ANGELS IN ADOPTION®
25TH ANNUAL
meet the honorees
About CCAI

Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit dedicated to eliminating the barriers that prevent children from being part of a safe, nurturing, and permanent family. As an organization uniquely founded "by Congress, for Congress," CCAI has served as a trusted, principal source of the information, expertise, and resources needed by Members of Congress to make informed policy decision about domestic and international child welfare for over twenty years. CCAI believes every child deserves a family and every family deserves a caring community. CCAI is deeply committed to bipartisanship, strengthening families, and permanency.

Knowledge is powerful. CCAI's main purpose and expertise is providing experiential and interactive resources and opportunities for Members of Congress and their staff to stay up to date on child welfare policy information and bringing awareness and education to the U.S. Congress.

About Angels in Adoption®

Through the Angels in Adoption® Leadership Program, Members of Congress have an opportunity to recognize individuals, families, and organizations from across the country who have made extraordinary contributions to adoption, permanency, and child welfare on behalf of vulnerable children and families. Once selected, Angels travel to Washington, D.C. to personally meet with federal policymakers, receive advocacy training, participate in Hill Day meetings with their Members of Congress, and receive recognition at a celebration held in their honor. Since 1999, thousands of Angels have traveled to Washington, D.C. to take part in this program, and these extraordinary leaders return home better equipped to effect change on behalf of children in need of safe and nurturing families.
2023 ANGELS IN ADOPTION® HONOREES

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Jodi Jackson Tucker
Tasha Billinglesey Uland
Stacy Ziegler
The Anderson family became “team BEAN” through the gifts of adoption. In 2015, God worked in a “David & Goliath” situation using honorable birth parents. Through a private adoption with Hughes Law, BCS, and Jean Cline, they were “gifted” Boaz at birth. His adoption was finalized nine months later. Boaz, their son, is full of energy and laughter. In 2021, the Andersons received a call from their Pastor Wes Roth. He was approached by biological grandparents, needing to find a family to adopt their two-week-old granddaughter in foster care. The Andersons were excited about this gift! But apprehensive about the complexities with interstate paperwork and being a fictive kinship adoption. Through all these hills and valleys, they found comfort in so many Bible verses! One they turned to daily was Ecclesiastes 3:11 “He (God) has made EVERYthing beautiful in its time.” When Emma was five months old, she was placed with Angela and Nathan. In September 2023, after 17 years of marriage, years of infertility, so many prayers: Boaz, Emma, Angela, and Nathan Anderson officially became “team BEAN.” All because of God’s great faithfulness and loving kindness! P.S. Emma loves her paternal grandma’s homemade canned green beans, cold! Always shouting out “BEANs! BEANs!” even at breakfast and bedtime.
Hether and Tim have been foster parents since 2011. They have fostered more than 30 children over the past twelve years. The couple has adopted five children, and are in the process of adopting three more children, many of whom are siblings. Hether and Tim have also helped eleven additional children successfully reunite with their biological families. Many of the children who come to Hether and Tim have high medical needs and are members of large sibling groups. The Andersons recognize the importance of keeping a connection to each child’s birth family, so they make sure to offer each of their adopted children the opportunity to maintain those connections. Each year, the Andersons take camping trips focused on connecting their adopted children with their birth families – even if that necessitates hundreds of miles of travel. Hether also has a passion for helping other adoptive, foster, and kinship caregivers, known as resource families. In 2017, she started a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting resource families across Maine. Hether is now the Lead Resource Family Trainer and provides a variety of training to help families build the skills to provide a safe and healthy home environment for the children under their care.
