth parents, prospective adoptive parents, and private adoption agencies. Barbara's vocational experience includes interstate (ICPC) adoption; contested adoption; re-finalization of international adoption (as well as registrations of foreign births); private agency adoption, independent adoption; family member adoption; and adult adoption. Adoption is not just a professional interest for Barbara and her family, but also a personal interest as Barbara and her husband provided kinship care to a child from April 2006 to April 2007, which led to them ultimately becoming licensed foster parents from November 2013 through November 2018. Barbara's family has had the joy of providing temporary care for numerous children during that time and adopting two of their foster children. Some of Barbara's favorite memories involve listening to her children explain the need for more foster families, as well as watching her children embrace every child that is placed in their family, temporarily or permanently. Barbara and her husband are approved caregivers through Better Together in Naples, Florida and continue to enjoy providing a home for vulnerable children.

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## Elizabeth Berkowitz

Jupiter, FL 33478

Elizabeth (Liz) Berkowitz exclusively practices adoption law and currently serves as President of the Florida Adoption Council. She has been a member of the Council's Board of Directors since 2015 and has played a significant role in advancing and shaping adoption laws in Florida. Liz is a certified Guardian Ad Litem and serves as a Justice Teacher for the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit. Her work has been widely recognized, including being named Woman of the Year by the National Association of Professional Women and receiving the Adoption Star Award from the Florida Adoption Council in 2019. Liz's professional commitment is matched by her personal dedication. She regularly provides care for infants and children in need and is known for never turning away those who require support. Through her meticulous and compassionate approach, she has made an extraordinary impact on the adoption community by representing adoptive families in domestic private placement and contested adoptions, while remaining a steadfast advocate for birth parents and children alike. From start to finish, Liz prioritizes the welfare of every child she serves. She frequently supports birth parents and adoptive families beyond business hours and has sacrificed personal time to ensure they feel supported and cared for. In challenging cases where others may step away, she remains relentless in her pursuit of permanent, loving homes for children. Beyond her private practice, Liz is a strong voice for children in the dependency system and regularly provides pro bono services to those in need. She and her family also founded two soccer programs for children with disabilities in Palm Beach County. Liz Berkowitz exemplifies the profound impact of dedication, compassion, and service.

## Robbin and Steve Brydges

Jacksonville, FL 32223

Robbin and Steve Brydges are the adoptive parents of two brothers who were adopted through Wendy's Wonderful Kids. Since they began their adoption journey, Robbin and Steve have been outspoken advocates for kids in foster care and adoption through the foster care system, including medically fragile children and sibling groups. Their oldest son, Dalton, is 15 and has Cerebral Palsy and Dawson, his younger brother, is 12 and in 6th grade. Their family was featured in the film "Instant Family" and often appear on the local news addressing issues that affect adoptive families. Robbin's passion for her family and advocacy for children and the adoptive community is something spectacular. Steve is an amazing father and wonderful provider for his family. Dawson says that "every night he wishes that other children find good moms and dads" like he and his brother did. They also started the Bridging America in Support of Forever Families organization to support and educate on issues related to adoption through foster care.

## Lisa and Jorge Alvarez

Punta Gorda, FL 33983

Lisa and Jorge Alvarez have dedicated more than 21 years to fostering children, welcoming over 120 children into their home during that time. They are the proud parents of two adopted children, one of whom has chronic medical needs, and have consistently demonstrated exceptional commitment, patience, and compassion in their caregiving. Jorge's personal experience in foster care in Miami brings a unique depth of understanding and empathy to their work, which he and Lisa have shared in partnership throughout their fostering journey. Together, the Alvarez family has been recognized with numerous awards in acknowledgment of their outstanding service to children in need. After more than two decades of unwavering dedication, Lisa and Jorge have recently retired from serving as foster parents, leaving behind a lasting legacy of care, advocacy, and positive impact on the lives of countless children.

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## Angela and Felix Gonzalez

Oakland, FL 34787

Angela and Felix Gonzalez have been adoptive parents since 2012. Shortly after adopting their daughter, they felt a strong desire to serve their community by pioneering a unique model of care for adoptive and foster families. Additionally, they felt a passion to advocate and speak out about adoption and foster care in their community. Felix established an adoption fund as he dreamt of helping families fund their adoptions. Since then this adoption grant program has helped over 20 Central Florida families adopt children from all over the globe. Angela is a Trauma Informed Practitioner and has been teaching about the importance of becoming a trauma-informed community since 2017. Angela co-founded a WRAP Around program to serve foster and adoptive families with practical resources, such as mental health and attachment disorder support, meal delivery, trauma informed training, tangible needs, such as diapers, clothing, respite care, and a mom's support group that still meets to this date. Through their leadership and efforts, locally, they have partnered with Embrace Families in Florida and Devereaux Behavioral Health to serve foster youth in Central Florida. They have also been partnered with The Art Gallery of Central Florida for the last three years. Through this partnership, they host over 100 teens in foster care at a Winter Wonderland Christmas party. Under Angela and Felix's influence and leadership they've recruited hundreds of volunteers to serve children, whether by training parents to step into fostering or adopting, or training volunteers to engage locally by serving foster and adoptive families, or by being a part of the programs the licensing agencies in Central Florida offer.

## Open Hearts for Orphans

Delray Beach, FL 33482

Open Hearts for Orphans not only funds the needs of orphaned and abandoned children around the world, but they also provide adoption grants to families. Many of the children that are adopted have special medical needs. Through the "Little Hearts" medical missions, our program provides life-saving medical equipment and helps to provide and fund surgeries for orphaned and abandoned children around the world. As part of the ARISE adoption advocacy program, they aim to break down the financial barriers of adoption with "Say Yes" grants and intend to wrap-around adoptive families with follow up funding if needed. In an effort to equip our special needs grant families in additional ways, the family is given a copy of "The Connected Parent" by Lisa Qualls and Dr. Karyn Purvis, and quarterly trauma-informed trainings through trained practitioners. As of January 2024, they have given over 120 grants to families in 34 states reaching children with special needs from 21 different countries. Hundreds of children in the domestic adoption system are waiting for a permanent family. Most of these children are older than age seven and may have siblings. Many of these children may have special behavioral and/or emotional needs that require steadfast commitment and extra care from their families. Open Hearts for Orphans is a Family Recruitment Organization with the Family-Match portal to help find adoptive families for children in the foster care system and is now an official Family Recruitment Organization with Adoption-Share.



## **Ellen Kaplan**

Coral Springs, FL 33065

Ellen Kaplan is the founder of Law Offices of Ellen M. Kaplan, P.A., which offers full services for adoption. With her background as a lawyer, labor and delivery nurse, and childbirth educator, Ellen is driven to help birth mothers through the adoption process. She is a Board Certified Adoption Attorney and asserts the rights of her clients, with an emphasis on the needs of women and children. Ellen provides a personal touch for those she counsels as she guides them through the adoption process, using her experience as an attorney and registered nurse. One example of her excellency is as follows: in February 2020, a child was removed from their home by the state of Florida due to child abuse. The child's great grandparents immediately went to the state and attempted to get custody as kinship caregivers and were denied. The great grandparents immediately began searching for someone who could help and were thankful to find Ellen Kaplan. Ellen immediately began the arduous task of refuting all of the claims that were made by the state for denying custody. Ellen worked tirelessly, and helped the great grandparents learn of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) as it applied to their current case. Through Ellen's hard-work, determination, tenacity, and outright unwillingness to give up, the state of Florida gave custody and guardianship to the great grandparents. There are not enough words for to be able to describe the impact Ellen made for this family.

## **Christina Spudeas**

Coral Springs, FL 33071

Christina has dedicated her life to being a public servant; however, her best career move came when she became the CEO of Florida's Children First. Florida's Children First is a non-profit, nonpartisan, independent advocacy organization committed to protecting and advancing the rights of children and youth. Through that work she was able to help Florida Youth Shine, a group of current and former foster youth, grow to be a youth led organization. She has touched the lives of many of Florida youth through this work by being an advocate of children's issue related to youth in care. She has testified before the Florida State Capitol in Tallahassee and also on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. Christina has truly been a rock for Florida's foster care system by always striving to make a positive difference. Christina recently retired as CEO after 20 plus years of services to the youth of Florida's foster care system.

## **Richard Fardo**

Port Charlotte, FL 33981

Richard Fardo is a single father who currently lives in Florida. Richard became a foster parent and eventually adopted a total of 10 sons. He has adopted children domestically from Indiana, Ohio, and Florida as well as internationally, from Russia. His work stands as an example to community members considering adoption and foster care. From being a mental health advocate, foster care advocate, adoption advocate, to being a former member of The Children's Home Society of Florida (CHS) Board of Directors , Richard has a long history of being involved in the communities of which he has lived. His continued commitment to children in the foster care system is unwavering and inspiring.



## The Nurture Place

Winter Garden, FL 34787

The two founding members of Nurture Place have worked tirelessly and often without any compensation to provide services to an underserved population. Angela Gonzalez and Summer Darnell have both not only recognized a need in their town but have made great effort to meet that need. Angela understands the needs of adoptive children and their families. She has adopted a child herself and that journey has provided her first-hand experience of the lack of support and resources for adoptive families in her local area. Angela became trained in Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) and used this training to provide support to both parents and children. This model trains caregivers to provide effective support and treatment for at risk children. She runs a support group monthly for parents of adoptive children, providing an environment that parents can both receive support and also give support to other parents who may be in another place of the adoptive journey. Angela also recruits and trains volunteers to work with children in the community to provide groups addressing attachment and trauma related concerns, assisting children who have been part of the child welfare system or adopted. Summer has been working to provide evidence-based treatment for an individual, group, and familial basis to children and their families in the community. It has been critically important to her to make sure that services are available for women who are pregnant, new parents, or who are parenting a child that has experienced a traumatic event, has been adopted, or has been in the child welfare system. Summer has attended numerous trainings about evidence-based practices and is certified as an Adoption Competent trained therapist in the State of Florida. Summer also provides group services in schools, offices, and even homes. Angela and Summer have worked together to share their vision of providing evidence-based quality services to all families in their community and have worked diligently to ensure that all have access to services. They have partnered with local churches, community health centers, schools, and businesses in an effort to reach more children and families. They have also been successful in asking the local community to sponsor a child in need of services. They work to ensure that services are provided in English and Spanish to address the diversity of our community.

## Mary Kinirons

Fort Lauderdale, FL 33316

Dr. Mary Kinirons embodies the relentless mission of finding permanent families for foster youth, making an extraordinary contribution to the lives of children in need. Her unwavering commitment is not just a belief and career but a lifestyle. Mary and her husband adopted a sibling group of three children from foster care through the Heart Gallery. She has not only changed the lives of her children, but has set an example for others to follow. Her commitment to providing a loving and stable home is a testament to her compassion and selflessness. Mary's dedication extends far beyond her own family. She tirelessly advocates for foster care and adoption in Broward County, across the state, and the nation. Through her advocacy efforts, she works to raise awareness, educate the public, and secure funding to support initiatives benefiting foster youth and adoptive families. As the Executive Director of Heart Gallery of Broward County, Mary leads with passion and purpose, driving forward the organization's mission to provide forever for youth in foster care. Her leadership is not confined to the walls of her office; it extends into her personal life, where she is an adoptive mother. In a world where foster youth often face uncertainty and instability, Mary stands as a beacon of hope and love. Her dedication to finding forever homes and advocating for youth in need makes her a true advocate in the foster care and adoption community.

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## **Karen and Joseph Klein**

Melbourne, FL 32940

Joseph ("Joe") Klein is a practicing attorney in Florida and has been an active, dedicated member of his community for nearly two decades. He and his wife, Karen, began their family with two biological children and later felt called to grow their family through foster care and adoption. The Kleins first became foster parents in Florida and eventually adopted their daughter, Cosette. As a family of five, they continued fostering, and most recently their family grew again when twin boys they fostered from near infancy were officially adopted. Today, the Klein household is full, lively, and—by their own account—constantly emptying the pantry. Over the past seven years, Joe and Karen have cared for 11 foster children and have adopted three children. In addition to his role as a foster and adoptive parent, Joe supports children through his professional work by volunteering as a Guardian ad Litem attorney. In this role, he provides legal advocacy for children in the child welfare system, helping ensure they receive services that best meet their individual needs.

## **Dianne and Lloyd Weed**

Venice, FL 34285

In 2016, Dianne and Lloyd Weed launched The Twig Cares, Inc., an organization dedicated to encouraging and inspiring children in foster care. They created an upscale boutique where children in foster care can shop for free every month they are in care. The items in the boutique are either new or like new, and everything is hung, tagged, and placed in departments. The Twig even has dressing rooms where children can try on their selected items. One's experience at The Twig is one filled with dignity, hope, and encouragement. The Twig served 810 children in 2020, with approximately 300 children visiting every month. The Twig is a place where children and youth feel they belong and where they know they matter. The Twig has become an influential voice in the community on behalf of children in foster care, raising awareness about the needs of the foster care community. Dianne and Lloyd have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make the organization a success. Dianne serves as Executive Director and volunteers 50-60 hours/week to the organization. Lloyd has spent countless hours working on whatever is needed from financial support to building shelves. This couple adopted their daughter, Ashlyn, from foster care in 1998 and have dedicated their lives to improving the lives of children in care.

## **Ligia Cushman**

Wesley Chapel, FL 33543

Ligia N. Cushman is a transformational leader with more than two decades of experience in child welfare, adoption, and family services. A native Spanish speaker and adoptive mother, Ligia not only supports adoptive, foster, and kinship families through her professional work — she lives what she encourages families to do. Her personal experience navigating adoption informs her advocacy for permanency, stability, and culturally responsive supports for children and caregivers. Ligia holds a bachelor's degree in psychology and master's degrees in human services and professional counseling, and currently serves as CEO of Families Rising, a national nonprofit that equips families and professionals through training, support, and strategic advocacy. Her leadership has been recognized nationally, including honors from the Diversity Council and Telemundo for her impact in community advocacy, child welfare equity, and family support.



## **Nicole Skellenger**

Boca Raton, FL 33496

Ask any agency that has ever been Hague-accredited who they called when an adoptive family encountered a legal roadblock, and they will tell you Nicole Skellenger is the leader in the field. Nicole is the go-to attorney for international adoption agencies nationwide, successfully arguing RFEs, NOIDs, and NODs (denials from USCIS). The majority of the cases Nicole supports are relative adoptions, people with limited resources and clear need to help their grandchildren or nieces and nephews who have become orphaned. Nicole's success, knowledge, availability, and willingness to take these cases prove that she is the angel adoptive families need in their darkest hour.

## **Robert Lamarche**

Oakland Park, FL 33309

Robert C. Lamarche, JD, LCSW, exemplifies the qualities recognized by the Angels in Adoption Award through his unwavering commitment to children and families. His distinguished career in child welfare, combined with a deeply personal journey to secure permanency for a child he loved as family, reflects a lifelong dedication to compassion, courage, and advocacy. With more than 25 years of experience serving vulnerable children and strengthening adoptive families, Robert currently serves as Executive Director and Attorney of ACF Adoptions. In this role, he leads an organization committed to ethical, child-centered adoption practices and the comprehensive support of expectant parents, birth families, and adoptive families throughout life-changing transitions. Robert's path into law was inspired by a legal barrier encountered while working as a licensed social worker for the State of Florida. At the time, Florida law prevented him from adopting an older youth on his caseload, who otherwise faced aging out of foster care without a permanent family. Challenging the law, he secured the adoption of his oldest son and highlighted the urgent need to remove unjust barriers to permanency. Building on this experience, Robert pursued legal training to advocate more effectively for children and families navigating complex adoption and child welfare systems. His combined expertise as a social worker and attorney has uniquely positioned him to advance ethical practice, particularly in medically complex adoptions, helping countless children find safe, permanent families. He is frequently invited to speak nationally on adoption ethics, subsidy, and medically complex placements, shaping policy and practice across the field. Robert C. Lamarche's career reflects exceptional dedication to the well-being of children and families, serving as a model of leadership, advocacy, and ethical excellence in adoption and child welfare.

## **Jane Worthen**

Lithia, FL 33547

Jane Worthen is now in her 80s. She has adopted over 30 children (specifically sibling groups) and has fostered countless more in about a 40 year span. Jane's care for vulnerable youth is unparalleled, numbering her as the most amazing woman, according to youth in her care. These youth attribute their resilience in adulthood to their time with Jane. She is an example and inspiration for child welfare advocates.





## GEORGIA

### **Rhonda Fishbein**

Atlanta, GA 30328

Rhonda "Ronnie" Fishbein is a Georgia attorney who practices exclusively in the area of adoption law. As an adoptive mother herself, she is passionate about the services she provides and sensitive to the issues her clients face. Families who retain Ronnie receive the benefit of highly personalized and responsive legal service. She is recognized locally and nationally for her knowledge of adoption laws. Some of her credentials include: more than 35 years of legal experience, a law practice devoted exclusively to adoption law, represented more than 3,000 adoption clients, holds a master's degree in counseling from New York University, formerly Executive Director of Adoption Planning, Inc., a Georgia licensed child-placing agency, the first Georgia Attorney admitted to the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys, fellow in the Georgia Council of Adoption Attorneys, and AV rated by Martindale-Hubbell, the highest level of peer review rating.

### **Hope 1312 Collective**

Brunswick, GA 31520

Hope 1312 Collective is rewriting the story of child welfare in Glynn County, Georgia. The past few years, they have made strides in this work and are truly changing the lives of children who will be the next generation. Partnering with 10 local churches, Hope 1312 Collective is connecting the needs of vulnerable children with resources who can help. They launched enabling technology two years ago that helps to not only prevent children from coming into care by meeting material needs, they also support foster and kinship families by meeting needs. Hope 1312 Collective also launched a therapeutic summer camp, Royal Family Kids Camp, for children aged 6-12 who are experiencing foster care. The relationships made during camp are carried on all year through mentorship programs and other touch points. The goal is to create long-lasting relationships that teach these children their value and worth. In addition to these programs, Hope 1312 Collective is encouraging Division of Family & Children Services (DFCS) workers and supporting their work to protect the children in our community. They also support foster and kinship families through care communities and birth families with simple things like meals. They use evidence based tools such as Trust Based Relational Intervention models throughout their work, which is trauma informed and transformational in the lives of children who have experienced trauma.



## **Sherriann H. Hicks**

Suwanee, GA 30024

Sherriann H. Hicks, a member of the State Bar of Georgia, has focused her law practice on adoption for the past 28 years. She has worked tirelessly, and volunteered hundreds of hours of her time to educate attorneys and judges and to improve the application of Georgia's adoption laws. In 2006, she was invited to be an Adoption Fellow in the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys (AAAA), has served two full terms on its Board of Trustees, is currently President Elect, and will become President of the Academy in May 2024. Sherriann is a member of the Gwinnett County Bar Association, and served as its President from 2003-2004. She is a founding Fellow and past President of the Georgia Council of Adoption Lawyers (GCAL). Sherriann is a frequent speaker at adoption seminars sponsored by the Institute of Continuing Legal Education in Georgia and Sherriann was involved in drafting and passage in 2018 of GCAL's comprehensive revision of Georgia's adoption code. Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Sherriann worked with Senator Jon Ossoff's office to secure passage for two orphaned Afghan teens who arrived at Kabul's international airport the day it was bombed. The teens spent 10 weeks in Albania awaiting an emergency humanitarian parole which allowed them to enter the U.S. to live with their maternal aunt near Atlanta. Sherriann was able to file and finalize their adoption by their maternal aunt before the older teen turned 18 in order to satisfy U.S. Immigration requirements. Sherriann was able to give the teens permanency. Sherriann has dedicated her career to adoption and she has finalized hundreds of adoption of children who were in foster care as quickly as possible. Sherriann and her husband Jeff have been married for over 30 years, and have three children.