Nadya Andrusik is the Executive Director of Children, Youth, and Family Services at Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area. Lutheran Social Services of the National Capital Area (LSSNCA) has been serving the Greater Washington, D.C. area for more than 100 years. In the 1950s, LSSNCA counseled unwed mothers and began a childcare fund, eventually becoming the first Lutheran adoption agency in the area. They continue to provide home study and post-placement visits for domestic and international adoptions for families and individuals within a 50-mile radius of the Greater Washington D.C. area. With the inception of the Youth Wellness and Development program in 1999, LSSNCA was the first in the area to offer a camp, Youth Haven, and ongoing programming to support youth impacted by HIV/AIDS, which now expands to serve children who lived or are living through adverse childhood experiences. LSSNCA also introduced the unaccompanied refugee minor (URM) program to the state of Virginia to provide more care for youth without family or loved ones. Escaping a traumatic life, and surviving a harrowing journey, LSSNCA provides wraparound services to youth and their foster families to support them throughout their new life together. The unaccompanied refugee minor program works with youth from around the world, and has been working to scale up support, services, and matches for Afghan unaccompanied youth who have begun arriving following the fall of Kabul. In 2023, 29 refugee youth were served through the URM program.
Arkansas True Vision Children's Homes

Arkansas

Recommended by U.S. Senator John Boozman

Arkansas True Vision Children's Homes (ATVCH), an Arkansas not-for-profit corporation affiliated with Family Ministries, includes Florence Crittenton in Little Rock, the Maggie House in Charleston, and the Young Homes in Fort Smith. The Young Homes also coordinates Family Ministries Foster Care Program, which includes foster homes on and off campus. Florence Crittenton opened in 2004 and has cared for over 1,800 children, and Maggie House and Young Homes have cared for over 600 children in Western Arkansas. The Maggie House opened in December 2015, and the Young Homes opened in 2017. The Maggie House serves teenage children, ages 13-17, as a Qualified Residential Treatment Program. The Young Homes concentrates on caring for sibling groups of all ages. This prevents children from the same family being separated and placed in different homes or facilities around the state. Heart Cottage provides emergency shelter and the other three homes (Soul, Mind, and Strength Homes) provide long-term care with trained foster parents. Staff provide foster care training and support in addition to coordinating educational and social activities. ATVCH’s goal is to ensure that children in their care achieve permanency through reunification, adoption, or independent living. Over 60 children have been adopted who were in the care of Maggie House or the Young Homes, with over 20 of those by current or former staff members.
Marsha and Tim Azinger

Missouri

Recommended by U.S. Representative Jason Smith

Marsha and Tim Azinger have a unique story. They may be best known for working with individuals with disabilities in their community. Tim is the retired Director at LIFE Inc. Center for Independent Living in Farmington, Missouri. He is the co-founder and has assisted people with disabilities in his community for over 25 years. Before this work, Tim was in the United States Marine Corps and was injured at Camp Pendleton, California. His injuries resulted in Tim being quadriplegic. Tim’s wife Marsha was in a car accident which also left her paralyzed as a quadriplegic. When Marsha and Tim married, they knew that having a family of their own would be a challenge, so right away they started looking into adoption. In 2006, the Azingers became the proud new parents of a little boy named Wyatt. At that time, they knew that there were more children out there and they wanted to give another child the best life possible. Two years after adopting Wyatt, the Azingers got to bring home a beautiful baby girl, Addie. The Azinger family has had to overcome an amazing number of obstacles over the years. Not only are there obvious obstacles with physical demands to raising children, but also challenges that come with special needs children. Marsha and Tim believe patience, consistency, and love are the foundation for a flourishing family environment.
In 2013, Aimee Befort began her work supporting children at St. Johns Country Family Integrity Program as a Dependency Case Manager. After two years in the role, she was promoted to Adoption Coordinator and has been working in this role since. In this role, she works closely with case management staff to expedite permanency through adoption and partners and advocate not only for the children on her caseload but the families as well. She is known for her tireless efforts to place children in reliable, safe, and loving homes. Aimee has helped approximately 250 children be adopted in the ten years she has been with St. Johns Country Family Integrity Program. Thanks to her diligent efforts, these children have the opportunity to succeed in stable and secure homes. Aimee has time and time again demonstrated her commitment to supporting youth.
Bench Mark Program was founded in 2014 as a fitness-based mentoring program that provides long-term support and guidance to at-risk youth in their community. When Will Kiefer launched the organization, he was still a student at Franklin and Marshall College, looking for a way to support young adults who had not succeeded in traditional mentoring programs. Today, through partnerships with the Lancaster County Children and Youth Agency and the Department of Juvenile Probation, Bench Mark can support young adults through fitness training, academic support, and career counseling. This program introduces young adults to a network of mentors who stick with them through some of the toughest periods of their lives, and for many youth, Bench Mark is: “The place I can always come back to.” Beyond its flagship Open Gym Program, Bench Mark also operates programming within the Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center, meeting young adults when they are living in both detention and shelter residences. Relationships built there evolve into engagement in other juvenile justice programs within Bench Mark that help youth complete all of their probation requirements. The organization also operates a suspension alternative program in the local high school. In many cases, Bench Mark even offers employment to its successful program graduates, allowing them to build their resumes with part-time jobs as peer mentors to other young adults within Bench Mark Program.
Michele Wright and Michele Bennett have adopted four kids through the Arizona foster care system. Not only are they remarkable parents, but they also founded a clothing exchange program called Spreading Threads. Michele has turned her once-a-month clothing exchange, which started in her garage, into a monthly community event for foster and adoptive parents to get clothing, information, and support from other local community nonprofits. They, along with their volunteers, have worked tirelessly to build much-needed programs for the foster and adoptive families of Pima County.
Dr. Christopher Berger, Superintendent of the Wright City R-II School District, and his wife Amanda, a real-estate broker, have fostered 26 children since 2000. In addition to their three grown biological children, they have two young, adopted daughters who are currently eight and ten years old. The half-sister of one of their daughters also periodically lives with them on an informal basis. When they moved to Warren County three years ago, for Chris to take the Superintendent job, their teenage foster daughter, Taliyah, and her infant son moved with them. They are proud of Taliyah’s high school graduation last May.
Tricia Bonnema has long had a heart for children. For more than three decades (seventeen years as a special education instructor and fourteen years as an elementary school teacher), she has displayed a passion for educating and helping children with special needs. But Tricia’s heart for children, particularly those in need, goes far beyond just the classroom. In the early 2000s, Tricia and her husband made the decision to adopt. In 2005, the Bonnemas adopted a baby girl. Sadly, shortly thereafter, Tricia was left as a single mother. In spite of this, and recognizing the challenges that would be posed being a single mother, Tricia decided to again adopt through a local government agency. In 2010, she was blessed with the adoption of a second daughter with special needs. Outside of work and personal life, Tricia has continued to give her utmost to those less fortunate. Working with organizations such as Fostering Great Ideas and Hope Healing Home, Tricia has helped collect countless luggage items and sleepers for both children in foster care in South Carolina and abroad, as well as toiletry items for Safe Houses of Safe Harbor. South Carolina and children both within the state and beyond have benefited immensely from Tricia’s tireless care for others.
Genesis Buckhalter-Horne has been a licensed foster parent for two years. In that time, she has fostered a handful of children, and recently adopted her two sons. She has been an amazing advocate for both children and they have gone from surviving to thriving under her care. Genesis serves as a volunteer for her county's Foster Care Review Board and runs a local nonprofit.
Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City has proudly served Central and Western Oklahoma since its 1912 founding. In its 111-year history, Catholic Charities has evolved to serve more people in need, of any faith or none, in many distinctive ways, while collaborating with a wide range of partner organizations. The youngest client is not yet born (in Crisis Pregnancy Services); the oldest is 97 in sponsored senior housing. Catholic Charities does not do everything along life’s journey, but has more than 14 distinct services including Women’s Sanctuary, Counseling, and Affordable Housing. Specific to children, Catholic Charities provides Adoption & Pregnancy Services, Title 1 Counseling, and Refugee Resettlement services. In the past two years, Catholic Charities facilitated reception, placement, and follow-on supportive services for well over 2,000 refugees and humanitarian arrivals into Oklahoma, an ongoing effort drawing support from more than 80 denominations of all faiths to ensure refugee children are placed in safe and nurturing homes. Catholic Charities has been blessed to facilitate over 2,400 adoptions.