## **Ignite Hope**

Dallas, GA 30157

Jacqui and Jeff Jackson chartered the nonprofit, Ignite Hope. Jacqui was adopted into a loving family and adopted children herself. The family noticed a dearth of resources and support for children in crisis – as well as the families that support them – and decided to act in order do something about it. Ignite Hope's mission is to be Champions for Children. They work to do this by advocating for awareness and pushing for changes that affect at-risk children throughout the communities in which they live. Ignite Hope provides resources to meet the physical and spiritual needs left by trauma, neglect, and abuse through churches, governmental agencies, and non-governmental organizations. Additionally, Ignite Hope exists to empower coaches for the families and systems that support children in crisis. All of these are critically important for the children and those who fight to win the battle for their physical and spiritual well-being. Jacqui tenaciously promotes public policy by helping to shape legislation and advise leaders in all arenas for what is most beneficial for children in crisis. She is highly energetic, an excellent speaker, published writer, and herself an accomplished champion for at-risk children and the families that support them. Jacqui and Jeff Jackson of Ignite Hope have, and continue to make, extraordinary strides in advocating for awareness, providing much-needed resources, and empowering others to broaden critical support. Ignite Hope truly goes above and beyond for children in crisis and those who support them.



## **Josie Redwine**

Marietta, GA 30062

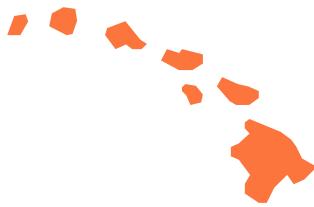
Josie Redwine is a huge part of adoption success. She helps adoptive families to understand each step of the adoption process, including the highs and lows that can go along with it. Since 1996, Josie has completed over 4,000 adoption cases, helping children from across the country and world find permanent families. She has represented agencies, birth parents, and adoptive parents, and she has served as a Guardian ad Litem for children. Josie has served as a faculty member of the Adoption Law and Practice seminars sponsored by the Georgia Institute of Continuing Legal Education, helping educate other attorneys on topics including the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC), the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), the Service member's Civil Relief Act (SCRA), and Georgia adoption law related to terminating birth parent rights and adoption litigation. With all of her experience in the child welfare legal system, other attorneys often refer challenging cases to Josie. Her work helps families feel successful and create flourishing lives for their children. Josie is always willing to answer questions and give guidance to future adoptive parents. She is always willing to show care and understanding to others wanting to grow their family.

## **Barbara Katz**

Brookhaven, GA 30329

Barbara Katz's professional expertise and depth of knowledge in the adoption and family creation space is extraordinary. She was selected as a Fellow of the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys (AAAA) and a Charter Fellow in the Georgia Council of Adoption Lawyers ("GCAL"), serving on the board as Treasurer for almost a decade. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning/queer (LGBTQ+) community is often underserved in the adoption space, but Barbara Katz has been instrumental in the advocacy of LGBTQ+ adoption rights, as well as maintaining membership in the Stonewall Bar Association of Georgia and the National LGBT Bar Association's Family Law Institute. Barbara Katz was also featured in the mini-documentary, "Getting to Baby: Creating a Family in the 21st Century", featured at the "Out of Film" Festival in Atlanta in 2013.





## Family Programs Hawaii

Honolulu, HI 96813

Family Programs Hawaii, a 501(c)(3) social service agency, prioritizes strengthening at-risk children and families involved in the child welfare system. Established in 2004, they offer prevention, support, and transition services to prevent foster care placements, aid families in the system, and assist youth transitioning out of care. With approximately 60 employees in Honolulu and a receiving home in Maili, they've expanded to include a community mental health clinic and various state and federal contracts. Emphasizing prevention and community partnerships, they aim to ensure children grow up in safe, stable homes. Central to their mission is supporting foster parents and enhancing the well-being and safety of children in care. They emphasize building hope and resilience, recognizing the positive impact on physical and mental health. By fostering positivity and collaboration, Family Programs Hawaii endeavors to empower youth and families and strengthen communities.

## Catholic Charities Hawaii

Honolulu, HI 96822

Catholic Charities is the largest private network of social services in the United States. In Hawaii they offer much needed programs and services to the community. They are based in Honolulu but provide services throughout the state. The Teaching-Family model is the root of their therapeutic foster care placement for youth struggling with emotional and behavior regulation called Nā 'Ohana Pulāma (NOP). For youth 0-5 years old Catholic Charities Hawaii is able to provide specialized care for children with special needs or medical issues through their Hale Mālama program. Once children are placed Permanency Support Services ensure that placement of youth in foster or relative placement is safe and stable across state lines. They also provide mental health care for those whom have experienced childhood sex abuse and their families. They also provide family and parenting development which includes supporting parents dealing with traumatized youth. They are able to provide for the community, bringing people together and sharing smiles through hardship.

## A Family Tree

Honolulu, HI 96826

A Family Tree (formerly Hawaii International Child) is Hawaii's only locally owned, fully licensed child placement and family services adoption agency. A Family Tree has been supporting families in their adoption journeys since 1975 and offers home studies, home study updates, and post-adoption placement support and reports. The mission of A Family Tree is to support family permanency through culturally aware adoption and foster care services, to increase equity and welfare by offering family planning options for women, and to provide compassionate mental health assessment and treatment for all members of the 'ohana.

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## **The Village**

Blackfoot, ID 83221

Jacque Burt was a foster parent for many years. Her passion for helping children blossomed into a non-profit called The Village: A Foster Closet. At The Village, foster children are provided with necessities and fun extras to help make their stay with their foster families more comfortable. The Village is provided with items donated from the community ranging from blankets, hygiene items, shoes, clothes, makeup, toys, transition kits, etc. With Jacque and the other volunteers at The Village, they are able to help get Christmas and holiday gifts to each child in the region. They also do other activities, like Easter Baskets, for children as well.

## **Joanne Wenger**

Kuna, ID 83634

Joanne (Jo) and her husband adopted three children from foster care, two of which are now adults. Their son is currently serving as a Marine while their youngest daughter is still at home and in high school. Jo and her husband did a great deal of hard work to bring healing and hope to their kids and their family. Now, Jo works tirelessly as the office manager for Healthy Foundations, which is a counseling agency that specializes in helping parents who face challenges with post-adoption issues in the family. She is a huge advocate for the need to support families, building strong connections and healthy kids.

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## ILLINOIS

### **Shelley Ballard**

Glenview, IL 60025

Shelley Ballard has practiced adoption law since 1988, shortly after becoming a parent by adoption herself. She has handled hundreds of adoptions of every category as both a solo practitioner and as a partner in a small law firm. In addition to representing clients in adoption matters, Shelley has been actively involved in legislative efforts to improve adoption since the early 1990s. She has helped draft and lobby for many pieces of legislation affecting adoption in Illinois and North Carolina over the years, including the "Baby Richard Law" enacted in 1994 that created the Illinois Putative Father Registry and added several safeguards to the Illinois Adoption Act to reduce contested adoptions. In addition, she has contributed the chapter on adoption for the ISBA Family Law Handbook, published by the Illinois State Bar Association and has for many years written the chapters on Interstate and Adult Adoption for the Illinois Adoption Law Practice Handbook, published by the Illinois Institute for Continuing Legal Education. Shelley also regularly addresses adoptive parent groups and legal professionals on various legal issues affecting adoption. While spending part of her professional career in North Carolina, Shelley taught an introductory adoption seminar for Central Piedmont Community College and authored several adoption articles that appeared in the Charlotte Parent, Carolina Parent and Carolina Youth Alliance magazines. She also became an Adjunct Professor at the Loyola University Law School in 2014, teaching a bi-annual seminar on adoption law. Shelley graduated magna cum laude from Vanderbilt University School of Engineering in 1979, and cum laude from Northwestern University School of Law in 1987, where she was elected to the Order of the Coif (top 10% of her class). Over the years, Shelley has served in various positions at organizations including as a Fellow of the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys; a member of the Board of Directors and later President of the Board of the On Your Feet Foundation; member of the Chicago Bar Association Adoption Law Committee, serving as its Chair during 1993-94 and 2005-06; the regular Guardians and Litem for the children being adopted in the Cook County Adoption Court from 2012 to 2017; and the Board of Directors and current Secretary/Treasurer of the Midwest Adoption Center. Finally, Shelley has been recognized as a top lawyer in adoption by the Leading Lawyers Network, Lead Counsel and Super Lawyers. Shelley's firm SHELLEY B. BALLARD P.C. was founded to meet the need for comprehensive, high-quality legal services for adoption. Shelley takes pride in providing responsive, empathetic, and responsible legal services to her clients.

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## Anita Deyneka

Wheaton, IL 60187

For more than 50 years, Anita Deyneka has been a global champion for orphans and vulnerable children, impacting thousands of children and families around the world. She is the proud mother of two children adopted from Colombia, and it was through their adoption—and the extensive networking she and her husband, Peter, conducted in the former Soviet Union—that her deep engagement in orphan care began. In response to the immense needs of vulnerable children in the former Soviet Union, Anita, then president of Russian Ministries (now Mission Eurasia), launched an initiative called Home for Every Orphan. What began as a project soon expanded into a standalone organization and grew beyond Russia and Ukraine into additional countries. Today, Anita works with A Family For Every Orphan (AFFEO), an organization that raises awareness about the plight of neglected and abandoned children in nine countries, develops innovative strategies and resources for orphan care, and mobilizes Christians across the United States to open their hearts and homes to foster and adopt. For more than 13 years, Anita has served in Ukraine, partnering with a dozen local organizations working tirelessly to ensure the safety and well-being of orphans, vulnerable children, and families—especially in the midst of war. Committed to best practices, Anita has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to support community-based solutions to the orphan crisis. Through this work, Anita has played a key role in the formation, launch, and growth of the World Without Orphans movement, which now engages thousands of churches in more than 60 countries around a shared vision: that every child will grow up in a safe, stable, and nurturing permanent family.

## Denise Patton

Palatine, IL 60067

Denise J. Patton is an adoptive parent and adoption attorney who, for over 23 years, has devoted her law practice to adoption and infertility law issues. Denise is a member and past Chair of the Chicago Bar Association's Adoption Law Committee and she is a fellow of the Academy of Adoption & Assisted Reproduction Attorneys. As an adoption attorney, Denise has successfully completed over two thousand adoptions and represented hundreds of children as their court appointed Guardian ad Litem. She has presented at numerous adoption conferences over the years and conducted seminars educating prospective adoptive parents on the different types of adoptions, the adoption process, how to get started and resources available to overcome the financial barrier to adoption. Prior to receiving her law degree from DePaul University, Denise was employed as an Attorney and an Adoption Specialist for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. She also worked for several years as a Child Welfare Specialist and Child Protection Investigator for the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Additionally, Denise has been a member of the American Academy of Assisted Reproductive Technology Attorneys since 2009. She was named one of the Ten Best Law Firms by the American Institute of Family Law Attorneys for exceptional and outstanding client service 2019-2020 and was named in Leading Lawyers as being one of the top lawyers in the state in the area of Adoption Law 2012-2020. She is also the author of a chapter of IICLE Adoption Law (Illinois) 2006, 2011, and 2015 Editions.

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## **Jill and Rodney Winslow**

Troy, IL 62294

Dr. Rodney and Mrs. Jill Winslow are residents of Troy, Illinois. In 2012, the Winslows, who have four biological children, adopted a young girl from the People's Republic of China. Since completing their adoption journey, the Winslows have advocated for children in crisis and shared their story of adoption with several community groups and churches. As a result of the Winslows' efforts, other children have been adopted by permanent families. During the past several years, not only have the Winslows advocated for children in foster care, but they also opened their own home to two foster children and a teenager experiencing homelessness. Jill, who mentors teen moms, has also provided counsel for one of her foster child's biological mothers to navigate an abusive relationship. The Winslows offer support, both financially and by volunteering their time to other organizations within their community who assist foster families. The Winslows participate in Safe Families for Children, an organization whose goal is to keep families together and to keep children safe. Jill has also volunteered her time with The Restore Network as well as Equipping the Called, an organization dedicated to assisting foster families and children. By volunteering her time and energy, she has directly impacted the lives of countless foster families, providing them with the essential items they need to provide a stable and nurturing environment for the children in their care. The Winslows have contributed greatly to the care of foster children and children in crisis by opening their home and hearts to those in need as well as by providing their time and financial support to local organizations in their community dedicated to assisting children.

## **Laura Adams**

Lake Forest, IL 60045

Laura Adams founded iCARE4 Adoptive and Foster Families in 2024. Through her lived experience as an adoptive mother, she saw and felt the urgent need for better preparation of school personnel and mental health professionals to serve children living in foster, adoptive, and kinship families. She has created Connection Kits to provide classroom teachers an easy-to-implement collection of resources, and also Connected, We Thrive in-person and virtual trainings to support understanding and implementation of the concepts and activities in the kits. All of which is grounded in research-based best-practices. She has presented at numerous conferences, contributed to briefs, and participated in legislative roundtables with state representatives Laura Fina (D, 17) and Michelle Mussman (D, 56). She is thoughtful, compassionate, and incredibly hardworking---thoroughly committed to ensuring these youth and their families are met with better understanding and appropriate guidance. According to a December 31, 2025, report from Illinois DCFS, there are over 16,000 children in foster care alone throughout Illinois, residing in every district. And that number doesn't even account for children in adoptive homes. What is clear, though, is that these children are in our schools, and our schools are ill-equipped to support them. The feedback Laura and iCARE has received is overwhelmingly enthusiastic. Teachers want what Laura is providing. And we all want the very best outcomes for these children.





## **Jennie Sullivan**

Greenwood, IN 46142

Jennie has been the Executive Director of the Academy Of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorney (AAAA) for almost three years after being the Executive Administrator for eight years. Jennie supports the work of AAAA's member attorneys and helps steer adoption policy and makes sure that adoptive families, agencies, lawyers, and others always have access to the most experienced lawyers in the US and abroad. AAAA is a credentialed organization of adoption and A.R.T attorneys with over 400 active members. Jennie is the glue that keeps AAAA running smoothly. She puts 110-percent of her energy into ensuring that AAAA continues to be the amazing organization it is. Jennie is the finest example of a professional dedicated to the welfare of children and families. Jennie keeps AAAA a well-oiled machine. She easily manages a Board of Trustees, as well as being the public face of the organization and the go-to person for the 450+ members. AAAA is a credentialed, nonprofit organization of attorneys, judges and law professors throughout the United States and internationally, who are distinguished in the fields of adoption and assisted reproductive technology. AAAA's Fellows are committed to the ethical practice of adoption and assisted reproductive technology law, and they would not be able to fulfill the Academy's mission without Jennie at the helm. Without Jennie's help, the President of AAAA from 2020-2022 (during the Pandemic) says they would not have been able to survive that time. With her help, AAAA was able to pivot and plan two large virtual conferences as well as monthly virtual board meetings and additional virtual activities to keep our members engaged during the Pandemic. Past AAAA Presidents who have served while Jennie has been at AAAA would unanimously say that they could not have done their jobs quite as well without Jennie by their side. Prior to joining AAAA, Jennie worked at one of the largest adoption law firms in Indiana and has always been a strong advocate for ethical practices in adoption and ART. Jennie truly keeps AAAA running and allows AAAA members to continue to advocate for all members of the adoption community.

## **Firefly Children and Family Alliance**

Indianapolis, IN 46202

Firefly Children and Family Alliance is a nonprofit organization that has supported Indiana families and adults for generations. Grounded in the belief that providing children and adults with opportunities to succeed builds stronger communities, Firefly helps Hoosiers overcome hardship and unhealthy behaviors. Through programs focused on child abuse prevention, home-based services, youth placement, and recovery services, Firefly Children and Family Alliance works to create lasting, positive change. Guided by a vision of healthy communities with thriving people, Firefly's mission is to empower individuals to build stronger families and communities.

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## Indiana Adoption Program

Indianapolis, IN 46208

The Indiana Adoption Program offers extensive resources for families navigating the delicate journey of adoption. They also promote adoption of the children by posting their stories on their website. Their resources begin with information for adults considering adoption. These sources cover adoption of special needs youth, foster care youth, babies, older children, and adoption as single parents. The resources cover general considerations as well as Indiana specific guidelines. They also guide adults through the journey of being a new parent and the specific challenges that come with being an adoptive parent. This includes being aware of the realities that face adopted youth and families, such as behavioral issues, therapy, depression, transitioning, and attachment. These resources are facilitated by the adoption coordinators that cover different segments of Indiana. The program also hosts events throughout the month both in-person and virtual that cover the struggles of being an adoptive parent and how to support your child. They facilitate support groups and orientation for adoptive parents. The Indiana Adoption Program also partners with other national and state organizations to expand their reach.

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## Janessa Senter

Marion, IA 52302

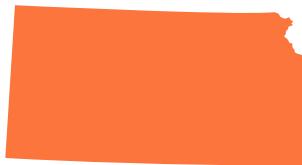
Janessa Senter is an alumna of foster care, a community activist, and a foster and adoptive mother. She has been an advocate for foster youth since the age of 14, including serving as a FosterClub AllStar and participating in the Iowa Youth Connections Council and Elevate, a foster youth advocacy organization. Despite receiving limited support after aging out of care and no continued support from her adoptive family, Janessa has built her success through determination, resilience, and a strong ability to connect with others. She holds a bachelor's degree in criminology from the University of Northern Iowa and a master's degree in criminal justice from Mount Mercy University. Janessa currently serves as a dropout prevention specialist at Linn-Mar High School, where she also brings students together to engage in conversations about cultural diversity and equity. In 2015, she began fostering youth, and in 2019, she adopted a sibling group of three. In addition to her professional and parenting roles, Janessa has provided free and low-cost senior and family portraits for foster youth and alumni. She is deeply engaged in cultural equity work, which indirectly benefits foster youth in Iowa, a state with some of the highest rates of disproportional minority involvement in the child welfare system. Janessa is also a co-founder of the Marion Alliance for Racial Equity, an advocacy organization committed to advancing racial justice in the community.

## YSS

Ames, IA 50010

YSS is a nonprofit organization based in Iowa dedicated to empowering youth and families to overcome challenges and reach their full potential. With a focus on prevention, intervention, and recovery, YSS provides a range of services that support mental health, substance use recovery, housing stability, and family well-being. Guided by a commitment to meeting people where they are, YSS works alongside individuals, families, and communities to foster resilience, promote healthy choices, and create pathways to long-term success. Through compassionate care and evidence-based programs, YSS helps build stronger, healthier communities across Iowa.