Stephen Chipman and his family’s generous gift of time, talent and treasure have helped children in the United States and around the world have access to vital educational and familial support. Stephen and his wife, Kim, have two adopted daughters from China, Samantha and Emma. Unable to forget the children remaining in Chinese orphanages, they discovered OneSky, a nonprofit organization that provides early childhood care and education for children living outside of family care and other low resource conditions in China, Vietnam, and Mongolia. Over 15 years, their service has made a significant impact on many children who are now reaching their potential because of services provided by OneSky, assisting more than 283,000 vulnerable children and training more than 75,000 caregivers. Stephen accepted the invitation to be the Keynote Speaker at Gift of Adoption’s signature fundraising event in 2014. Stephen and his daughter, Samantha, spoke about how individuals and companies can and should take actions to transform the lives of children who would otherwise grow up without the love, guidance, and protection of families. Stephen and Kim serve on the Gift of Adoption Investor Board, personally giving enough to complete the adoptions of 17 children in at-risk situations. Stephen is also a founding member of the Gift of Adoption’s Strategic Advisory Council – a small group of leaders who are diligently researching opportunities to remove financial barriers to adoption.
Rhyan Buettner-Desmaret and Peterson Desmaret lived in Haiti for 15 years, where they both worked in medical services and family preservation programs. In 2016 Rhyan founded Middle Ground, a pediatric malnutrition treatment center and family preservation program. During their years in Haiti, the Desmarets were granted custody of three Haitian children, Annabel, Henry, and Adaline, who are under their guardianship pending adoption through the Haitian government. In 2022, due to the growing conflict in Haiti and serious safety concerns, the Desmarets felt it necessary to leave the country and temporarily return to Rhyan's home state of Minnesota. As U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents, Rhyan and Peter were free to move back to Minnesota with their two biological children, but their three Haitian children were not allowed to go with them. Despite the conditions in Haiti, Rhyan and Peter refused to leave their children. After 11 months of waiting, Annabel, Henry, and Adaline were approved to enter the United States through the humanitarian parole program. Today Peterson and Rhyan live in Alexandria, Minnesota with their six children, Annabel (11) Henry (9) Adaline (6) Jonathan (5) Malachi (4), and Zariah (July 2023). They continue to work in advocacy for Haitian children through Middle Ground.
Judge Michael (Mike) Dickinson is a graduate of Mississippi State University where he earned a Bachelor of Accountancy and a graduate of Mississippi College School of Law where he received his law degree. Judge Dickinson has worked in the private practice of law since 2005 in civil litigation in Gulfport, Mississippi. He also served in the U.S. Navy on the USS Independence (aircraft carrier) in Japan. In 2018, Judge Dickinson was elected to serve as a County Court Judge handling all Youth Court matters in Harrison County. In 2022, he was appointed by the Mississippi Supreme Court to serve on the Commission on Children’s Justice. In 2023, Judge Dickinson was appointed by the Chief Justice of the Mississippi Supreme Court to serve as a member of the Mississippi Task Force on Foster Care and Adoption which was created by the Mississippi Legislature in Senate Bill 2384.

Mike has been married to Siobhan (“Shuh-von”) for 18 years, and they have five children (three biological, one adopted from foster care, and one currently in foster care). The Dickinsons began serving as foster parents in Harrison County in 2016, and to date have fostered ten children. Mike also helped spearhead the Rescue 100 ministry at Michael Memorial Baptist Church which served to boost the number of foster homes in both Harrison County and across the state of Mississippi. In 2021, he became a Trust Based Relational Intervention (TBRI) Practitioner through Texas Christian University.
Elijah’s Closet’s (EC) mission is to assist families with children in foster care and families with children susceptible of going into foster care. In 2017, Co-founder and President, Nikki Williams, and her husband were made aware of the 800 children in foster care within their community of Harrison County and immediately felt led to become foster parents. While attending training, they realized the lack of resources for foster parents and decided to open a “closet” that would help supply foster families with necessary items for children entering their home. Shortly after, the Williamses were introduced to another couple who, in 2015, had started another “closet” out of a storage unit and the two became partners. Fast forward to 2018, when Elijah’s Closet became a 501(c)(3), adopted a board of like-hearted individuals, and grew from one, to two, to three storage units, into a building! Elijah’s Closet recently moved their operations to Biloxi, Mississippi and has grown to serve all family dynamics: prevention, reunification, foster, etc. Elijah’s Closet partners with organizations like Mississippi Department of Child Protection Services, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Canopy Children’s Solutions, Youth Villages, Southern Christian Services, Women’s Resource Center, churches, schools, and more to ensure the children in their community have their needs met. Elijah’s Closet continues to look forward to more ways they can expand their reach. Elijah’s Closet believes the more their community becomes involved, the more they will grow, and the more children they can help: when people come together to take on big issues, change DOES happen.