## KANSAS

### **Emily Wheeler**

Olathe, KS 66062

Emily Wheeler has taught 20 TIPS-MAPP classes, supporting at least three families per class as they prepare for foster care and adoption. She is a strong advocate for trust-based relationships and trauma-centered care, with a particular focus on mental health and overall wellness. Emily serves on the state board for NTDC Guidance, where she has helped recruit volunteers to provide critical services to foster and adoptive families. She is also active in community outreach, including participating in Pride events to share inclusive information about who can foster and adopt. Emily is the adoptive parent of a daughter adopted from foster care, a role that further informs her commitment to strengthening the child welfare system. Through education, advocacy, and mentorship, Emily is dedicated to promoting the system and sharing knowledge to better support children and families.

### **Culture Creations Inc**

Wichita, KS 67212

Culture Creations, founded by Alexandria Ware-Hill, is a mission-driven organization dedicated to supporting the healing and growth of youth in foster care through culturally affirming hair care. Recognizing hair as a powerful expression of identity, family, and belonging, Culture Creations reconnects young people with hair care practices that reflect who they are. Through hands-on coaching, workshops, and community-centered programs, the organization helps build confidence, restore self-worth, and foster dignity—using hair care as a foundation for personal healing and lasting change.

### **KVC Health Systems**

Olathe, KS 66061

KVC Health Systems is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening families, preventing child abuse and neglect, and helping children and adults achieve mental wellness. Through a broad continuum of care — including in-home family support, mental and behavioral health services, foster care, adoption, and inpatient children's psychiatric treatment — KVC touches the lives of tens of thousands of people each year. KVC also partners with state agencies to provide case management and direct services, recruits and supports foster and adoptive families, and offers trauma-informed care grounded in evidence-based practices. With locations across multiple states and a team of caring professionals, KVC works to ensure every child and family has access to compassionate, high-quality support.



## **Lisa Williams-McCallum**

Topeka, KS 66604

Lisa M. Williams-McCallum is a dedicated advocate for adoption. As a practicing attorney for the past decade, she has focused exclusively on adoption and child welfare litigation, building a reputation for her expertise and commitment to adoption. As an adult adoptee herself, she not only found her first family but forged a meaningful relationship with them, deeply influencing her work in adoption. In addition to her legal practice, Williams-McCallum teaches adoption law at Washburn University School of Law, where she imparts her knowledge and passion for adoption to future legal professionals. Her involvement in academia highlights her dedication to educating others and ensuring future generations of attorneys are equipped to advocate for all members of the adoption triad. Williams-McCallum is actively involved in various initiatives aimed at raising adoption awareness and supporting expectant and adoptive families alike. One of her notable contributions is the "#ForeverFamilies Picnic at the Zoo," an event celebrating over 200 families she has worked with through the years. This event not only celebrates the bonds of these families but also serves as a platform to educate the public and dispel myths and misconceptions surrounding adoption. Williams-McCallum is a Fellow of the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Technology Attorneys, demonstrating her commitment to the highest standards in adoption law. She has also served on the Kansas Judicial Council Advisory Committee on Adoption and Relinquishment, further highlighting her dedication to shaping adoption policies and practices. Her impact extends beyond the legal realm, as she served hundreds of children in Shawnee County, Kansas, as a Guardian ad Litem for eight years, advocating for their best interests. Williams-McCallum's multifaceted approach to advocacy, combining personal experience, legal expertise, and community service, makes her a respected figure in the field of adoption and a beacon of hope for adoptive families and children in need.

## **Jae Hedrick**

Wichita, KS 67216

Jae Hedrick has dedicated her life to foster and adoption support for various agencies. She is currently spearheading efforts to bolster community support with agencies in Sedgwick County, Kansas by working with charitable organizations, such as Stand Together and Gathered, Inc. Specifically, Gathered, Inc. seeks to address gaps in the local child welfare system as seen first-hand. One gap Gathered, Inc. seeks to close is the gap between 1150 children in foster care and only 630 foster families. Gathered, Inc. seeks to provide training and support for foster families to help close the gap between these numbers. Jae's work to raise awareness for Gathered, Inc. and other organizations will allow them to fill the gap in the child welfare system in Kansas.

## **Robert Glover**

Leawood, KS 66209

More than 25 years ago, Robert Glover and his wife moved to China with their six children—all under the age of 10—to serve and care for vulnerable children and youth. Since that time, more than one million orphans have been placed in permanent families across China. Today, Robert continues this work throughout Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Singapore, and Armenia, remaining deeply committed to helping children find safe, permanent, and loving families.





## Karen and Larry Elliott

Buffalo, KY 42716

Five miles from Abraham Lincoln's birthplace, Karen and Larry Elliott's home is a safe haven to the children of LaRue County. Karen and Larry's foster care story began in 1990 with leading youth ministry at Mt. Moriah Baptist Church. They quickly built relationships with local children, especially youth from rough homes. The Elliots committed themselves to helping uprooted children feel grounded and safe. Since 2014, Karen and Larry have fostered 17 children. They work to fulfill each child's permanency goal, and consistently accept older children who are harder to place, especially in rural areas like LaRue. In 2019, the Elliots adopted a youth who grew up in a home with domestic violence, drug abuse, and other challenges. Today, that youth takes pride working on the Elliots' hay farm. Like other youth the Elliots have fostered, he finds peace and purpose working the natural land. The Elliots teach children practical skills, like how to build a wagon, to help them build a sense of accomplishment, confidence, and control within their environment. LaRue would not be the same without the Elliots. Rural areas often see a gap in mental health and social services and a lack of foster homes. Because of the Elliots, LaRue children can stay in-county for school and close to their friends. Karen and Larry take time to develop relationships with children's biological families, linking arms to create a greater sense of support for each child. Karen and Larry are a significant part of children's web of support, even after the children leave foster care. This critical continuity in their lives prevents attachment trauma and protects their sense of belonging. Simply, the Elliots help children flourish while strengthening their family and community roots. The Elliots currently care for one adoptive son and three foster children.

## Stephanie Perlow

Murray, KY 42071

Stephanie Perlow has seen firsthand the importance of permanency in a child's life through her professional career, first as a family law attorney and now as a family court judge. Since taking her position on the bench, Stephanie has made it a priority to finalize cases that are ready for adoption even during COVID-19 times, thanks to technology. She advocates for parents to maintain custody of their children and take advantage of local parenting classes when possible, but she also recognizes that there are times when adoption is a good solution to hard circumstances. She has ideas to create more of an adoption network in western Kentucky so that state social workers, private social workers, adoption advocates and agencies, family ministries, and the general community can all have a better understanding of how to support local families built through foster care and adoption.



## **Dana Radford**

Frankfort, KY 40621

Nearly every adoption professional in Kentucky has been impacted by Dana Radford's work. Her professionalism, energy, and willingness to assist are key reasons so many adoptions move forward smoothly. Dana is known for her responsiveness, approachability, and readiness to offer guidance—often taking calls or answering emails quickly and always with warmth and professionalism. With extensive knowledge of adoption law, Dana consistently provides thoughtful answers and dependable support. She is deeply committed to ensuring that adoption processes move forward ethically and with the best interests of children and families at the center. While many families may never know the vital role Dana plays in their adoption journeys, her behind-the-scenes work is widely admired and respected by professionals across the state. Through her attention to detail and steady leadership within the Cabinet for Families and Children, Dana continues to inspire those who work alongside her and benefit from her dedication.

## **Addison Futrell**

Murray, KY 42071

Addison is a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor with a deep understanding of the trauma children may experience through adoption. She works compassionately with both parents and children, equipping families to navigate these challenges with grace and resilience. In addition to her professional work, Addison and her husband are foster parents who have welcomed multiple placements into their home, including one that led to adoption and another currently moving toward adoption. As both a devoted parent and a trusted counselor, Addison brings firsthand experience and insight into how adoption can affect a child's spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical well-being.

## **Adoption Assistance**

Louisville, KY 40207

Adoption Assistance is a Kentucky-licensed nonprofit child-placing agency with 25 years of experience serving children and families. Over the years, the organization has helped more than 3,000 children find permanent, loving adoptive families. Adoption Assistance has also provided compassionate support and guidance to hundreds of expectant parents and has assisted thousands of prospective adoptive parents in fulfilling their dream of parenthood. Committed to making adoption accessible, the agency has not raised its home study fee in 25 years. With a dedicated staff whose careers are centered on serving children, Adoption Assistance has earned a reputation as one of the nation's leading child-placing agencies.





## LOUISIANA

### **Robert Brown**

Baton Rouge, LA 70816

Robert Brown and his wife, Claudia, stepped up to take in their three grandsons after a tragic event that led to the murder of their daughter. Notable poet, Langston Hughes wrote, "life for me ain't been no crystal stair." This metaphor resonates with Robert Brown's journey as a parent but, most of all, a grandparent. Robert and his wife rose to the challenge of raising their grandsons with perseverance and strength. Robert is active at the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Information Center of Louisiana. Through the center, Robert found the lawyer who helped with the adoption process of his grandchildren. Robert was inspired to dedicate himself to participating in workshops and conferences at the center while sharing tips and moral support to grandfamilies. He has shared his family's story with local, state, and national audiences to help other grandfamilies get the supports and services they need. Robert is a valued member of Generations United's GRAND Voices Network of kinship caregiver advocates who have a range of expertise and personal experience as relatives who have raised children when their parents have been unable to raise them, also called grandfamilies. He is an agent for change in kinship.

### **Gail Grover**

Baton Rouge, LA 70807

Judge Gail Grover was elected Judge of East Baton Rouge Parish Juvenile Court, Division "B" in 2019. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Northwestern State University (1995) and a Juris Doctorate from Louisiana State University Law Center (1998). Before her judgeship, she made impactful contributions to youth and families in roles such as Assistant District Attorney, Director of the East Baton Rouge Department of Juvenile Services, and Assistant Secretary for the Louisiana Office of Juvenile Justice. Committed to advocacy and leadership, she actively served in youth ministries and on various boards such as the BRBA Youth Education Committee. In 2022, she was a huge advocate and played a key role in celebrating National Adoption Day with EBRP Juvenile Court.

### **Jason May**

Baton Rouge, LA 70809

Jason R. May, originally from Delhi, Louisiana, has been practicing law in Baton Rouge since 1997. His academic journey led him to Louisiana State University (LSU), where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, followed by a Juris Doctor from the Southern University Law Center. In 2006, he established the May Law Firm, where he has become a respected attorney, specializing in various legal matters with a particular focus on adoption. Over the course of his career and through his law firm, Jason has successfully finalized over 200 adoptions, showcasing his dedication to helping families. Outside of his legal commitments, Jason has a genuine passion for sports, travel, fishing, and dining.

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## Respire Haiti

Baton Rouge, LA 70816

Respire Haiti was founded with the belief that all children deserve the opportunity to thrive. In Haiti, though many are unaware, child slavery is still a common practice. Unfortunately, due to poverty, many do not have a choice and are forced to either put their child in an orphanage or sell them as a "restavek" (child slave). When the founder of Respire Haiti, Megan Boudreaux, recognized this, she knew she had to do something. 13 years later, Gressier, Haiti is a haven for all people. Respire has a school of over 600 students, 75% being restaveks who would have never had an opportunity to receive an education. In addition, they have 20+ programs that provide necessary resources to their community with the intention to end the restavek crisis through a holistic approach. Some of the programs Respire offers include sports programming, food and water distribution, health education, therapy, and much more. Currently, foster care is not an option in Haiti, but Respire is helping to lead a charge in changing this reality. Respire is part of a network called "The Haiti Family Care Network." This group aims to be an educational catalyst and advocate for the shift towards family based care in Haiti. The vision is that all Haitian children and youth are given the opportunity to thrive in families.

## Placed Adoption Education Foundation

New Iberia, LA 70563

Placed Adoption Education Foundation has made an extraordinary contribution on behalf of children who need families by addressing one of the most overlooked barriers in adoption and foster care: misunderstanding. While many organizations focus solely on the legal or logistical aspects of adoption, Placed Adoption Education Foundation intentionally centers education, storytelling, and dignity, shaping how people think about adoption long before they are ever asked to act. Through age-appropriate high school presentations, Placed Adoption Education Foundation reaches students at a formative stage, correcting common misconceptions about adoption and foster care and replacing them with empathy, accuracy, and respect. By teaching children that adoption is complex, lifelong, and deeply human, the organization helps create classrooms where adopted and fostered children feel seen rather than singled out and where peers learn how to respond with compassion instead of curiosity or judgment. This early intervention has a ripple effect that extends far beyond a single lesson, influencing how future parents, educators, and community members understand vulnerable children and families.

Placed's impact also extends to adults through community presentations, faith-based education, and the Perfectly Placed Podcast, which elevates voices often left out of the adoption conversation, including birth parents, adoptees, foster parents, and siblings. By sharing real stories instead of simplified narratives, Placed restores dignity to those directly impacted by adoption and equips listeners to engage with these issues more thoughtfully. Perhaps most importantly, Placed shifts the focus from "saving children" to supporting lifelong relationships. This reframing honors the child's full story and promotes ethical, informed participation in adoption and foster care. By changing hearts, minds, and language around adoption, Placed is creating safer communities and stronger families for children who need them most.

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MAINE

## Spurwink Services

Portland, ME 04401

Spurwink, an organization committed to supporting foster families and children in foster care, offers a diverse range of services. From the initial stages of exploring foster parenting to placement of children in caring homes, Spurwink provides invaluable support. This includes essential information, offering guidance, and delivering educational resources. Furthermore, through Treatment Foster Care, the organization extends in-home supportive services to families in need. Their approach encompasses various programs. 'A Family for ME' actively recruits resource families for foster/adoptive care across the state, ensuring that every child has a loving home. The 'Resource Parent Care Team' stands ready to provide swift access to information and referrals, offering crucial assistance to foster families whenever required. Spurwink's 'Treatment Foster Care' initiative forms partnerships with families fostering children with significant behavioral needs, offering them ongoing, intensive support. Lastly, the 'Adoption Matching Program' diligently matches licensed families with children eagerly awaiting adoption, facilitating the creation of permanent families. Through these multifaceted services, Spurwink remains steadfast in its mission to enhance the lives of foster children and families, providing them with the necessary tools and support for a brighter future.

## Good Samaritan Agency

Bangor, ME 04401

Founded in 1902 by women from thirty Bangor-area churches, the Good Samaritan Agency was Maine's first independent adoption agency. Originally a residential home serving single, pregnant women, the agency evolved over the decades to meet changing needs—shifting from foster care arrangements to supporting women living independently or with family. Today, Good Samaritan continues to work with birth and adoptive families, providing a full range of services from home studies to post-legal support. In 1984, the agency partnered with the Bangor School Department to establish the Teen Parent Education Program, offering young mothers ages 14–20 a safe, nurturing environment to earn their high school diplomas while developing skills in parenting, financial literacy, career planning, and personal wellness. An on-site childcare center supports students and community children, focusing on healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development. Through this holistic approach, Good Samaritan empowers both mothers and children to thrive.





## MARYLAND

### **Jennifer Fairfax**

Silver Spring, MD 20910

Jennifer Fairfax is a very highly respected and accomplished adoption attorney. She has tirelessly advocated for her clients, including biological parents making adoption placement plans, adoptive parents welcoming children into their families, and, critically, the children involved. Indeed, at the core of every adoption is the gold standard principle of "Best Interest of the Child," a keystone and a legal imperative in every adoption. Jennifer's dedicated focus on the child has been instructive, inspiring and at its core, protective of these most vulnerable clients. To that point, she was accepted and served as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). Jennifer is the consummate professional: informed, prepared, and collegial. Beyond that, though, she displays exceptional kindness and understanding in what are difficult and emotional matters. Jennifer also generously gives her time to educate other professionals and members of the adoption community. She is a published author and a sought-after speaker, served as a Trustee and the Vice President of the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys (AAAA), worked extensively on adoption-related legislative initiatives, and has taught at the Maryland Judicial institute for several years. Jennifer has served as a law school guest lecturer and has consistently been recognized as a "Top Lawyer" in Maryland and in the District of Columbia. Additionally, Jennifer has served as a trustee or appointed contributor for several community organizations and adoption-related institutions. Jennifer's legal skills, knowledge, and ability to handle any complex adoption matter with confidence, while maintaining respect and empathy for her clients, and her dedication to the field of adoption are extraordinary and truly set her apart. Her contributions have bettered the legal practice of adoption and benefitted all members of the adoption triad.

### **Virginia McLaurin (posthumous)**

Maryland

Virginia McLaurin dedicated much of her life to serving children in foster care, leaving an indelible mark on the child welfare community. As an adoptive mother, her personal experience fueled a lifelong passion for supporting vulnerable children. In 1994, McLaurin expanded her impact by becoming a foster grandparent, a role she embraced for 24 years until the age of 106. Volunteering 40 hours a week at C. Melvin Sharpe Health School and later Roots Public Charter School, she provided consistent care and encouragement to children with special needs, many of whom came from foster care backgrounds. Whether reading to them, offering meals, or simply being a comforting presence, she embodied the unwavering support that so many children in the system desperately need. McLaurin's work exemplified the power of intergenerational mentorship in shaping the lives of children in foster care. Her dedication to providing love and stability made a profound impact, reinforcing the importance of community involvement in child welfare. Through her decades of service, Virginia McLaurin set a powerful example of what it means to invest in the lives of children in foster care, ensuring they felt valued, supported, and encouraged to thrive.

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## Jane Krienke

Annapolis, MD

Jane Krienke, MPA, is a seasoned child welfare policy professional with expertise in legislative advocacy, systems reform, and healthcare access for vulnerable populations. She is a key member of the Government Affairs and Policy team at the Maryland Hospital Association, where she helps shape state-level health policy affecting children and families. Jane participated in the Foster Youth Internship Program in 2014, where she researched and wrote a policy report advocating for youth autonomy in decisions about contact with biological parents after termination of parental rights, including considerations related to social media. An alumna of Truman State University, Jane's career reflects a deep commitment to improving the well-being of children and families.

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## MASSACHUSETTS

### **Vivian Cone**

Needham, MA 02494

Vivian Cone has dedicated over 30 years to the field of adoption, working with more than 100 families to help connect children with loving homes. She has facilitated the placement of children both in the U.S. and internationally, with a particular focus on supporting families navigating the adoption process in Vietnam. Recognizing the strength and resilience of the Vietnamese people, Vivian has worked alongside local communities to help ensure children in need have access to stable, supportive families. For the past 14 years, she has also played a key role in a humanitarian project in Hue, Vietnam, which provides education, respite care, and nutritional support for children with disabilities and their families. Her dedication has helped sustain this initiative through financial challenges, ensuring that children receive the care and opportunities they deserve. Vivian's passion for adoption is also deeply personal—she and her husband have built their own family through adoption, welcoming children from diverse backgrounds. Known for her kindness, tenacity, and unwavering commitment, Vivian has spent a lifetime supporting children and families, helping create meaningful connections and lasting bonds.