Jodie Felton has been serving as a foster parent in the Mississippi Delta for over 28 years. She has fostered more than 200 children and youth. Jodie became a foster parent while working in the Bolivar County Youth Court. She saw that youth in foster care needed someone to love and nurture them. Jodie recognized that she had the capacity to do something about that and it is exactly what she has been doing ever since. When the average foster placement closes after a few years, Jodie has chosen to continue to support youth, many of whom as teenagers, in Mississippi’s foster care system for almost three decades. Along with being a foster parent, Jodie is also an advocate for children and families in her community and across the state of Mississippi. Jodie’s impact on the youth that have come in and out of her home is impossible to measure. Jodie is a tremendous asset to the youth of Mississippi.
The Heather and N. Joel Fry family are an Iowan family of eleven. Heather and Joel adopted five children from Ethiopia and are raising their nine children in South-Central Iowa. The Frys have also fostered nine children over the past few years. Joel is a family therapist and advocate for the welfare of children, receiving awards from the Iowa Behavior Health Association, the Rural Healthcare Association, among others. The Fry family is an inspiration for walking the walk, not just talking the talk, by being a nurturing and permanent family for their children.
Britney Glaser became a hero to many children in the Lake Charles area of Louisiana on May 5, 2014. On this day, Britney’s two passions, television and care for children without permanent families, finally collided. A new segment on a local TV station, anchored by Britney, began to air weekly. “A New Family Tree” became a regular segment on KPLC-TV in Lake Charles because of Britney’s passion and desire to help local children find safe, nurturing, and permanent families. After much pleading with Louisiana’s Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and her own bosses, Britney began featuring children of all backgrounds once a week, telling their stories, spending time with them, and most of all, bringing awareness to foster care and adoption in Louisiana. In just six months, DCFS could see the stories were working: people called, and started signing up for classes and conversations with new potential families. Britney and her husband also enrolled themselves in DCFS’ Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP) classes to become foster parents. These classes saw record attendance after Britney’s segments started airing. Over the years, Britney and her husband have grown their family by adopting a son and having two daughters. While Britney may not anchor for KPLC-TV these days, she can be found teaching TV production classes for Calcasieu Parish Schools and continuing to advocate for adoption every chance she gets.
Attorney Willie N. Hamilton is a lifelong servant to bring families together. Attorney Hamilton attended Thurgood Marshall School of Law in Houston, Texas. He received his Juris Doctor in 1983 and was licensed in the State of Georgia in 1995. In 1996, Attorney Hamilton started solo practice in Georgia, was licensed in the Federal Court Southern District of Texas, Federal Court of Georgia, Supreme Court of Georgia, and Georgia Court of Appeals. Attorney Hamilton started adoption practice in 2006. He finalized both private and state adoptions, resulting in over 700 child adoptions in the state of Georgia. He has been consistently called on to participate in foster care graduation programs. Attorney Hamilton also consistently participates in the National Adoption Day program in several jurisdictions in Georgia. Additionally, he mentors other attorneys on the adoption process. In 2021, Attorney Hamilton received a recognition award from DeKalb County Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) for Dedicated Service National Adoption Day. Currently, because of his long-term commitment to the adoption process and permanency, Attorney Hamilton was admitted as a member of Georgia Council of Adoption Lawyers, Inc. Attorney Hamilton has a genuine love for families, demonstrated by his ability and willingness to solve complex problems to create safe, nurturing, and permanent families.