### **Kerry Homstead**

Northampton, MA 01060

Kerry Homstead has been with the Treehouse Foundation since 2005, serving as Community Facilitator till 2020, promoting and overseeing intergenerational community development. Kerry welcomed the opportunity to promote collaborative change “outside the foster care box” and invest in new cross sector solutions to promote well being, and safe, supportive communities where all ages thrive. She has been key to building the Treehouse Foundation from a grassroots movement to a nationally recognized and award-winning organization promoting foster care innovation. In her current role as Chief Program Officer, Kerry continues to facilitate the Re-envisioning Foster Care in America Movement and promote the Treehouse Intergenerational Treehouse Model with creative programming, partnerships and model replication. Homstead received her EdD from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and her BA from Smith College. She previously served as a Research Project Coordinator at the Smith School for Social Work for a study of Casey Family Resource Centers in the Northeast. She brings over 30 years experience in community-based work with at risk populations to the Treehouse Foundation. In addition, Kerry has a range of consulting experience and a background studying public alternatives schools.



## **Stephanie Garde**

Westminster, MA 01473

Stephanie Garde is an adoptive mother who, after recognizing her son's significant trauma and attachment needs, transitioned from her law career to advocate for his healing and well-being. For nearly a decade, she has supported adoptive, foster, and kinship families through Adoption Journeys in Massachusetts and the Attachment & Trauma Network (ATN) nationally. Stephanie provides trauma-informed education, moderates support groups, and speaks at adoption and foster care events across the Northeast and United States. As the organizer of ATN's Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools Conference, which attracts over 1,500 educators annually, Stephanie has played a pivotal role in advancing trauma-informed practices in education. Currently, she serves as the Operations Manager at ATN, overseeing the nonprofit's mission to support the healing of children impacted by trauma by strengthening families, schools, and communities. Stephanie's approach emphasizes both emotional support for parents and guidance on effective, trauma-informed parenting strategies.

## **Renee Lubowich**

Needham, MA 02494

Renee Lubowich has dedicated over four decades to the field of adoption, bringing a wealth of experience and compassion to her role as Co-Executive Director and Chief Clinical Officer at The Alliance for Children, Inc. She has been instrumental in guiding numerous families through both international and domestic adoption processes. Renee's quiet, steady, and reassuring demeanor has been a cornerstone in supporting families through the often complex adoption journey. She empowers women to make informed decisions that are right for them, always approaching each situation with a gentle touch. Her unwavering dedication has been pivotal in navigating the changing landscape of adoption over the past two to three decades, ensuring that ethics and vision remain at the forefront. Renee's contributions have solidified her reputation as a respected leader in the field of adoption.

## **Joyce Kauffman**

Rosindale, MA 02131

Attorney Joyce Kauffman has been practicing family law for over twenty-five years, with a focus on guardianship, adoption, mediation, and reproductive technology. She has extensive experience handling complex adoption cases, including co-parent and multi-parent adoptions, and has played a key role in shaping legal precedents in these areas. Early in her career, she was involved in Adoption of Tammy, the landmark case that established the right of same-sex couples to adopt in Massachusetts. She has since successfully facilitated numerous adoptions and assisted families in securing legal recognition for their parental rights. Notably, she represented the first same-sex couple in Massachusetts to obtain a birth certificate for a child conceived through IVF using the eggs of one parent and carried by the other. Attorney Kauffman is a frequent speaker at legal education seminars, conferences, universities, and community organizations. She has authored multiple articles on family law and the legal rights of diverse family structures. She is also a Fellow of the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys.





## Kristen Hamilton

Holland, MI 49424

Kristen Hamilton is a passionate advocate for adoption and child welfare, bringing both personal and professional experience to her role at the National Council For Adoption (NCFA). As an adoptive parent, Kristen has firsthand insight into the complexities and joys of adoption. During her time at NCFA as Director of Strategic Initiatives and Communications, Kristen was dedicated to spreading awareness about adoption-related issues, supporting families, and advocating for policies that protect and uplift children and adoptive parents. She has been actively involved in a national coalition of adoptive parents working toward policy reform, using her voice to influence legislation that improves the adoption process. Prior to her role at NCFA, Kristen worked with the adoption community to provide support and guidance to fellow parents, served with a national adoption advocacy group, and gained experience in the field through her work at an adoption agency. Her extensive advocacy efforts and commitment to ethical adoption practices make her a valuable leader in the adoption space.

## Lisa Hoeve

Holland, MI 49422

Lisa Hoeve is a dedicated child welfare advocate and the Founder and Executive Director of Hope Packages, a nonprofit organization committed to providing comfort and dignity to children entering foster care. Recognizing the emotional challenges faced by children during the transition into foster homes, Lisa established Hope Packages to supply essential items—such as clothing, hygiene products, and comforting personal belongings—so children have something of their own during this difficult time. Beyond her work with Hope Packages, Lisa is actively involved in foster care advocacy, collaborating with agencies, community organizations, and policymakers to improve the experiences of children in the system. She is passionate about raising awareness, supporting foster families, and creating a sense of security for vulnerable children. Lisa's leadership and compassion have made a lasting impact in the foster care community, providing tangible support to children in need and inspiring others to take action.



## Redefining Normal

Kalamazoo, MI 49048

Justin and Alexis Black, both foster care alumni, have dedicated their work to reshaping perspectives on trauma, relationships, and community support through their company, Redefining Normal. Drawing from their personal experiences, they have critically examined how trauma becomes normalized within families and how foundational elements—such as patient adults, supportive communities, and healthy expectations—are essential for a child's growth. Through Redefining Normal, Justin and Alexis help foster care advocates, parents, and community members understand the role they play in supporting youth. Their work emphasizes the importance of self-reflection, intentional relationship-building, and fostering environments that prioritize healing and stability. They challenge individuals to rethink what "normal" looks like, encouraging a shift toward healthier, more supportive dynamics for both foster youth and caregivers. Their mission is to highlight fostering as a collaborative process—one that involves not only the parent and child but also a broader community committed to providing love, guidance, and long-term success for those impacted by the foster care system.

## Marisa Van Zile

Watersmeet, MI 49969

Marisa Van Zile is a member of the Sokaogon Chippewa Band of Lake Superior Indians and a dedicated advocate for kinship caregivers. She is a former tribal foster parent and the adoptive mother of her son, Aidono. In 2015, she took placement of Aidono as a newborn. As a relative and enrolled member of the Lac Vieux Desert Tribe, it was important for Marisa to ensure his well-being and cultural connection. She officially adopted him in September 2017. Throughout her journey, Marisa often felt like she was the only one fighting for her son. This experience fueled her passion for advocacy, leading her to serve as a GRAND Voice with Generations United—a national network of kinship caregiver advocates. In this role, she works alongside others with lived experience to shape policies and practices that support grandfamilies. Marisa's dedication and lived expertise make her a valued voice in the movement to strengthen kinship care, ensuring that families like hers receive the recognition, resources, and support they deserve.

## Jordan Bartlett

Battle Creek, MI 49014

Jordan Bartlett is the co-founder of At Foster Greatness, a lived-experience-led organization working to transform the foster care system from the inside out. Grounded in the belief that meaningful system change must be shaped by those who have lived it, Jordan helps build and steward a platform where foster youth and alumni are empowered, supported, and heard. Jordan's work centers on elevating lived experience leadership, fostering innovation in support and empowerment, and co-creating solutions alongside youth, alumni, and allies. By bringing together community-driven strategies, technology, and advocacy, Jordan works to reshape policy and culture—ensuring that those most impacted by foster care are leading the conversation and setting the standard for change. Through At Foster Greatness, Jordan is helping build not just a community, but a movement—one that ensures every person with lived experience has a seat at the table and a voice in the future.





## MINNESOTA

### **Tori Petersen**

Albert Lea, MN 56007

Tori Petersen is a former foster youth who has transformed her experience into a powerful platform for advocacy, mentorship, and faith-based support. Now an adoptive and foster mother, she is deeply committed to uplifting youth who have experienced foster care. Alongside her husband, Tori runs Beloved Initiative, a faith-based organization dedicated to empowering and supporting youth with lived experience in foster care. Through mentorship, community involvement, and advocacy, she works to provide encouragement and guidance to young people navigating similar challenges. She also mentors girls in her local community, offering them support and wisdom drawn from her own journey. A sought-after national speaker, Tori frequently shares her story at churches and events, raising awareness about the realities of the foster care system and the importance of faith, family, and community. She is also the author of *Fostered: One Woman's Powerful Story of Finding Faith and Family through Foster Care*, where she details her personal journey and the role of faith in shaping her life. From working with nonprofits to fostering children in her own home, Tori's life is a testament to her deep love for others. Through every aspect of her work, she remains dedicated to providing hope, encouragement, and lasting change for youth and families in the foster care community.

### **Cameron Lee Small**

Bloomington, MN 55431

Cameron Lee Small is a mental health professional and transracial adoptee dedicated to educating and fostering empathy for those impacted by adoption. Through his social media platform, he helps others navigate the nuances of adoption, offering adoptee-centered videos, support groups, and parent workshops. His ability to challenge adoptive parents and social work systems—while maintaining a non-judgmental approach—encourages meaningful reflection and reform that centers adoptee voices. Cameron has been raising awareness about faith, child welfare, and mental health since 2012, following a life-changing reunion with his biological mother in Korea. Transracially adopted and the founder of Therapy Redeemed, he is a licensed professional clinical counselor with certification from the Permanency and Adoption Competency Certificate program. After a five-year search, he located and met his Korean mother in Seoul, an experience that deepened his connection to the adoptee community and inspired him to help others explore their own intersecting identities. In 2014, Cameron became the director of Holt International summer camp, furthering his work in adoptee advocacy. Over the past decade, he has collaborated with organizations worldwide, presenting trainings and workshops in various professional and clinical settings. Through his work, Cameron remains committed to walking alongside adoptees and adoptive families, fostering deeper understanding, healing, and systemic change.

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## Together for Good

St Paul, MN 55108

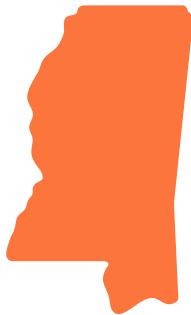
Together For Good creates pathways for the local church to come alongside vulnerable children and families through wrap around, relational care that helps stabilize families in crisis so they can move beyond it. Volunteers serve in a variety of ways — including hosting children during a crisis, providing respite care, building supportive relationships with parents through advocacy, and meeting practical needs such as meals. Together For Good operates in four locations across three states, with a team of professional staff who train volunteers in culturally competent, trauma informed caregiving and provide oversight and support for every case. Through these efforts, TFG works to ensure families never walk through a crisis alone and children are kept safe and supported.

## Fraser

Minneapolis, MN 55414

Fraser is a leader in adoption and foster care behavioral health services and supports for children and their families in the Twin Cities Metro Area. Fraser has developed a team of behavioral health providers with specialized training and skills to meet the unique needs of those involved with child welfare or on their adoption and foster care journey. A majority of Fraser's Foster and Adoptive Family Support team member have completed the Permanency and Adoption Competency Certificate Program from the University of Minnesota in addition to advanced training in "gold standard" early childhood mental health evidence based practices. Finally and most importantly, Fraser always aims to deliver these services and supports based on ongoing input from the children and families we serve. The program is grounded in cultural humility and operates from a person-centered vantage point.

In addition to Fraser's dedication to clinical quality, the program has established impactful partnerships throughout the Twin Cities Community to provide high quality coordinated care and rapid access to these needed services. These partnerships include, but are not limited, the University of Minnesota Adoption Medicine Clinic, Hennepin County's Caring Connection 4 Kids and Proof Alliance. These partnerships have allowed children and families involved with child welfare, in foster or adoptive care to receive services and supports in a timely fashion. Fraser's Foster and Adoptive Family Support program knows that time is of the essence when care is needed. Despite the huge mental health needs in the community, Fraser has dedicated availability for these services so that children and families can access care within weeks of reaching out. Fraser is committed to continuing to make life changing impacts on the lives of children and families on their child welfare, foster care and adoption journeys.



## MISSISSIPPI

### **Mary Hawkins**

Brandon, MS 39047

Mary Hawkins is a dedicated and deeply compassionate pillar of her community, known for her tireless support of foster families across Mississippi. Over the years, she has donated tens of thousands of dollars' worth of clothing, diapers, and essential living supplies to thousands of children in need. Mary is often the first person foster parents call—day or night—when they need support, and she consistently steps in to help without hesitation. Through her work, Mary gathers and organizes a wide range of critical resources for foster families, including diapers, wipes, formula, bottles, clothing, bedding, games, and toys, offering them free or at very minimal cost. She collects donations year-round and dedicates countless hours each week to sorting and distributing these items on her own time. Her store serves as both a resource and a lifeline for foster families, with all proceeds directly benefiting those caring for children in foster care. Mary's generosity, selflessness, and unwavering commitment to serving others make her truly deserving of recognition.

### **Beacon House Adoption Services**

Gulfport, MS 39501

Beacon House Adoption Services is a licensed 501(c)(3) nonprofit adoption agency with offices in Louisiana, Florida, and Mississippi. Founded in 1989, Beacon House has a long-standing tradition of supporting adoptive families and birth parents across the United States. With no waiting list, in-house recruitment of birth mothers, low staff turnover, and more than 30 years of experience, Beacon House maintains a strong track record of success in domestic infant adoption. Beacon House Adoption Services is committed to supporting all members of the adoption triad, from birth parents to adoptive families. The organization provides comprehensive resources for birth parents, including financial assistance for birth mothers considering adoption. Beacon House also conducts home studies and required pre-adoptive trainings to ensure every child is welcomed into a safe, loving, and prepared family environment. By working closely with both birth parents and adoptive families, Beacon House helps build meaningful connections and facilitates ongoing relationships that support positive adoption outcomes. With a legacy spanning more than three decades, Beacon House continues to make a lasting impact on the lives of children and families throughout Louisiana, Florida, and Mississippi.

### **Thomas Dent**

Ridgeland, MS 39157

Thomas Dent is an adoptive and former foster parent with extensive experience serving children and families within Mississippi's child welfare system. He previously worked with the Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services for more than five years, including serving as Director of Faith-Based and Volunteer Services and as Foster Parent Liaison, where he supported caregivers and strengthened partnerships across the state. Thomas currently serves as a Constituent Services Representative for U.S. Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith, continuing his commitment to advocacy and public service. Having both lived and professional experience in child welfare, Thomas understands the challenges that accompany this calling. Through it all, he carries a deep and steady hope rooted in his faith in Jesus—the Father of the fatherless—which continues to guide his work and service to others.

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## **Sara & Nic Pendleton**

Biloxi, MS 39532

Sara and Nic Pendleton have been foster parents for more than 15 years and have welcomed over 25 children into their home. Passionate advocates for foster care, they have inspired others to answer the call to foster, including those who first learned about fostering through their example. The Pendeltons have a unique foster care journey, marked by their deep commitment to caring for medically fragile children. They often welcome children directly from settings, such as state hospitals, providing them not only with critical medical care, but with the stability, love, and belonging of a family. When reunification is not possible, they offer something permanent—adopting children and giving them a forever home. To date, Sara and Nic have adopted five children from foster care and are also parents to one biological son. Beyond meeting the intensive medical and daily needs of the children in their care, the Pendeltons take time to understand each child's unique abilities and advocate fiercely on their behalf. Their advocacy extends beyond their own family, as they work to amplify the voices of children with similar needs. From empowering their autistic daughter to advocate for herself and access appropriate educational supports, to building a statewide community for caregivers of medically fragile children and speaking with foster parents across the state, their impact reaches far beyond their home. Through their compassion, advocacy, and unwavering dedication, Sara and Nic Pendleton embody the true spirit of foster care and are widely regarded as true angels in adoption.

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## MISSOURI

### **Ian Forber Pratt**

Ballwin, MO 63011

Ian Forber Pratt, MSW, is a leading expert in child protection and child care system reform, with experience working in Guatemala, India, Moldova, South Africa, Sri Lanka, the United States, and globally. As the Director of Global Advocacy & Growth at Children's Emergency Relief International (CERI), Ian focuses on driving systemic change for children and families. Ian is passionate about bridging the gap between policy and practice in child welfare and protection, at the global, state, and local levels. He was a member of the drafting committee for India's first national foster care legislation and has been a key figure in shaping policy around sponsorship, family strengthening, aftercare, and foster care at both state and national levels in India. Currently, he serves on the drafting committee for India's first-ever Sponsorship and Family Support Guidelines. In addition to his work in India, Ian consults for international organizations on strategic planning, theory-of-change development, and family-based alternative care. He is an expert in the U.S. child welfare system, focusing on scaling programs and driving large-scale change. Ian also offers training and consultation on mindset shifts, social change, and reflective competence, with seminars on power, proximity, and social change in child welfare care reform. As an international adoptee, Ian brings a deeply personal perspective to his work. He specializes in therapy for adoptive families—both international and domestic—focusing on identity, root search, and cultural competence.

### **Brandon Fisher**

Nevada, MO 64772

Brandon Fisher is a dedicated advocate for children, working both professionally and personally to support foster and adoptive families. Before becoming a judge, he worked as an attorney, assisting couples with fostering and adoption processes. In 2018, Brandon was appointed to the 28th Judicial Circuit Court of Missouri, where he has had a significant impact on the lives of children and families across four counties. His commitment to child welfare was further demonstrated in 2022 when he swore in as the Associate 28th Circuit Judge. Beyond his professional role on the bench, Brandon is also a foster and adoptive parent, which reflects his deep personal dedication to helping children in need. He continues to be an unwavering advocate for children, using his platform as a judge to influence positive change in the foster care and adoption systems. His work and personal commitment exemplify his passion for creating better outcomes for children and families.

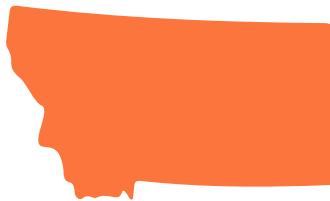
### **Kelly Ellison**

Kansas City, MO 64113

For more than 25 years, Kelly Ellison has helped adoptive families overcome one of the greatest barriers to adoption: funding. Working with adoption agencies nationwide, she is widely known and trusted across the adoption community. Thousands of families have been able to move forward with adoption because Kelly connects them to critical financial resources, including fundraisers, crowdfunding, the adoption tax credit, adoption loans, and adoption grants. Known for her unparalleled expertise in adoption financing, Kelly also brings something equally important—strong, trusted relationships with grant-making organizations. Through fair and effective advocacy, she works to ensure that financial constraints are never the reason a family is unable to adopt.

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## MONTANA

### **Sacred Portion Children's Outreach**

Bozeman, MT 59718

Sacred Portion Children's Outreach is a 501(c)(3) state-licensed and Hague-accredited child-placing agency dedicated to uniting children with permanent families. As the only Hague-accredited adoption agency in Montana, they uphold the highest ethical standards set by the Hague Adoption Convention, ensuring the protection and well-being of children and families throughout the adoption process. Sacred Portion Children's Outreach conducts international and domestic adoption home studies and post-adoption supervision for families in Montana. They also facilitate inter-country adoptions from the Philippines and Colombia for families across the United States, expanding opportunities for children in need of permanent, loving homes.

### **ChildBridge**

Bigfork, MT 59911

ChildBridge is a Montana-based nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting children and youth who have experienced, or are at substantial risk of, abuse, neglect, or abandonment. The organization works to ensure that every child has a safe and permanent family to protect them from harm. ChildBridge recognizes and builds upon the protective capacities of families, incorporating them into assessments, decision-making, and action planning to improve safety, permanency, and well-being for children. The organization also partners with communities to strengthen prevention efforts and promote shared responsibility for the safety and stability of children and families.





## NEBRASKA

### **Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Midland**

Omaha, NE 68102

For over 60 years, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Midlands has been dedicated to empowering children to reach their full potential and shape their futures. Supported by donors and volunteers, the organization fosters meaningful connections between adult mentors ("Bigs") and children ("Littles") aged 7 to 21 across the Omaha/Council Bluffs metro area. Mentorship plays a critical role in the lives of youth in foster care, providing them with stability, guidance, and a trusted adult who believes in them. Many children in the foster system face frequent transitions, making it difficult to build lasting relationships. Through one-on-one mentorship, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Midlands helps fill this gap by offering consistent support, encouragement, and life skills that prepare them for adulthood. A mentor can be a source of confidence, helping a child navigate challenges, set goals, and envision a future beyond their current circumstances. The impact of these mentorships extends beyond individual children—they strengthen communities by fostering resilience, promoting personal growth, and breaking cycles of adversity. With every match, Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Midlands creates opportunities for young people to thrive, ensuring they feel valued, supported, and empowered to pursue their dreams.

### **Astute Coffee**

Omaha, NE 68131

Astute Coffee is committed to empowering young adults who have been impacted by the foster care system by connecting them to the workforce and fostering their self-sufficiency through comprehensive personal and professional development programs. Founded with the mission of providing workforce development and personal growth opportunities, Astute Coffee offers a variety of programs designed to prepare individuals for success. These programs include financial literacy, cooking and nutrition, mindfulness meditation, academic tutoring, and more, all aimed at equipping young adults with the skills and knowledge necessary to thrive in both the workforce and in life. At Astute Coffee, the focus is on cultivating authentic, lasting relationships, recognizing that these connections can drive meaningful, long-term change. The organization demonstrates that even small-scale efforts can lead to significant, impactful outcomes.





## NEVADA

### **Sandra Kinne**

Lav Vegas, Nevada, 89135

Sandra Kinne is a dedicated leader in foster and adoptive care whose commitment to children and families exemplifies service, resilience, and compassion. She is the founder and principal of a charter school and a single mother of four, balancing her professional responsibilities with an unwavering dedication to providing safe, loving homes for children in need. Sandra initially welcomed one child into her home and later took in the child's sibling. When circumstances required the children to return to placement, she stepped forward again—this time welcoming additional siblings and ultimately reuniting all four children in her care. Her willingness to persevere through complex foster care transitions reflects both courage and deep commitment. Beyond her work as a parent and educator, Sandra actively supports her community through board service and civic engagement. She is a powerful example of what is possible when leadership, advocacy, and compassion come together, and she is highly deserving of recognition for her extraordinary impact.

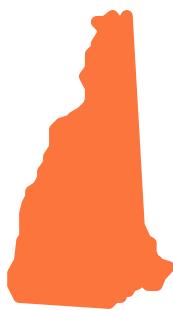
### **Laila-Rose Hudson**

Lav Vegas, Nevada, 89081

Laila-Rose Hudson is a fierce advocate and proponent of adoption. In her current role as a Children's Attorney at the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada in Las Vegas, she has assisted numerous families with achieving permanence through adoption. In addition to striving to provide foster youth with quality legal representation through established best practices, Laila-Rose also draws upon her own decade of lived experience in foster care. On her own time, she uses her personal and professional experiences to educate attorneys, judges, and other stakeholders as a conference presenter. Supervisors commend her for her passion, dedication, and the outcomes she achieves.

Laila-Rose has had several major successes related to adoption. For example, she had a client who desired adoption by a former foster parent across the country. Laila-Rose only had a first name and a state of residence, but she was able to locate the family and reunite her client. The adoption was finalized on July 11, 2024. Laila-Rose also displays a deep understanding of the importance of sibling connections. In a recent case, she successfully advocated for an infant client to be placed with the same family that adopted her older siblings against the preference of the caseworker. Through her unwavering commitment, lived experience, and exceptional advocacy, Laila-Rose Hudson exemplifies the profound impact that skilled, compassionate advocacy can have in securing permanent, stable futures for children in foster care.





## NEW HAMPSHIRE

### **Waypoint Help Along the Way**

Manchester, NH 03105

Waypoint is a trusted leader in family preservation and child welfare services in New Hampshire, working tirelessly to keep families together and ensure that children grow up in safe, loving environments. Through its Family Preservation & Strengthening programs, Waypoint provides critical support to prevent unnecessary foster care placements, stabilize at-risk families, and assist kinship and adoptive caregivers in navigating the challenges of parenting children who have experienced trauma. Recognizing that many children enter the foster care system due to preventable circumstances, Waypoint prioritizes early intervention. Their programs offer home-based family coaching, parenting education, and wraparound support to help parents develop the skills and resources needed to provide stable homes. By addressing issues such as poverty, mental health challenges, and family stress before they escalate, Waypoint has played a key role in reducing the number of children entering the foster care system. For kinship caregivers—relatives stepping in to care for children when parents are unable—Waypoint provides specialized support, ensuring these families receive the financial, legal, and emotional resources needed to provide stability. Additionally, for adoptive families, Waypoint offers post-adoption support, helping parents and children navigate the lifelong journey of adoption with counseling, education, and community connections. Waypoint's commitment to child well-being, family preservation, and permanency makes them a vital force in New Hampshire's child welfare landscape. Their holistic, family-centered approach ensures that children can remain with their families whenever possible and that adoptive and kinship caregivers receive the support they need to thrive. Their dedication to preventing foster care placement and strengthening adoptive families makes them a highly deserving candidate for this award.

### **Spaulding Academy & Family Services**

Northfield, NH 03276

For more than 150 years, Spaulding Academy & Family Services has been a leading provider of educational, residential, therapeutic, and foster care programs and services for children and youth with neurological, emotional, behavioral, learning or developmental challenges — including autism spectrum disorder — and those who have experienced significant trauma, abuse or neglect. Spaulding Academy & Family Services continually works toward delivering high-quality care and education with a culture based on kindness.

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## NEW JERSEY

### **Joi Fisher-Griffin**

Scotch Plains, NJ 07076

Joi Fisher-Griffin has made a remarkable impact on children and families affected by adoption and foster care, using her personal journey to inspire and empower others. As an adoptee herself, Joi leverages her life experiences—both the challenges and triumphs—to help others facing similar struggles. An educator, entrepreneur, and author, Joi uses her compelling memoir and best-selling children's adoption books to ignite hope and encourage individuals to share their stories. Her resilience and dedication to supporting children in foster care and adoption fuel her advocacy work. Joi serves on the Board of Directors for Miriam's Heart, where she actively works to provide resources and support to families navigating adoption. With a Master's degree in Educational Administration and a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice, Joi combines her educational expertise with a deep commitment to social justice. She leads support groups for adult adoptees and survivors of childhood trauma, helping individuals heal and embrace their futures. Joi also collaborates with the Child Advocacy Association of New Jersey (CAANJ) to address systemic issues in the child welfare system. Through her advocacy, she works to create lasting change and amplify the voices of marginalized communities, particularly those involved in adoption. Joi Fisher-Griffin is a true force for change, embodying integrity and compassion as she makes a profound difference in the lives of others, especially those affected by adoption and foster care.

### **Youth Consultation Services**

Newark, NJ 07104

Youth Consultation Services (YCS) has a rich history spanning over a century, beginning as a refuge for orphaned children and abandoned women. Today, YCS transforms lives across the state of New Jersey through 60 dynamic programs, including specialized schools, community mental health clinics, and residential care, all dedicated to empowering the most vulnerable.





## NEW MEXICO

### Hal Atencio

Albuquerque, NM 87120

Hal Atencio is a respected Trustee of the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys and a passionate advocate for family formation through adoption. His law practice is centered on adoption and representing foster parents, with a particular focus on ensuring that the legal process is ethical and child-centered. Hal is committed to improving adoption law in New Mexico and has taught numerous classes to his peers on adoption-related topics, sharing his expertise and commitment to best practices. In addition to his legal work, Hal is actively involved with the Adoption and Foster Care Alliance of New Mexico (AFCANM), where he has contributed to various initiatives, including chairing the Legislative Committee. His work with AFCANM aims to support and strengthen adoption and foster care policies in the state. His advocacy and volunteer efforts demonstrate his unwavering commitment to improving the lives of children and families in New Mexico. Through his legal practice, volunteer work, and leadership roles, Hal Atencio continues to make a significant impact on the lives of children and families, ensuring that ethical adoption practices and support systems are in place for those who need them most.

### The Foster Alliance

Albuquerque, NM 87125

The Foster Alliance's Essential Services program helps make kids and teens in foster care have what they need to feel safe, supported, and cared for—whether that's a bed to sleep in or the basics to get through the school year. Through the provision of critical items such as beds, clothing, school supplies, hygiene products, and other necessities, the program addresses immediate needs that can otherwise create instability or barriers to well-being. By partnering with child welfare professionals, caregivers, and community supporters, The Foster Alliance responds quickly and thoughtfully to requests, ensuring children are met with dignity and compassion during times of transition. Essential Services reflects The Foster Alliance's commitment to strengthening foster families and improving outcomes for young people by meeting fundamental needs and helping every child experience a sense of comfort, normalcy, and care.





## NEW YORK

### **Carla Riccobono**

New York, NY 10010

Carla Riccobono, LSW, is the Senior Director of the Foster Care and Adoption Program at New Alternatives for Children (NAC), where she has been a dedicated leader since 2001. Under her expert guidance, NAC's foster care program has not only thrived but exceeded expectations, with her team achieving an impressive 350% of their KINGAP goal—well beyond New York City's expectations for children leaving foster care through guardianship to kinship resources. This outstanding achievement was recently recognized by the city, resulting in a 50% increase in NAC's contract. Throughout her tenure, Carla has proven to be a resilient and innovative leader, especially during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the obstacles presented by the pandemic, she ensured that NAC's services remained uninterrupted, with her team continuing to make critical home and family visits while maintaining safety and working tirelessly to achieve permanency for children. Her leadership during this period exemplified her unwavering commitment to the families and children NAC serves, even at personal risk to herself and her team. Carla's visionary leadership and compassionate approach have had a profound impact on the foster care system, ensuring that NAC's clients receive the highest standard of care and support. Her ability to inspire her team, build strong relationships with families, and navigate complex challenges has made a lasting difference in the lives of children in need. Under her stewardship, NAC's foster care program has been a model of excellence, earning well-deserved recognition for its outstanding results.

### **Victory Christian Church**

Albany, NY 12206

Victory Christian Church in Albany has made a meaningful impact on the foster care community, led by Pastor Charlie, who has personal experience within the foster care system. Having experienced the challenges and emotional toll foster children often face, Pastor Charlie is deeply committed to addressing these needs, particularly the lack of personal belongings and the emotional impact of moving between homes. In 2021, the church opened "Our Store," a space dedicated to providing foster families with brand-new clothing, shoes, bedding, and other essential items, free of charge. Recognizing the difference that new, personal belongings can make in a child's sense of self-worth, the church aimed to provide foster children with items that could help them feel valued and supported during times of transition. "Our Store" operates as a community resource, with donated goods from local supporters, offering practical help to foster families. By ensuring that children have access to new clothing and other essentials, the church is working to foster a sense of dignity and confidence in the children they serve. Pastor Charlie's commitment to supporting the foster care community continues to inspire, demonstrating the power of community-driven support and collective care.

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## **Lori Kling**

New York, NY 10011

Lori Kling, LMSW, is a highly respected Adoption Social Worker with a remarkable 40-year career in New York State, where she has played an integral role in shaping the lives of hundreds of adoptive families. Known as one of the foremost adoption professionals in the state, Lori has dedicated her career to helping children find loving, permanent homes, and has made a lasting impact on the adoption community. In 1988, Lori founded Adoption Options, a private practice focused on facilitating the adoption process. Her expertise in home studies, post-placement services, and counseling provided invaluable support to adoptive parents as they navigated the complexities of adoption. Her commitment to supporting families and children throughout the adoption process has earned her a well-deserved reputation as a compassionate and skilled adoption professional. Throughout her career, Lori Kling has been an unwavering advocate for children in need of loving homes, and her work has touched the lives of countless families, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to grow up in a safe and nurturing environment.

## **Rich Buley-Neumar**

Castleton-on-Hudson, NY 12033

Rich Buley-Neumar has spent over 25 years deeply involved in the adoption world, a journey that began when he chose to grow his family through adoption. As the Deputy Director of Family Focus Adoption Services, a state-wide, full-service adoption and social services agency in New York, Rich plays a vital role in the agency's operations and its commitment to supporting families through the adoption process. His deep knowledge of adoption, particularly with challenging populations, makes him an invaluable resource to individuals and families considering adoption, especially foster-to-adopt. Rich's expertise shines in his role as a Family Transition Worker, where he listens with empathy and provide compassionate support. Drawing on his own personal adoption journey, he guides families through difficult transitions and provides hope during challenging times. Rich's talent for fostering understanding and hope, even in the most difficult situations, has made him a trusted advocate for both adoptive families and the children in need of a permanent home. Rich is instrumental in shaping the unique programs at Family Focus, ensuring they meet the specific needs of children in the foster care system.

## **Faith Rousso**

Garden City, NY 11530

Faith Rousso, a New York adoption attorney and adult adoptee, has spent over 30 years advocating for children and families in the foster care and adoption system. Her legal career is driven by a deep passion for protecting children's rights, both in the courtroom and the community. A respected leader, Faith serves on the Nassau County Bar Association Board and the WE CARE Advisory Board, the association's charitable arm. As co-chair of WE CARE's annual Children's Festival, she ensures that hundreds of children receive toys, educational materials, and enriching experiences, often funding much of the event herself. Faith's dedication extends to the Nassau County Women's Bar Association, where she was honored with the Virginia C. Duncombe Award for her contributions to adoption law education. Recently, she joined the Metro NY Board of Gift of Adoption and dedicates significant time to pro bono legal work. Through her extensive work in both legal and community-based advocacy, Faith Rousso has helped hundreds of children and families, offering them a voice and the resources needed to succeed.



## **Lisa Goldberg**

White Plains, NY 10605

Lisa Peck Goldberg has dedicated nearly two decades to advocating for foster and adoptive parents across New York State, first as a solo practitioner and now as the head of her own law firm. With unmatched empathy and an unwavering commitment to justice, she has helped countless families navigate the complexities of adoption and foster care, ensuring children find safe, loving, and permanent homes. Beyond the courtroom, Lisa is a driving force for systemic change. She is currently spearheading a New York adoption coalition, uniting adoption professionals to collaborate with elected officials on policies that safeguard the rights of children, adoptive parents, and expectant mothers. Her advocacy extends to education and outreach—she presents annually at the Adoptive Parents Committee Conference and leads workshops across New York, equipping foster and adoptive parents with knowledge about their rights and the realities of the adoption journey. Her tireless dedication to strengthening families and improving adoption policies makes her an invaluable leader in the adoption and foster care community.





## NORTH CAROLINA

### Congregations for Kids

Charlotte, NC 28212

Congregations for Kids (CFK) empowers the Charlotte community to support children, families, and social workers in the foster care system through four key pathways: Foster, Mentor, Serve, and Give. In addition to recruiting and training foster parents, CFK provides mentorship programs, assists aged-out youth, and fulfills tangible needs for families and social workers. One of CFK's most impactful initiatives is the Socialight Program, launched in 2018 in response to Mecklenburg County DSS identifying social worker turnover as a critical challenge. Through Socialight, community members sign up to provide ongoing encouragement and support to child welfare social workers, fostering personal connections that uplift those on the front lines of foster care. Since its inception, the program has played a pivotal role in reducing social worker turnover in North Carolina's largest county—from 69% in 2018 to just 19% in 2020. This reduction has profound implications, as children in foster care who maintain a single social worker achieve permanency 74.5% of the time, compared to just 17.5% for those who experience turnover (National Center on Crime and Delinquency). CFK's innovative approach strengthens the entire foster care ecosystem by enhancing social worker retention and, in turn, improving outcomes for children. Recognizing its success, CFK now offers the Socialight Program at no cost to organizations nationwide, helping communities across the country tackle high turnover rates and create more stable, supportive environments for foster children.

### Kelsey Vander Vliet Ranyard

Raleigh, NC 27617

Kelsey Ranyard Vander Vliet is a passionate advocate for ethical adoption policies and family preservation, with a strong commitment to supporting expectant and birth parents. She leads initiatives that promote unbiased, ethical care for women considering adoption, ensuring that hospital staff and medical professionals are equipped with the knowledge and training to provide non-coercive, compassionate support during the decision-making process. Previously, Kelsey played a key role in shaping policies that uplift the voices of birth parents and protect the integrity of the adoption process. With firsthand experience as a birth mother, she brings invaluable insight to her work, striving to improve the systems that impact adoption and reproductive decision-making. Beyond her policy and advocacy work, Kelsey is an author and podcast host, using her platform to foster greater understanding and ethical progress in adoption practices. She is a co-producer of the documentary, *Love, Your Birth Mom*, and co-author of *Adoption Unfiltered: Revelations from Adoptees, Birth Parents, and Adoptive Parents*. Additionally, she co-hosts Twisted Sisterhood, the first-ever podcast dedicated to birth mothers, creating a space for honest, unfiltered conversations about adoption, motherhood, and the complexities of modern parenting. Her unwavering commitment to ethical adoption reform, family-centered policies, and honest storytelling makes her an outstanding candidate for this award.



## **Patsy & Larry Simpson**

Mebane, NC 27302

Patsy and Larry Simpson have made a profound impact in the world of adoption and foster care through their unwavering dedication and tireless advocacy. Their personal experience as foster and adoptive parents has shaped their deep commitment to improving child welfare systems, not only within their community but on a broader scale. Throughout their years of fostering, Patsy and Larry have been pivotal in driving positive changes in their local child welfare community. Their leadership has fostered collaboration among governmental agencies, non-profit organizations, and families, creating a more unified and supportive environment for all involved in the foster care system. Patsy's advocacy work extends beyond her role as a foster and adoptive parent. As a former member of the Alamance-Burlington School Board, she fought for equitable educational opportunities and representation for all children, particularly advocating for Black and Brown children. Her efforts were instrumental in promoting high academic standards and inclusive practices within the school system. Their combined legacy of leadership, advocacy, and collaboration continues to inspire and influence positive change in the foster care and adoption communities. Patsy and Larry's dedication to improving the lives of children and families has created lasting, transformative impacts, and they remain champions for a brighter future for all children in need of safe, loving homes.

## **Peter Mutabazi**

Charlotte, NC 28278

Peter Mutabazi is a powerful advocate for children and families, whose life story and service exemplify the spirit of the Angels in Adoption award. At just 10 years old, Peter fled an abusive home in his native Uganda and spent five years living on the streets of Kampala, where survival was a daily struggle and street children were largely ignored and dehumanized. A single act of kindness—when a stranger simply asked Peter his name—altered the trajectory of his life. That moment of being seen and valued became the foundation of Peter's life purpose: to ensure that vulnerable children are known, heard, and loved. In 2017, Peter asked a question few dared to consider: "Can a single man become a foster dad?" He answered it through action. Since then, he has welcomed 47 children into his home and permanently adopted four, providing safety, stability, and unconditional love. Through a candid and widely followed social media platform reaching more than 3 million people, Peter educates the public about the realities and trauma faced by children in foster care, helping to break stigma and inspire others to engage. Peter is the author of two books, *Now I Am Known* and *Love Does Not Conquer All*, and the founder of the Now I Am Known Foundation, which creates personalized bedroom makeovers for foster youth entering their forever homes—restoring dignity, inspiring hope, and affirming each child's worth. His advocacy and lived experience have garnered national media attention, including features on NewsNation, CNN, and Fox News, and he is a sought-after speaker at child advocacy conferences nationwide. Through humility, resilience, and unwavering commitment, Peter Mutabazi has transformed dozens of lives and continues to reshape how foster care and adoption are understood. His work embodies compassion in action and holds the promise of lasting impact for vulnerable children and families.