J.T. Harding is a top songwriter in the country writing hit songs for artists such as Blake Shelton, Kenny Chesney, Keith Urban, and Darius Rucker. J.T. was adopted as an infant and has since used his music career as a platform to be an advocate for adoption. J.T. hosted a free ‘Write Like a Rockstar’ songwriting contest for people who are adopted. J.T. received submissions from all over the world, and unexpectedly the contest was covered on celebrity podcasts, radio shows, network television in Boston, Los Angeles, and he even flew to New York to be on Fox News to talk about the contest. J.T. uses his platform as an award winning songwriter to show how grateful he is to be adopted and notes: “I feel like I won the lottery of life by being adopted. When ever something in the music business or life doesn’t go right I remind myself that I’ve been lucky since day one! Because I’m adopted, I have a really positive outlook on life. I feel like things will work out because God or the universe - whatever anyone wants to call it - put me into the arms of a family that I wouldn’t trade for the world.” J.T.’s best selling book, *Party Like a Rockstar*, chronicles his early childhood, music career, and reconnecting with his biological parents later in life. J.T. is a joy to everyone that knows him and a powerful advocate for adoption.
With the most recent match (sibling group of 3), the Harris family were an adoptive option to bring all three siblings together in one household, as they had been placed in two different foster homes. This is a great example of bringing siblings together after having been in separate homes for some time. Emma and Michael have welcomed the extended family of these children into their own family. The family has contact with the birth mother and are open to possibly having face-to-face contact should it be in these children's best interest in the future. Currently, they are working on bonding as a family and preparing for the adoption. Emma and Michael realize how loyal and connected the kids are to their mother and do not want to cut that tie. They also have welcomed the children’s uncle, his fiancé and their children, along with the maternal grandmother and her husband into their fold. They have had them to their house for visits, dinner, have met in the community for visits, etc. Emma and Michael are incredible and understand how important biological family is to a child and they do not fear the kids maintaining that connecting, they embrace it and flourish the relationship. They could not be any less selfless while working with families in foster care. They are a positive model of what fostering to adoption should look like.
The Heart Tree: Hispanic Foster and Adoptive Parents Organization of Rhode Island is a nonprofit organization founded on November 5, 2021 to support foster, adoptive, and kinship families of the Spanish-speaking community and provide them with training, resources, classes, mentoring, and guidance. The Heart Tree’s goal is to provide guidance to underserved, underrepresented parents by fostering a sense of community. The Heart Tree’s founders, Jorge Saborio and Minolly Saborio, bring ten years of experience as foster and adoptive parents. During the COVID-19 pandemic, their inspiring work identified seventy (70) adopted Hispanic youth and youth in care who were in need during the holiday season. The Saborios invited children to dream up a list of gifts, and with the help of generous sponsors, they fulfilled every gift. After two successful years in collaboration with Carmen Rosario, a co-founder, The Heart Tree was formally founded to offer a variety of programs and host events for foster, adoptive, and kinship families. Moreover, The Heart Tree was awarded a grant through the Rhode Island Office of Healthy Aging in collaboration with The Village. The grant will connect grandparents and other caregivers, 55 years of age and older, with support and resources to enrich their relationship with the child(ren) under the age of 18 in their care. The grant provides valuable services to authentically and effectively connect Spanish-speaking families in a culturally supportive manner. The Heart Tree will be honored at Progreso Latino’s 46th Annual Gala this October for their dedication in the Latino community.
Dave James is a crucial part of his community. Dave has been a longtime asset, who continues to work for the betterment of the area. At the start of his career, he served as a teacher and coach for an inner-city school in Omaha. After, he worked and developed programs for a youth organization, Omaha Home for Boys (OHB). Their goal is to equip youth, young adults, and families with the skills and confidence needed to succeed to strengthen communities. In his 21 years of service before retiring in 2010, Dave taught and coordinated vital classes, developed a mentoring program, and served as coordinator for the scholarship program. A few years after retirement, Dave was invited to deliver furniture to youth who had aged out of foster care and were moving into their first apartments. This inspired Dave, and in 2017, he brought together a Board of Directors and created “Partnership 4 Hope.” Partnership 4 Hope took over management of the Youth Mart with support from OHB. This led to the organization providing material support for young adults, mentoring support for youth, and assisting in emotional support. Other areas of support provided were in schooling, rent, and transportation. While Partnership 4 Hope was growing into what it is today, Dave served as the Executive Director and director of the mentoring programs. Today, Partnership 4 Hope consists of four pillars: mentoring, Youth Mart, Truck Brigade, and the Cole French Educational Support Fund. These core pillars allow the organization to mentor youth, assist in providing and delivering furniture for youth, and provide financial support for young adults to continue their education. Dave James has shown time and time again that he is an asset to his community.
Magistrate Paul Jones is a Rhode Island Family Court Magistrate who oversees many cases related to child welfare. Magistrate Jones participates in National Adoption Day every year and is an advocate for permanency for children in foster care. He cares deeply about the needs of teens and young adults affected by foster care. Magistrate Jones works very hard from the bench to ensure they have all the resources they need to succeed in life. Magistrate Jones is a great person and a wonderful advocate for kids. Paul's wife, Linda, is a volunteer for Adoption Rhode Island, a member of the Duffle Bag Bash planning committee, and community advocate for Rhode Island's Heart Gallery project. At the Duffle Bag Bash, Linda works tirelessly to make sure children in foster care do not move from place to place with their belongings in a trash bag. She has helped to secure locations in the state to highlight the needs of children in state care and is a wonderful ambassador for all kids who need a little help to succeed in life. On National Adoption Day and at the annual summer Adoption Rhode Island Sibling Camp, she has arranged for Windwalker Humane Coalition pet therapy teams to interact with children and families. Linda is a caring and compassionate person and a strong advocate for children.
Debra Lombard

Florida
Recommended by U.S. Senator Jared Moskowitz

Debbie Lombard is a cherished member of the Broward County community of Florida, and a lifelong advocate for adoption. Her journey is a truly remarkable one, and although extremely humble, Debbie Lombard improved the lives of many children through her incredible care and service. Debbie’s own mother died when she was 11. At age 14, Debbie volunteered at a group home, where she met a boy with cerebral palsy who was placed for adoption at birth. Debbie was drawn to him immediately, and because of this encounter, her own passion and love for people with developmental disabilities began. After giving birth to her first child, Debbie was told for medical reasons, she would be unable to carry a second. Together with her husband Scott, they began an adoption journey. During this process, Debbie learned she was adopted and this past year, found out she has a biological half-brother. In the course of adopting three remarkable children, the Lombards helped an additional 10 children find adoptive homes in their community. Debbie’s story doesn’t end with her personal story. The empathy she developed in her young life helps her support and care for others. In 1993, Debbie was asked to help volunteer for a drama class for children, teens, and adults with special needs. Thinking she would be there for three months; she never left this new vocation. Debbie now runs a program dedicated to supporting young adults with developmental disabilities at the David Posnack Jewish Community Center. Over the years, with being adopted herself and having adopted her own children, Debbie feels it has helped her understand that all children are the same and love for children, parents, and families is encompassing.
Bobbi and Roger Loven began foster care when Roger was doing his anesthesiology residency in Omaha, Nebraska in the early 1980s. The Lovens cared for babies up to three weeks before they were permanently placed with a family. When the couple moved to Bismarck, North Dakota in 1984, they had already cared for 17 babies. In 1991, while raising three sons of their own, they became licensed foster care providers in North Dakota. Because Roger is a medical doctor, they were often contacted about babies from the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), including those born with drug addictions, recovering from withdrawal, and with physical injuries. The Lovens adopted their daughter when she was nine years old, after five years caring for her through foster care. In the 40 years since taking their first placement, the Lovens estimate they have cared for at least 85 children. They enjoy ongoing contact with many families whose children they have fostered. Additionally, they mentor countless other adults new to foster care. The Lovens also are active in a group at their church where caregivers listen to and support each other in whatever challenges they are facing. Roger retired in 2019 after 35 years as an anesthesiologist at Bismarck’s St. Alexius Hospital. Although they talk about pulling back in the number of children they will care for through foster care, they expect to continue for a while, being in constant contact with NICU nurses who are well acquainted with this couple and their loving hearts.