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# **Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina (FFA)**

Mebane, NC 27302

Since 1975, the Foster Family Alliance of North Carolina has been a steadfast advocate for foster caregivers and a beacon of support for children in need. Founded on principles of compassion and dedication, FFA-NC has played a pivotal role in enhancing North Carolina's foster care landscape. From providing crucial education and resources to championing legislative reforms, FFA-NC remains committed to ensuring every child in foster care receives the love, stability, and support they deserve.

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## NORTH DAKOTA

### **Catholic Charities North Dakota**

Fargo, ND 58104

Catholic Charities North Dakota (CCND) has been a steadfast advocate for child welfare in the state for over 100 years, offering a broad range of services to support North Dakota's children and families. With programs focused on adoption, guardianship, and support for pregnant and parenting individuals, CCND works tirelessly to strengthen families and provide care for vulnerable populations. Through its advocacy for children in foster care, CCND emphasizes permanency, so that all children have access to safe, nurturing, and permanent families. The organization also offers critical support through clinical therapy, counseling, and professional development for families and adoption professionals, ensuring that children and families receive the resources they need to thrive. In recognition of their outstanding contributions, CCND was honored with The Annual Parent Guide Parent's Pick in 2023, underscoring the organization's deep commitment to supporting families in North Dakota. Their ongoing work continues to foster lasting, positive change, connecting individuals to create strong, supportive families for generations to come.

### **The Village Family Service Center**

Fargo, ND 58106

The Village Family Service Center has been a cornerstone of support for children and families since 1891. With a focus on permanency through adoption and foster care, The Village is committed to ensuring that every child has the opportunity to grow up in a stable, loving home. Their adoption and foster care programs provide essential services to children in the child welfare system, helping to find permanent homes, support foster families, and offer therapeutic and family-centered services. The Village's holistic approach and innovative care models continue to make a profound impact on families across North Dakota and Minnesota.





## Rosemary Ebner Pomeroy

Delaware, OH 43015

Rosemary Ebner Pomeroy is a dedicated and highly skilled adoption attorney with a private practice specializing in family formation. She expertly guides prospective adoptive parents, birth parents, and surrogates through the complex legal process of adoption, providing critical support with contracts and legal procedures. Rosemary played a key role in helping former Franklin County Probate Judge Robert G. Montgomery establish the Adoption Attorney Steering Committee at the Franklin County Probate Court. In addition to her practice, Rosemary served as a Staff Attorney at the National Center for Adoption Law and Policy at Capital University Law School from 2012 to 2015, where she contributed to numerous adoption initiatives, including overseeing Adoption Academy events and supporting law students in foster youth advocacy. Her longstanding commitment to the field is reflected in her role as a Fellow of the Academy of Adoption & Assisted Reproduction Attorneys since 2004.

## National Down Syndrome Adoption Network

Cincinnati, OH 45212

The National Down Syndrome Adoption Network (NDSAN), a program of the Down Syndrome Association of Greater Cincinnati, is a domestic program serving children and families in all 50 states. The NDSAN is a connection point between expectant and birth families, and families who want to adopt a child with Down syndrome. The NDSAN provides support, education, and connections to families on the adoption journey, as well as medical professionals and adoption agencies. Its mission is to ensure that all children born with Down syndrome have the opportunity to grow up in loving families. The NDSAN is led by Stephanie Thompson, a tireless advocate for children with Down syndrome. She has dedicated her career to ensuring that families have accurate information about Down syndrome at the time of diagnosis and are informed of their options related to raising a child with Down syndrome and/or creating an adoption plan. She counsels families throughout the adoption journey, walking alongside them every step. As a mother of an adult son with Down syndrome, she is able to provide families with a unique and honest perspective on raising a child with Down syndrome. Stephanie's commitment to families goes well beyond guiding them through the steps of the adoption process. She is committed to meeting each family where they are and empowering them to make loving choices for their family. Over the last decade, the NDSAN has supported approximately 500 families who receive a diagnosis of Down syndrome for their child. More than 250 children with Down syndrome have been connected to a loving adoptive family. In addition, nearly 200 families have decided to parent their child with Down syndrome as a result of the support and education provided by Stephanie. Stephanie meets each family with the utmost empathy, compassion, respect, and encouragement.

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## Aaron Ockerman

Delaware, OH 43015

Aaron Ockerman is the President of Ockerman Consulting, a full-service government affairs firm specializing in adoption-related legislation. Since 2006, Aaron has demonstrated extraordinary leadership and dedication, becoming a driving force behind Ohio's adoption reforms. His tireless advocacy has led to significant legislative victories, including the successful push for access to records for 400,000 adoptees and criminalizing fertility fraud in Ohio. Beyond legislative accomplishments, Aaron has been instrumental in leading a coalition of adoption agencies and advocacy groups to address the growing issue of unlicensed adoption intermediaries in the state. His role in connecting stakeholders and navigating complex legal landscapes showcases his unwavering commitment to the adoption community. Aaron's passion for adoption advocacy is not just about policy changes; it's about improving the lives of children and families, and his persistence has made a lasting impact on Ohio's adoption system. His ability to mentor and inspire new advocates also highlights his dedication to fostering the next generation of leaders in the field.





# OKLAHOMA

## **Dr. Deborah Shropshire**

Oklahoma City, OK 73105

Dr. Deborah Shropshire is a dedicated, passionate, and innovative leader currently serving as the Director of Child Welfare for the state of Oklahoma. Dr. Shropshire is a certified pediatrician who found her calling in the field of social work, specifically working with children from hard places and those who care for them. She is the founder of Foster Hope Clinic, a program located in Tulsa and Oklahoma City and designed specifically to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children who have experienced significant abuse in their lives. Dr. Shropshire has worked diligently during her time as the Director of Child Welfare to make necessary system changes by rallying frontline workers, foster and adoptive parents, state leaders, and community stakeholders to break down barriers of service and to ensure each individual child's needs are met and pathways developed so that they may overcome their past and eventually thrive. Focusing on utilizing the Theory of Hope, Dr. Shropshire has undoubtedly changed the face of child welfare in Oklahoma resulting in long-lasting changes that will impact outcomes for families for generations to come.

## **Lauren Frost**

Tulsa, OK 74133

As Miss Oklahoma 2024, Lauren Frost is a dedicated advocate for adoption and foster care, using her platform to raise awareness and drive meaningful change. As a proud adoptee, Lauren has devoted over 1,500 hours to her community service initiative, "Adoption as Oklahoma's Option," championing the importance of permanency for children in need. Lauren has cultivated partnerships with leading national and international adoption organizations, assisted in court adoptions, and engaged directly with foster and adoptive communities. She has traveled to 39 states, speaking to more than 11,000 students about adoption, organized donation drives to provide essential items for children in foster care, and played a key role in numerous fundraising events and galas. Through personal conversations with over 500 foster children, adoptees, adoptive parents, and prospective parents, Lauren continues to be inspired and motivated by their stories. As Miss Oklahoma, Lauren will travel across the state, furthering her mission and strengthening partnerships with adoption organizations. Through her advocacy and personal journey, she highlights the profound impact of a stable, loving family. Her legacy is one of hope, spreading the message: "There are no unwanted children, just unfound families."



## Alexandria Temple

Bixby, OK 74008

Alexandria "Alex" Temple is a proud member of the Cherokee Nation and a partner at Beloved Adoption Law, PLLC. She grew up in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, and earned a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from the University of Oklahoma. Alex graduated with honors from the University of Tulsa College of Law in 2015, where she served as a Director on the Public Interest Board and earned CALI Awards for achieving the highest grades in Legal Research & Writing II and III. Alex has long been passionate about children's advocacy, a commitment that has deepened since becoming a mother. She has worked in the Civil Division of the Public Defender's Office and volunteered with Tulsa Lawyers for Children, developing a deep respect for foster families, step-parents, grandparents, and others who open their homes to children in need. In her legal practice, Alex focuses on research, writing, and appellate advocacy, and she strives to support families with empathy, compassion, and excellence, recognizing the profound impact of stable, loving homes on children and society.

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## OREGON

### Christina Nelson

Corvallis, OR 97330

Christina Nelson is a dedicated advocate for children and families impacted by foster care and adoption. A mother of six, Christina and her husband expanded their family through both foster care and private adoption. After the birth of their biological son in 1994, they adopted two toddlers from foster care and later welcomed an infant through private adoption. In 2017, when two young sisters—her daughter's half-siblings—needed an immediate resource family, the Nelsons stepped in. Following the unexpected passing of the girls' mother later that year, they officially adopted their now-youngest daughters. Beyond her role as a mother, Christina has long been a steadfast supporter of children and families navigating the complexities of the foster care system. In the late 1990s, she fostered Meg, maintaining a lifelong connection even after Meg reunified with her biological family. Years later, when Meg faced the possibility of losing her own son to foster care, Christina provided informal yet vital support—offering respite care, mentorship, and stability. Thanks to her guidance, Meg and her family remained together and thriving. Committed to strengthening her community's support for vulnerable children, Christina played a key role in bringing Every Child Oregon to Benton County, helping to meet the immediate needs of children in foster care, resource families, child welfare professionals, and biological families. Her dedication of time, energy, and personal resources has contributed to the organization's success and impact. In addition to her advocacy work, Christina is an accomplished author. Her 2021 novel, *The Way It Should Be*, received critical acclaim for its poignant exploration of foster care, adoption, addiction, and the complex relationships within the child welfare system. Through her writing, volunteer efforts, and personal experiences, Christina remains committed to ensuring that all children—regardless of their circumstances—understand that they are loved, valued, and worthy of stability and support.

### Boys and Girls Aid

Portland, OR 97219

Boys and Girls Aid has been dedicated to improving the lives of Oregon's most vulnerable children for over 140 years. Founded by a group of Portland's visionary leaders, the organization was built on a foundation of compassion, innovation, and practical solutions to address the needs of children and youth in crisis. Throughout its history, Boys and Girls Aid has remained committed to identifying and responding to the evolving challenges faced by Oregon's children. Rather than offering only immediate solutions, the organization has developed a comprehensive infrastructure of therapeutic models and outcome-based interventions designed to create lasting, positive change in young lives. In 2007, Boys & Girls Aid established Safe Place, the first and only youth shelter in Washington County, as a direct response to the growing crisis of youth homelessness in the region. Additionally, the organization pioneered permanency services in Oregon, recognizing that foster children need not only nurturing families but also the skills to form healthy, lasting relationships. With a steadfast commitment to innovation and impact, Boys and Girls Aid continues to transform the lives of children and youth, ensuring they receive the stability, care, and opportunities they need to thrive.

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## PENNSYLVANIA

### **Marcía Hopkins**

Philadelphia, PA 19143

Marcía Hopkins is the Senior Manager of Youth Advocacy and Policy at the Juvenile Law Center (JLC), where she leads the organization's Youth Advocacy Programs. In this role, she empowers young people in Philadelphia with lived experience in foster care to advocate for meaningful policy reforms. She works closely with youth to identify systemic challenges they have faced, helping them develop presentations and policy recommendations that are shared with lawmakers and advocates across Pennsylvania. A recognized expert in child welfare policy, Marcía has played a pivotal role in expanding JLC's policy initiatives with a strong emphasis on racial equity and systemic reform. She also provides strategic guidance to organizations nationwide in developing youth advocacy programs, ensuring that those with direct experience are actively shaping the policies that affect them. Beyond her policy work, Marcía is a dedicated mentor, offering continuous one-on-one support to young people navigating challenges related to housing, education, and legal matters. Many youth remain engaged with JLC's programs for years, maintaining lasting connections with her even after their formal participation ends. Marcía brings both lived experience and professional expertise to her advocacy. Having experienced the foster care system firsthand in Philadelphia, she defied the odds to earn both her bachelor's and master's degrees in social work. Her work is distinguished not only by her deep policy knowledge but by her unwavering commitment, authenticity, and compassion. The impact of her efforts extends far beyond the individuals she supports—creating lasting change across systems and communities.

### **Elizabeth Vaysman**

Philadelphia, PA 19103

Elizabeth "Liz" Vaysman, Esq. is an adoption attorney licensed in Pennsylvania and New York, specializing in adoption and reproductive law. Liz represents both expectant parents and adoptive parents, guiding them through legal processes and advocating for their rights. Liz is especially passionate in advocating for the prohibition of unlicensed adoption professionals in private adoption and continuously advances her education to better serve her clients. Liz is also a voice for raising the ethical standards in the private adoption field. She is a Fellow with the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys (AAAA), and a member of the American Bar Association Family Law Section and the Society for Ethics for Egg Donation and Surrogacy (SEEDS). Liz earned her law degree from American University in Washington, D.C., and graduated with a degree in Finance and Political Science from Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. Active in her community, Liz serves as a pro bono attorney for foster youth with the Support Center for Child Advocates and as a Board Member & Secretary with the Legal Clinic for the Disabled.



## Constance and Brian Iannetta

Glenside, PA 19038

Constance and Brian Iannetta are dedicated parents who have opened their hearts and home as kinship caregivers to three children, ultimately adopting two while supporting the successful reunification of the third with his biological parent. In December 2019, they also welcomed a biological child into their family. The Iannetta's story began decades prior to becoming parents. Constance herself aged out of foster care in 2002 at the age of 18. Having experienced her own challenges both while in care and upon exiting, she connected herself with peer groups which opened the pathway for her to become a passionate advocate for the rights of youth in the substitute care system. Her advocacy work extends to local, state, and national levels. Initially as a member of the Bucks County and Pennsylvania Youth Advisory Boards, she engaged in public speaking aimed to educate caseworkers, administrators, foster parents, lawyers, magistrates, legislatures, and others charged with developing policy for children and youth in substitute care. During Covid-19, Constance was a huge advocate in getting resources into the hands of youth and young adults who had transitioned out of care. Currently, as the founder of Fosterstrong, an organization whose goal is to connect this population to necessary resources, Constance is connected with many organizations in her community. Constance and Brian initially met in 2003 as friends before becoming a couple in 2007. From the beginning, Brian fully embraced Constance's mission and together, they have worked tirelessly to advocate for children, youth, and caregivers within the foster care and adoption communities. The Iannettas co-founded a movement and platform aimed at fostering kindness and healing, with a focus on raising awareness about the critical need for resources in the foster care system. Their efforts span a range of issues, including higher education, mental health, domestic violence, and self-care. Throughout their journey, they have organized car washes, bake sales, national awareness walks, support programs, and alumni reunions—all while balancing the responsibilities of home, family, and their respective careers. Their dedication to advocacy within the foster care and adoption communities is truly exemplary.

## Isaac Etter

Lancaster, PA 17602

Isaac Etter was transracially adopted as a young child. Since then, he has engaged in several nonprofits in his home community of Lancaster, PA. Isaac is also the founder of Identity, an organization that uses technology to empower foster and adoptive families. Through his work with Identity, Isaac makes a difference in educating parents involved in the child welfare sphere. Isaac gives keynote addresses and workshops for organizations across the U.S., including his recent speaking role at the Florida Adoption Council conference in 2023. Isaac also hosts monthly Q&A sessions for online listeners and partner organizations to learn more specifically about transracial adoptions. Isaac has been a featured guest on several podcasts, and even started his own podcast series with Identity called "Inside Transracial Adoption." In this series, Isaac talks with his adoptive mother, providing insights from their own experiences with transracial adoption in hopes of inspiring listeners in their own journeys. In all he does, Isaac seeks to highlight the many factors that make transracial adoptions complex and provides guidance to empower families in the midst of their own transracial adoption experiences. Recipients of his guidance and trainings comment on the greater understanding and empowerment they feel in their own fields of child welfare.

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## Children's Friend

Providence, RI 02903

Children's Friend is a leading organization dedicated to promoting the healthy development and well-being of Rhode Island's most vulnerable children and families. In response to the serious and sometimes fatal consequences of child abuse and neglect, the organization is undertaking a strategic realignment to strengthen prevention, intervention, and long-term outcomes for children. Children's Friend provides a comprehensive continuum of services, including adoption and foster care, parent education, Early Intervention, nurse home visiting for high-risk newborns through Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) and Healthy Families America (HFA), WIC, Early Head Start, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, Head Start, state-funded Pre-K, summer learning and enrichment programs, specialized child care for children with special needs, and family support and preservation services. The organization also operates Family Support Centers that offer crisis intervention, education, family literacy programs, advocacy, and connections to community resources. In 2019, Children's Friend served nearly 31,800 individuals, 91% of whom were living below the federal poverty level.

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## SOUTH CAROLINA

### Sharon Cole

Rock Hill, SC 29732

Sharon Cole is a retired adoption social worker who continues to serve in private practice, bringing decades of experience and expertise to her work. Colleagues describe her as a professional who upholds the highest ethical standards and strives to ensure the use of best practice methods in all aspects of adoption work. Sharon is known for maintaining a child-focused perspective at the core of her practice, always prioritizing the well-being of children in her care. In addition to her private practice, Sharon has trained staff at the Palmetto Women's Center (formerly the Crisis Pregnancy Center) in Rock Hill, SC, on South Carolina adoption laws and best practices for communicating with pregnant clients considering adoption. Sharon is an active member of The South Carolina Association of Pregnancy Care Centers, where she regularly participates in annual meetings and retreats that offer professional development opportunities. As a frequent presenter, she leads adoption training sessions for pregnancy center staff, board members, and volunteers across the state, further contributing to her long-standing role as a leader and educator in the field.

### Fostering Great Ideas

Greenville, SC 29607

Fostering Great Ideas is a nonprofit organization dedicated to reimagining the foster care system by restoring dignity and increasing stability for children and families impacted by foster care. Through innovative solutions and meaningful relationships, the organization strives to create lasting, positive change. Fostering Great Ideas envisions a world where every child thrives—empowered with hope, resilience, and a strong sense of belonging. Their programs support children and youth, strengthen families, and connect communities to foster a more compassionate and effective system of care. The organization provides a wide range of services, including mentorship, tutoring, and college planning for youth in foster care. They also offer support for birth mothers navigating reunification, relatives caring for children placed elsewhere, siblings separated in care, and individuals interested in becoming foster parents. Additionally, Fostering Great Ideas educates the community on the realities of foster care through workshops and mobilizes passionate volunteers to advocate for systemic improvements. At its core, Fostering Great Ideas is committed to ensuring every child knows they matter, building healthy relationships for long-term well-being, and driving collaborative change to transform the foster care system.



## **South Carolina Youth Advocate Program (SCYAP)**

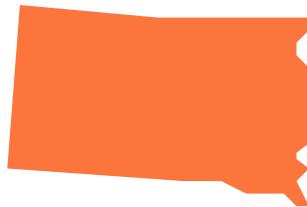
Columbia, SC 29210

South Carolina Youth Advocate Program (SCYAP) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing foster care services and non-residential, community-based programs for at-risk and special needs children. SCYAP offers innovative and flexible programs designed to meet the unique needs of the children and families they serve. The organization supports children with a wide range of emotional, behavioral, mental, and medical needs, offering services that include out-of-home therapeutic care, community-based programming, and in-home intervention. Depending on the program, SCYAP serves children from birth to age 21, along with their families. Guided by the belief that every child deserves a permanent home and family, SCYAP emphasizes the importance of family and community as essential resources for fostering positive development and long-term well-being.

## **Tricia Williamson**

Columbia, SC 29201

With more than three decades of dedicated service, Tricia Williamson has been a steadfast advocate for vulnerable children and families, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to adoption and child welfare. As the Senior Director of Domestic Family Services at Lifeline Children's Services, Tricia plays a pivotal role in equipping churches, families, and communities to support children in need of loving homes. Beyond her leadership within the organization, she has been a tireless champion for ensuring that children receive Christ-centered care and that families are empowered to navigate the adoption and foster care journey with confidence. Since beginning her career in 1992, Tricia has made a profound impact on the adoption and foster care landscape. Her leadership has been instrumental in expanding Lifeline's mission to provide ethical, faith-based adoption services, particularly during pivotal moments of change in the field. Her dedication to family preservation, international adoption, and post-adoption support has transformed the lives of countless children and families around the world. Tricia's wisdom, compassion, and unwavering commitment to vulnerable children have left a lasting legacy of hope and healing.



## SOUTH DAKOTA

### **Juanita Scherich**

Pine Ridge, SD 57770

Juanita Scherich is a committed advocate for tribal children and families in South Dakota, drawing from her own lived experience in the foster care system to address its challenges. She previously served as the director of the Oglala Sioux Tribe (OST) Oglala Nation Tiospaye Resource & Advocacy Center (ONTRAC), where she championed efforts to support tribal families and provide resources aimed at keeping families intact. In this role, Juanita worked diligently to advocate for culturally appropriate placements for children within their tribal communities, ensuring that family environments were aligned with each child's unique needs. Juanita's extensive experience includes a decade of service as the OST Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) director. After witnessing the ongoing struggles with high caseloads and staffing shortages, she retired. However, her commitment to helping tribal families remained strong, and in 2021, Juanita returned out of retirement to take on the role of ICWA director once again. Since then, she has continued her vital work advocating for children and families involved in the child welfare system, demonstrating her unwavering dedication and passion for keeping tribal families connected.

### **Children's Home Society of South Dakota**

Sioux Falls, SD 57110

Established in 1893, Children's Home Society of South Dakota is the state's oldest human services nonprofit organization. For more than 70 years, it served as South Dakota's primary orphanage and adoption agency, providing care and permanent families for thousands of children. As the need for orphanages declined nationwide with the introduction of foster care as the preferred method of care, the orphanage closed in 1968. Recognizing the evolving needs of children and families, Children's Home Society shifted its focus to developing special education and residential treatment programs. Over the years, the organization has continued to expand its continuum of services, which now includes Emergency Shelter and Crisis Intervention, Forensic Interviews and Advocacy, Residential Treatment and Education, Adoption and Foster Care, Nurse-Family Visitation, and Prevention Education and Training. These programs support families, individuals, and children of all ages, many of whom have experienced domestic violence, abuse, neglect, or other traumatic life events. Through all of its programs, the organization remains committed to strengthening families and ensuring children receive the care and services they need.





# TENNESSEE

## **Emily Chapman Richards**

Franklin, TN 37069

Emily Chapman Richards has been a dedicated advocate for adoption and orphan care since the age of 11. Her passion for these causes was sparked during a mission trip to Haiti, which led to the adoption of three daughters from China and the founding of Show Hope—a nationally recognized organization that has become a leading voice for adoption advocacy and orphan care. Through Show Hope, Emily has helped thousands of children experience the love of a family, both in the United States and globally. With over 15 years of service at Show Hope, Emily most recently served as Executive Director, where she played a pivotal role in expanding the organization's adoption assistance, medical care grants, pre- and post-adoption support, and student leadership initiatives. She is trained in Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI), a set of methods developed at Texas Christian University designed to foster trust and connection between caregivers and children by addressing their physical and emotional needs. Under her leadership, Show Hope established the Pre- and Post-Adoption Support program, which provides essential resources and practical training to parents, caregivers, church leaders, and professionals, equipping them to restore hope to children and families on their healing journeys. To date, the program has served over 110,000 families and individuals. Emily holds a bachelor's degree in International Studies and Religion from Baylor University and a master's degree in Theology from Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

## **Sharon Valente**

Memphis, TN 38105

Sharon Valente became an advocate for adoption after her family adopted her sons, Peter and Kevin. While advocating for adoption in 2003, a conversation about "Why Peter?" inspired another family to adopt—and motivated the Valentines to adopt a second child with special needs. Kevin's adoption further fueled Sharon's dedication to mentoring and supporting other families, particularly adoptive parents of children with special needs, providing reassurance and community for those navigating similar challenges. In 2015, Sharon chaired the Host Commission for the Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles, overseeing the recruitment and training of hosts for over 5,000 honored guests, including Heads of State, celebrities, and local officials. Her commitment to advocacy led to her appointment to the board of Leadership in Disabilities & Achievement of Hawaii in 2018, where she championed grant opportunities for programs supporting individuals with disabilities. Sharon's focus on her son Kevin brought her to the FIU Embrace Center for Advancing Inclusive Communities at Florida International University, a program dedicated to empowering individuals with disabilities to reach their fullest potential through research-based programming, community engagement, and professional skills development. In Fall 2023, Sharon joined the University of Tennessee Health Science Center, while her family remained in Miami so Kevin could complete his studies at FIU, where he will graduate in May 2024. She has committed to bringing a similarly impactful program to Tennessee, continuing her lifelong dedication to advocacy, inclusion, and opportunity for children and families.

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## **Suzanne Jones**

Cookeville, TN 38501

Suzanne Jones has dedicated her entire career to advocating for and supporting the most vulnerable children in Tennessee. With a deep commitment to helping children overcome the most challenging circumstances, Suzanne has spent over two decades working tirelessly to connect children with their forever families. She began her career with Youth Villages in March 2000, initially serving as a foster care counselor. In this role, Suzanne supported children in foster care by providing counseling and advocating for their well-being. She also worked closely with families of origin to navigate the foster care system and facilitate reunification when possible. In 2005, Suzanne transitioned to the role of Adoption Specialist, where she has played an instrumental part in helping over 300 children achieve permanency through adoption. Throughout her 24-year career, Suzanne has worked with children who have experienced severe abuse and trauma, often facing significant challenges in achieving stability. Many of the children she supports have complex needs, including older youth, those with special needs, and large sibling groups, some of whom are in residential treatment centers awaiting adoptive placements. Her dedication to children extends beyond her professional work. After tragically losing both of her niece's parents, she took permanent guardianship of her 13-year-old niece, providing her with a loving and supportive home during an incredibly difficult time. Suzanne's unwavering commitment to her niece exemplifies her personal and professional dedication to children's best interests. She is a true advocate who continually strives to make a lasting, positive impact on the lives of children in need.

## **Ximena and Richard Roseland**

Arlington, TN 38002

Ximena and Richard Roseland have dedicated the past 18 years to serving children at risk through direct care, advocacy, and program support. After marrying in 2006, they moved to Mexico, where they spent two years volunteering at an orphanage, fostering children, and providing critical support to other foster families. Their commitment continued in Ecuador, where they worked in a small school setting while fostering additional children for eight years. Upon returning to the United States, they settled in Arlington, TN, joining the volunteer staff of Orphanos, an international organization supporting vulnerable children in over 27 countries. At Orphanos, Ximena has played a vital role in administrative support, while Richard transitioned into direct foster care advocacy, championing initiatives to strengthen the foster care community in Shelby County, TN. Throughout their journey, the Roselands have self-funded their work, raising support through donations to continue serving children in need. Their unwavering commitment has led them to embrace the title "Missionaries to the Foster Care Community," reflecting their passion for empowering foster families and advocating for at-risk children both globally and locally.

## **Tennessee Alliance for Kids**

Nashville, TN 37204

Tennessee Alliance for Kids (TAK) meets essential needs to comfort children, empower youth, and offer hope to families impacted by the foster care system in Tennessee. The Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS) cannot solicit donations as a government agency and out of a need for tangible support, Tennessee Alliance for Kids was established in 2016. TAK serves the Davidson County DCS, Mid-Cumberland DCS, South Central DCS, Office of Independent Living, Tennessee Baptist Children's Homes and CASA Nashville.

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TEXAS

## The Attic Foster Network

Midland, TX 79708

The Attic Foster Network is dedicated to supporting foster families in the Permian Basin by addressing their tangible needs and fostering a community of like-minded individuals, while also engaging local churches. Their mission is to empower churches and their members to actively participate in the prevention, intervention, and emancipation of local orphans. The organization's vision is to eliminate the orphan crisis in Midland, Odessa, and the surrounding areas. The foster care situation in the Permian Basin is overwhelming, with nearly 90% of foster children being required to relocate from their hometowns, and approximately 60% moving more than 100 miles away. The Attic Foster Network aims to ensure that foster families are well-prepared, reducing the need for children to be placed far from their communities. Originally founded as a Facebook group for foster families to exchange resources, the Attic Foster Network now provides essential supplies, such as diapers, strollers, clothes, and more, all donated by the community. The organization also offers welcome wagons to families welcoming new arrivals, as well as training programs to equip foster families with the tools they need. By engaging local churches, the Attic Foster Network is building supportive communities that provide encouragement and resources to families, working to alleviate the foster care crisis in the region.

## David Cross

Fort Worth, TX 76129

Dr. David Cross is the former Rees-Jones Director of the Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development (KPICD) and a retired Professor in the TCU Department of Psychology. From 2016 to 2022, Dr. Cross led the Institute in its triple mission of research, education, and outreach to improve the lives of children who have experienced abuse, neglect, and/or trauma. He has authored numerous peer-reviewed publications addressing issues related to at-risk children. Along with his late colleague, Dr. Karyn Purvis, Dr. Cross co-authored, *The Connected Child: Bringing Hope and Healing to Your Adoptive Family*, a widely acclaimed resource aimed at helping adoptive parents understand the needs of children who have experienced trauma. *The Connected Child* continues to be a best-seller among adoption books. Together, Drs. Purvis and Cross created Trust-Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI®), a holistic, attachment-based, trauma-informed, and evidence-based intervention designed for children who have experienced relational trauma. Dr. Cross earned his B.S. in Psychology from California State University, Fresno, and pursued graduate study at The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, where he earned both an M.A. in Psychology and an M.A. in Statistics. As the leader of KPICD, Dr. Cross advanced the Institute's mission, which includes training professionals worldwide in TBRI® and conducting research to deepen understanding of the complex needs of children affected by trauma. Under his leadership, the Institute successfully expanded its reach, offering training in 50 states and 57 countries.

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## Legacy Adoption Services

North Richland Hills, TX 76182

Legacy Adoption Services is committed to providing comprehensive, high-quality support to both expectant mothers and adoptive families. As a trusted resource, the organization offers guidance and essential services to ensure the well-being of children and those involved in the adoption process. Through rigorous background checks and thorough home studies, Legacy Adoption Services ensures that every child placed through their program is welcomed into a safe, stable, and loving home. In addition to facilitating secure placements, Legacy Adoption Services prioritizes the well-being of expectant mothers, offering financial assistance, maternity clothing, and access to proper medical care. By addressing both the emotional and practical needs of mothers facing unplanned pregnancies, the organization provides compassionate, individualized support during this critical time. Serving North Texas, Legacy Adoption Services is dedicated to creating positive futures for children and families through ethical, thoughtful adoption practices.

## Rachel Russo

Boerne, TX 78006

Rachel Russo is a dedicated advocate and foster parent who has provided a safe and nurturing home for 14 children over the past nine years. Recognizing the urgent need for resources to support foster and kinship families during the critical first days of placement, she took action. What began as a small effort in her garage—collecting and redistributing essential items such as car seats, beds, clothing, and strollers—has since grown into the Vault Fostering Community, a widely recognized nonprofit serving families across South Texas. Despite the challenges of fostering as a single parent, Rachel has remained unwavering in her commitment to the well-being of vulnerable children. She has adopted two sons and continues to foster their infant brother while ensuring they maintain strong connections with their biological siblings. In addition to her direct work with children and families, Rachel is an influential voice in the effort to reform the child welfare system. She collaborates with organizations such as the South Texas Alliance for Orphans, the Blue Ribbon Task Force, and the Bexar County Children's Welfare Board to drive meaningful change. Rachel's dedication to fostering, advocacy, and systemic reform exemplifies her role as a leader and changemaker in the child welfare community.

## Katy Padilla-Stout

San Antonio, TX 78255

Judge Katy Padilla-Stout serves as the 225th District Court Judge and Administrative Judge for the Bexar County Children's Court. A dedicated advocate for children in the foster care and adoption system, she has tirelessly worked to ensure their legal representation and well-being. Drawing from her experience in child welfare, Judge Stout brings perseverance and compassion to every case. Beyond the courtroom, she has successfully fought for critical resources for foster children, including securing specialized education for a blind and deaf child and advocating for a life-saving kidney transplant. In addition to handling a full caseload of CPS cases, she serves as an educational surrogate for foster children in public schools. Judge Stout not only speaks out about the urgent need for loving foster and adoptive homes—she leads by example. She and her husband have adopted two children from the foster care system, deepening her firsthand understanding of the challenges these children face. Through her unwavering commitment, she continues to drive meaningful change for vulnerable children and families.



## **Michele Nigliazzo**

Laredo, TX 78041

Michele Nigliazzo is an attorney, advocate, and adoptive mother with over two decades of experience championing the rights of children and families, particularly those affected by trauma. Her work includes special education advocacy, parent training, serving as a Court Appointed Special Advocate, and promotes trauma-informed practices among judges, attorneys, CASAs, and child welfare professionals. Having worked extensively in both Missouri and Texas, Michele now leads national efforts as the Courts Advocacy Director for the Attachment & Trauma Network. In this role, she coordinates advocates and liaisons across the country and spearheads initiatives, such as the Trauma-Focused Courts Summit. Drawing from her personal experience advocating for her own children's needs, Michele is dedicated to identifying and creating critical resources for adoptive and foster children nationwide.

## **Tracy Harting**

Pflugerville , TX 78691

Tracy Harting is a recognized leader in child welfare and adoption in Travis and Williamson Counties. She has represented countless children as an attorney ad litem, as well as numerous indigent parents seeking to reunify with their families. Tracy is known for her unwavering advocacy for her clients and her steadfast commitment to the best interests of each child. In addition to her legal work, she has mentored numerous attorneys in child welfare and adoption practices, helping to strengthen the next generation of advocates.

## **Christi Craddick**

Austin , TX 78703

Christi Craddick has served as Chairwoman of the Texas Railroad Commission since 2012. She holds a Doctor of Jurisprudence and works on environmental policy in the state of Texas. Christi is part of a family tradition of adoption and is the proud adoptive mother of her daughter, Catherine. They live together in Austin, Texas, and Christi's adoption story serves as an inspiring example of adoption in action, highlighting the importance of family and advocacy.





## Ashley Mitchell

Springville, UT 84663

Ashley Mitchell is the Founder and Executive Director of Lifetime Healing Foundation, a nonprofit organization that fosters innovative programming to support mental health initiatives for women who have experienced trauma through adoption, trafficking, sexual abuse, or any other form of exploitation. For over a decade, Ashley has been one of the most consistent and sought after birth mother voices in the nation. As a birth mother herself, Ashley is committed to increasing support, education, and resources for both birth mothers and adoptive families. She created the Back to Basics adoption education program which is the first and only adoption education platform for prospective adoptive parents that integrates the birth parent perspective. Additionally, she writes curriculum for transformative birth mother support groups and promotes openness and honesty within adoption. Through Knee to Knee, a program under Lifetime Healing Foundation, she has trained licensed adoption agencies and law firms in 11 states to provide effective post-placement support for birth parents. Beyond her nonprofit work, Ashley is the founder of Big Tough Girl, an advocacy platform focused on storytelling, education, and empowerment. She also co-hosts The Twisted Sisterhood Podcast, a dedicated space for birth mothers navigating post-placement life. With her core message—"Adoption is for life"—Ashley continues to be a powerful voice, ensuring that both adoptive and birth families receive the support they need to create loving, stable environments for their children.

## Donna Pope

Sandy, UT 84070

Donna Pope is a dedicated leader in the adoption community, renowned for her unwavering commitment to ethical adoption practices and birth parent advocacy. In 1999, she founded a domestic adoption agency with the mission of ensuring that birth mothers are treated with dignity and respect. For over 22 years, she has built and maintained a program that provides individualized, comprehensive support to birth mothers as they navigate the adoption process. Throughout her career, Donna has worked with thousands of birth mothers and has played a pivotal role in placing newborns in loving homes across the country. She is actively engaged in legislative efforts to reduce barriers to adoption and serves as a respected voice on Utah's Adoption Council. Her extensive experience in the field has earned her widespread recognition, particularly for her ability to engage with birth fathers. Known as the "Birth Father Whisperer," Donna excels at guiding these fathers toward understanding the best interests of their child while fostering lasting connections between birth families and adoptive families. As an adoptive mother of three sons, Donna understands firsthand the complexities of adoption and the challenges of single parenthood. Her unwavering support for her children reflects the same dedication she brings to the families she serves. Donna's lifelong contributions to birth families and adoptive families alike have had a profound and lasting impact, and her leadership in the adoption field continues to shape the future of ethical and compassionate adoption practices.



## Lance Rich

Bountiful, UT 84010

Lance Rich is a highly experienced adoption attorney who has represented adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoption agencies in a wide range of cases. As an adoptive father of three, he brings both professional expertise and personal insight to the adoption process. A dedicated advocate for ethical adoption practices, he serves as a Trustee of the Academy of Adoption and Assisted Reproduction Attorneys and is an active board member for United for Adoption, Utah Foster Care, and the Utah Adoption Council. Lance is a sought-after speaker on adoption law and has presented at conferences and seminars hosted by the Utah State Bar, the Utah Adoption Council, the National Business Institute, the American Academy of Adoption Attorneys, and the International Society of Family Law. He began his career representing children in the Michigan child welfare system and, as a Bergstrom Fellow in law school, received specialized training in child welfare law. His commitment to ethical and child-centered adoption practices continues to shape his work in Utah and beyond.

## Jenny Dew

Lehi, UT 84043

Jenny Dew is a dedicated foster and adoptive parent, children's mental health advocate, and champion for adoption permanency. She and her late husband of 44 years raised five children, including two adopted through Utah's foster care system in 1994. With decades of firsthand experience, Jenny has spent years studying Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), a condition common among children who have experienced severe neglect and abuse. Although her children are now adults, Jenny remains deeply committed to improving the foster care and mental health systems. She is the author of five children's books on adoption and trauma and serves as a parent leader with the Utah Parent Advocacy Council (NACAC), NAMI, and several online support groups for adoptive parents. Jenny's advocacy was driven by her personal struggle to secure mental health treatment for her two adopted children. Discovering that hundreds of adoptive families in Utah faced similar challenges, she took action. With residential treatment costs exceeding \$100,000 per year and many insurers refusing coverage, families were often forced to relinquish custody to access care. Jenny worked with DCFS, the Department of Justice, and Utah lawmakers, including State Representatives Erik Hutchins and Kay Christofferson, to address this crisis. Her efforts led to the unanimous passage of HB 0339 (Autumn's Bill) in 2016, ensuring that parents who adopted from DCFS were no longer charged with abandonment and that critical support was provided for children with severe mental health needs. Through her relentless advocacy, Jenny continues to be a powerful voice for adoptive families and children in need.

## A Act of Love

Sandy, UT 84070

Founded in 1993, A Act of Love Adoptions is a trusted 501(c)(3) Utah-licensed adoption agency dedicated to helping birth parents and adoptive families navigate the adoption process with care and compassion. Their mission is to create loving connections that lead to strong, stable families through adoption. What sets them apart is their deep understanding and empathy stemming from personal experience. The staff comprises adoptive parents, adoptees, and experienced professionals, each bringing a heartfelt commitment to the adoption journey. A Act of Love is creating lasting, meaningful families through adoption.





## VERMONT

### **Vermont Kin as Parents**

Burlington, VT 05408

Vermont Kin as Parents (VKAP) is a leading advocate and resource for kinship caregivers and the children they are raising across Vermont. Recognized for its strong advocacy efforts, VKAP works closely with families, serves on key committees to represent the voice of kinship caregivers, and champions legislative and policy changes to improve the well-being of children and families. The organization also collaborates with national agencies dedicated to supporting kinship families. VKAP offers a comprehensive range of services, including disaster support, parenting assistance, childcare resources, legal guidance, child development support, respite care, and adoption, foster care, and guardianship resources. Additionally, VKAP facilitates support groups and provides kinship guides to help caregivers navigate their journey. Through education, advocacy, and direct support, VKAP is making a lasting impact on kinship families across Vermont.

### **Spectrum Youth & Family Services**

Burlington, VT 05401

In 1970, a group of community members, in partnership with the Burlington Ecumenical Action Ministry, founded the Shelter Action Company (SHAC) to address the increasing number of at-risk youth running away from foster homes. This initiative later evolved into Spectrum Youth & Family Services, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting youth and their families in the Burlington and St. Albans areas. Today, Spectrum is a nationally recognized leader in empowering teenagers, young adults, and their families through prevention, intervention, and life skills programs. Each year, Spectrum serves approximately 1,400 individuals aged 12-26, offering a comprehensive range of services designed to support their successful transition to adulthood. These services include mentoring, housing, and counseling, among others. Spectrum's transitional housing program specifically supports youth aged 18-23 who have aged out of foster care and are in need of housing. The program provides a structured, supportive community where residents can develop independent living skills and gain the tools necessary for self-reliance. Additionally, the Spectrum Drop-In Center offers a safe space for young people to access essential services, such as meals, laundry facilities, showers, and access to computers and phones. Through these comprehensive services, Spectrum Youth & Family Services remains committed to its mission of empowering youth and their families to make sustainable positive changes, fostering a community where all young people have the opportunity to thrive.





## **Susan Branco**

Arlington, VA 22204

Dr. Susan Branco is a licensed professional counselor and a transracial and transnational adoptee from Colombia, South America. She is a long-standing advocate for increased adoption-related research and training within counselor education and is passionate about improving mental health outcomes for transracially adopted persons. For over 14 years she maintained an independent practice collaborating with adoptee children, adolescents, families, and birth parents. She applies her lived, clinical, and research experience to increase awareness about adoption counseling practice in a variety of ways. In 2015, Dr. Branco graduated from Virginia Tech with a doctorate in counselor education and supervision. During her doctoral studies until present day, Dr. Branco has published extensively in peer reviewed journals and book chapters on the topic of adoption, adoption counseling, and transracial adoption. Her work has been cited over 100 times by other scholars and the Netherlands' government in their 2021 report on international adoption practices. She has presented over 100 workshops, lectures, and trainings on the topic of adoption related counseling practices to high school, undergraduate and graduate students, teachers, families, mental health practitioners, adoption professionals, and her fellow adoptee community. Dr. Branco's advocacy work illuminates the need for culturally responsive and adoption fluent mental health services for adoptees and their families. Currently, she is a practicing counselor, serves as a tenure track Assistant Professor in the Counselor Education program at St. Bonaventure University, and is an instructor with the Post Adoption Certificate program at Rutgers University. In addition, Dr. Branco is a steering member of the Society for Adoptee Professionals of Color in Adoption. She is a mentor, dissertation and thesis advisor to other adoptees researching adoption related topics. Her recent research on Colombian adoptee international search and reunion is featured on a genealogy service, Myheritage, in their biweekly podcast.

## **Terri and Johnston Moore**

Moseley, VA 23120

Terri and John Moore are dedicated advocates for foster care and adoption, having adopted seven children—Ashley, Chris, Anthony, Brandy, Aruna, Hallie, and Emme—from Los Angeles County Foster Care. For 16 years, they were actively involved in the foster care and adoption community in Los Angeles before relocating to Richmond, Virginia in 2016 where they continue their mission of supporting vulnerable children and families. Committed to raising awareness, Terri and John promote foster care and adoption within area churches and advocate for children and families involved in the system. Terri previously served as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), while John is a writer, consultant, and frequent speaker at foster care and adoption events. Through his extensive outreach across Virginia, John has helped establish networks of support, connecting families with the resources needed to provide stable, loving homes. Passionate about community engagement, John often includes his children in his advocacy work, introducing them as a testament to the power of adoption. Their ongoing efforts continue to make a meaningful impact on foster and adoptive families throughout Virginia.

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## Zahra Marin

Springfield, VA 22152

Zahra Marin is a dedicated child welfare advocate and leader who began her advocacy journey at just 14 years old. A former foster youth from California, she has spent her career mobilizing, mentoring, and empowering foster youth, beginning with her work at California Youth Connection (CYC). In 2010, at the age of 18, she became the first youth board member of CYC's Board of Directors, where she played a pivotal role in developing a strong and supportive youth board member program. Since 2019, Zahra has been a key leader at the National Foster Youth Institute (NFYI), first serving as Organizing Manager before being promoted to National Organizing and Policy Director in 2020. She is widely respected for her leadership, fairness, empathy, and strategic thinking, earning recognition from NFYI's youth members, board of directors, and staff. Her ability to transform organizations, systems, and people has been instrumental in fostering a diverse, trauma-informed workplace that uplifts and values the voices of former foster youth. Zahra's impact extends beyond organizational leadership—she has played a critical role in shaping child welfare policy at both the state and federal levels. Her advocacy has helped pass key legislation, and her mentorship has empowered hundreds of current and former foster youth nationwide to become strong advocates for change. A passionate and authentic leader, Zahra continues to inspire the next generation of child welfare advocates through her commitment to inclusivity, collaboration, and system reform.

## Stacey and Kevin Reynolds

Oakton, VA 22124

Stacey and Kevin have been dedicated advocates in the adoption community for over 25 years. As proud adoptive parents, they have actively supported adoption awareness, advocacy, and fundraising efforts at both the national and local levels. Most recently, they co-chaired the National Council For Adoption's (NCFA) 40th Anniversary Fundraising Event at Nationals Park, which raised over \$340,000 to support NCFA's mission of research, advocacy, and awareness. Despite the event's original cancellation due to the pandemic, they successfully led efforts to reimagine and execute the celebration, featuring keynote speaker Hoda Kotb. Stacey also served on NCFA's Board of Directors for many years, chairing multiple committees and contributing to the organization's strategic initiatives. In recognition of their service, Stacey and Kevin were honored with NCFA's Friend of Adoption Award, one of the organization's highest distinctions. Their longstanding involvement with the Gladney Center for Adoption spans over two decades, including service on the Board of Directors and Leadership Council, chairing major fundraising initiatives such as the Gladney Cup and the Annual Daddy-Daughter Dance, and providing transitional care for infants awaiting placement. Beyond their leadership roles, Stacey and Kevin have mentored countless families navigating the adoption process, fostered relationships with birth parents, and worked tirelessly to promote adoption awareness in their community.



## **ECHO Family Care Partners**

Hampton, VA 23661

ECHO Family Care Partners was founded by Randal and Kelley Nichols, a foster and adoptive couple who recognized a critical need for greater community support in Coastal Virginia. After welcoming two children with significant special needs into their home, they saw firsthand that addressing the foster care crisis required more than adoption—it demanded a network of ongoing support for both foster families and at-risk families to prevent family separation and break the cycle of foster care. ECHO serves as a vital bridge between local DSS offices and faith-based organizations, nonprofits, and community groups, providing essential resources such as diaper bank support, emergency assistance, and trauma-informed training for professionals. The organization also introduced CarePortal to Coastal Virginia, facilitating direct connections between families in need and community members eager to provide support, all with the goal of preventing foster care placements. In 2023 alone, ECHO Family Care Partners served 466 families each month, generating an estimated economic impact of over \$580,000. Rooted in the belief that strong communities create strong families, ECHO continues to transform lives by fostering meaningful support networks for vulnerable children and families.

## **Chris Seaton**

Arlington, VA 22205

As a foster parent in Northern Virginia, Chris Seaton witnessed firsthand the gaps in the foster care system, recognizing that it alone cannot meet the needs of children, families, or young adults aging out of care. With a deep understanding of the challenges and an opportunity to engage the faith community, she sought to mobilize churches to support foster families, encourage social workers, and build lasting relationships with vulnerable youth. In 2018, with the support of a local church, Chris founded Project Belong VA, equipping and training churches in Fairfax, Arlington, and Alexandria to provide critical wrap-around support. Under her leadership, the organization has grown to a team of 12 staff serving 10 localities. By 2024, Project Belong had partnered with 79 churches to serve 344 social workers, 518 families, and 1,157 children across Northern Virginia. Through initiatives such as Care Communities, CarePortal, Social Stars, and Don't Go Alone, Project Belong connects foster, adoptive, and kinship families with vital community resources, reducing strain on social workers and improving outcomes for children. Chris's vision, collaborative leadership, and commitment to child welfare have established a unique and impactful model, strengthening families and increasing awareness of foster care and adoption throughout Virginia.





## WASHINGTON

### Community Health Care Foster Adoption Clinic

Tacoma, WA 98405

Community Health Care's Foster Adoption Clinic is dedicated to providing trauma-informed medical, dental, and behavioral health care for children and families impacted by foster care, adoption, and kinship care. Its mission is to create a trauma-minimizing healthcare home that recognizes the unique needs of these children and supports their overall well-being. Founded in October 2020 by an adoptive mother and Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioner (ARNP) seeking better care for her own children, the clinic has since served over 1,250 children and families through more than 4,000 healthcare visits. It provides specialized care to a diverse and underserved population across western Washington, including children in foster care, youth awaiting adoption, homeless youth, unaccompanied minors, pregnant teens in foster care, and young adults who have aged out of the system. Recognizing the profound impact of trauma, loss, and toxic stress on these individuals, the clinic is committed to delivering compassionate, comprehensive care tailored to their unique experiences. The clinic's highly trained team of six providers and staff ensures a welcoming, trauma-sensitive environment. Exam rooms are designed to feel like a cozy living room, with medical equipment brought in only when needed to reduce anxiety and sensory overload. Patients have access to sensory toys, chalkboards, craft tables, and a snack shack stocked with healthy options. Additionally, the clinic provides blankets, stuffed animals, and sensory toys to help comfort children during visits, reinforcing a sense of security and care. By prioritizing trauma-informed, patient-centered care, the Foster Adoption Clinic continues to fill a critical gap in healthcare services, ensuring that children and families affected by foster care and adoption receive the compassionate support they deserve.

### Treehouse

Seattle, WA 98144

Founded in 1988 by a group of social workers, Treehouse was built on the belief that children in foster care deserve a community committed to their success. As firsthand witnesses to the impact of abuse and neglect, the founders recognized that the challenges facing youth in foster care could not be addressed in isolation. Each day, nearly 10,000 children are in foster care in Washington state. While these youth have tremendous potential and aspirations, they also face unique challenges, including trauma, loss, and frequent changes in homes and schools. This emotional upheaval often creates significant social, emotional, and academic barriers. Treehouse is the only nonprofit in Washington state dedicated exclusively to the educational needs of youth in foster care. Through a youth-led programming model tailored to their experiences, Treehouse provides timely educational resources, removes barriers to school success, and collaborates closely with caregivers, caseworkers, educators, and community partners. In partnership with the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Treehouse Educational Advocates support public school students from pre-K through 12th grade across Washington state who have Tribal, federal, or state dependency or shelter care status.

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## **Rene Savage**

Lacey, WA 98516

Rene Savage has made an extraordinary and deeply personal contribution to children in need of family through her unwavering commitment to kinship care, advocacy, and long-term emotional support. When her niece faced the trauma of instability caused by substance abuse, violence, and loss in her biological home, Rene stepped in not temporarily, not conditionally, but fully and permanently, providing a safe, loving, and stable family when no other option existed. Rene did not simply offer shelter; she rebuilt a childhood. She navigated the complexities of kinship placement with clarity and resolve, ensuring her niece had access to consistent education, healthcare, emotional healing, and opportunities to thrive. Despite profound personal loss, including the deaths of multiple immediate family members, Rene remained steadfast, modeling resilience, grace, and unconditional love. Her home became a place of safety and restoration during seasons of grief and uncertainty.

Beyond her own family, Rene openly shares her experience to advocate for children in foster and kinship care, encouraging others to step forward when family preservation is possible. She speaks honestly about the realities of caregiving, both the sacrifices and the rewards, helping normalize the challenges while emphasizing the lifelong impact of showing up for a child in crisis. Rene's contribution is extraordinary because it is rooted in action, not recognition. She has changed the trajectory of a child's life through consistency, sacrifice, and love, embodying the very heart of what Angels in Adoption represents: ensuring that children who need families are not left to face the world alone.





## WEST VIRGINIA

### **Mission West Virginia**

Hurricane, WV 25526

Mission West Virginia (WV) is a nonprofit organization committed to recruiting foster and adoptive parents while providing essential services and resources to youth across the state. The organization operates two key programs: the Frameworks Program and the THINK Program. The Frameworks Program is designed to connect families with children in the foster care system. Mission WV offers education and support for prospective foster and adoptive families, including awareness events and specialized training for kinship care. The program provides crucial guidance on navigating the first steps of the foster care and adoption processes, ensuring that families feel prepared and supported as they begin their journey. The THINK Program, which has been serving youth in 29 West Virginia counties for over 17 years, focuses on prevention education. The program addresses topics, such as healthy relationships, teen pregnancy prevention, and positive youth development. Through these programs, youth are empowered to identify unhealthy relationships, build strong connections, and gain critical reproductive health education. Additionally, the THINK Program offers parent and community education, helping adults learn how to effectively teach youth about relationships and reproductive health. Mission West Virginia is dedicated to both recruiting and supporting foster and adoptive families while equipping youth with the tools and knowledge they need to navigate life and relationships successfully. Through their comprehensive education and prevention efforts, Mission WV plays a vital role in fostering positive outcomes for families and youth across the state.

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## WISCONSIN

### Adoption Choice Inc.

Madison, WI 53719

Adoption Choice, Inc. (ACI) is a prominent nonprofit adoption agency serving families across the state of Wisconsin since 1986. Committed to building families through adoption, ACI provides comprehensive support and counseling to both adoptive families and birth parents. The agency prioritizes the well-being of children throughout the adoption process, offering compassionate and professional guidance at every step. ACI is dedicated to embracing diversity and inclusivity, welcoming all types of families, including married couples, LGBTQ+ couples, and single individuals, without discrimination. Additionally, ACI supports adoptive families through its Reduced Home Study Fee Program, offering financial assistance for eligible families. Through its extensive experience and commitment to fostering successful adoptions, ACI has helped create countless loving, permanent families across the state.

### Wisconsin Family Connections Center

West Allis, WI 53214

The Wisconsin Family Connections Center (WiFCC) is a collaborative initiative designed to provide comprehensive support and resources for individuals, families, and caregivers with past or present involvement in foster care, adoption, reunification, kinship care, and guardianship. WiFCC offers a unified service network to better meet the needs of families and professionals across the state. WiFCC's mission is to empower and strengthen families by providing access to information, referrals, training, and tailored support. The center serves kinship and relative caregivers, foster families, post-permanency families—including those who have reunified, established guardianship, or adopted—and the professionals who support them. Committed to promoting dignity and well-being, WiFCC strives to deliver compassionate, individualized assistance that fosters thriving children, youth, and families.

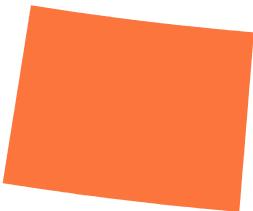
### Foster the Village

West Allis, WI 53214

Foster the Village is a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting the foster care community in Brown County, Wisconsin. The organization provides free clothing, shoes, diapers, and other essential care items to children entering out-of-home care, many of whom arrive with little to no personal belongings after being removed from parental custody due to abuse or neglect. Brown County has the second-highest population of children in out-of-home care in Wisconsin, following Milwaukee County. To address this critical need, Foster the Village collaborates with Brown County Health and Human Services, Children's Wisconsin, Foundations Health & Wholeness, and other local organizations. Committed to easing the foster care journey for both children and caregivers, Foster the Village provides essential resources and community support to brighten the lives of those in care. At the heart of its mission is the belief that every child in foster care deserves love, dignity, and a compassionate support system.

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## WYOMING

### Deborah and David Birge

Cheyenne, WY 82009

Deborah and David Birge have been dedicated advocates and leaders in the adoption community for decades in Cheyenne, Wyoming. As parents to three biological children and six children adopted from China, they have demonstrated a lifelong commitment to supporting families through the adoption process. Recently, Deborah and David championed the rights of international adoptees in Wyoming, advocating for easier access to state birth certificates. Their efforts culminated in a legal battle that reached the Wyoming Supreme Court, where they successfully secured a legal birth certificate for their son after his re-adoption in Wyoming, ensuring equal rights for all adoptees. Beyond their personal experiences, Deborah and David serve as trusted mentors and resources within the international adoption community. Deborah is a passionate advocate for adoption, offering both support and honest insight into the challenges families face. Together, Deborah and David continue to be influential figures in their community, sharing their time, knowledge, and unwavering dedication to adoption advocacy.

### Sheridan Foster Parent Exchange

Sheridan, WY 82801

The Sheridan Foster Parent Exchange is a Christian organization serving children in crisis throughout Sheridan and Johnson Counties. The organization provides community resources and supplies to help children feel safe, valued, and loved. Founded in March 2013 by Carla Trier and her eight-year-old foster daughter, the organization was inspired by Carla's experiences as both a foster child and a foster parent. Recognizing the urgent need for immediate support when children enter new homes, Sheridan Foster Parent Exchange ensures that children receive more than just basic necessities, helping them begin the healing process. The organization supports foster, adoptive, and kinship families at every stage of the foster care journey, including welcoming new children, navigating adoption, reunification, and ongoing challenges after foster care. They also provide guidance and resources for grandparents and other guardians caring for children in their family.