Keith Lowhorne currently serves as the Vice President of Kinship at the Alabama Foster & Adoptive Parent Association (AFAPA). He also serves as the Chair of the Grandparents as Parents Committee at AFAPA, where he advocates for kinship care, works to ensure grandparents have the resources they need to adopt their grandchildren, and strives to reduce barriers to adopt. Keith was also nominated to serve on the Administration for Community Living (ACL) Advisory Council to Support Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. After a 43-year career in broadcast journalism and on the brink of retirement, Keith and his wife adopted their own grandchildren, ages nine and six. In his role as a voice for kinship care and grandparents as parents, Keith exemplifies the importance of using one's experience and platform to advocate for positive change. Keith is committed to reducing barriers to adoption, advocating for resources, and raising awareness about the critical role of kinship caregivers.
Carol and James Martin are the natural parents of five adult children whom they have raised and nurtured in the Austin Community of Chicago, which is a lower middle-income area. All of their children are doing well and leading meaningful lives. James is 76, and Carol is 68, and in addition to raising their five children, they have adopted and/or been foster parents to 27 other children who all are now adults and living on their own except the four teenagers who currently reside with the Martins. Family and relational permanency is important to the Martins and during a hospital stay, James had a stream of children and youth formerly in his care stop by and visit the one who had been an angel in their lives.
In January 2011, Casey and James (Jimmy) Materese felt the calling to expand their family through adoption. After an unsuccessful domestic infant adoption attempt that year and the subsequent birth of their two children (Lyla and Maddox), in 2015 they felt called to adopt siblings from Haiti. Casey and Jimmy submitted their initial application in 2015, and they were matched with three adoptive siblings (Guyto, Fleurina, and Guerlineda, ages 15, 13, and 9, respectively) in May 2021. They officially adopted the children in September 2022, and following several yearlong delays due to Haitian government office closures, demand for Haitian passports, an earthquake, and the COVID-19 pandemic, they were finally able to bring the children home to South Dakota in June 2023. Casey and Jimmy have been married for 15 years. Jimmy is native to Madison, South Dakota and has worked for the City of Madison for 19 years. Casey is a fourth-grade teacher at Madison Elementary School. She is a Sioux Falls native. She graduated with a bachelor’s degree from Dakota State University in 2010 and completed her master’s degree at Black Hills State in 2017.
MCHS Family of Services is proud of its foster care and adoption programs, which has provided a safe haven and brighter future for hundreds of young people annually who have been removed from their parents’ home due to the trauma of abuse and neglect. Through comprehensive services focused on family engagement, youth empowerment, and permanency, hundreds of young people get the support they need to achieve permanency and success. All of this is made possible through the partnerships MCHS has with the state, their funders, and the incredible staff who go above and beyond in ensuring every young person finds safety, permanency, love, and support. It’s also made possible by the dedication and sacrifices of the foster parents and adoptive parents, as well as their kinship partners. MCHS’ foster care program focuses on providing temporary, loving homes for young people entering the foster care system with special focus on mental health, life skills, and academic achievement. MCHS’ adoption services continue to ensure young people experience the comfort and safety that only permanency can offer. Utilizing evidence based interventions, prioritizing community supports, and lifting the voices of families and young people, MCHS’ foster care and adoption programs transform the lives and create brighter and better futures for hundreds of young people and families every year.
Judith McLaughlin has served as the Director of Adoption Services of Life Choices Memphis for sixteen years. Adoption Choices of Memphis is a licensed program by the states of Tennessee and Mississippi to provide child placement services. Since 1987, Adoption Choices has completed more than 225 adoptions. Adoption Choices’ work includes many supports for their community including recruiting, orienting, and training families for adoption; addressing the emotional, practical, and spiritual needs of all clients; and providing on-going support extended to adoptive parents and birth parents, as well as adult adoptees. Adoption Choices also facilitates a Cradle Care volunteer program which provides a secure, loving environment that lasts for two-to-four weeks, for newborns being placed for adoption. Life Choices believes adoption to be a permanent, covenant relationship both between the adoptive family and the child, as well as the adoptive family and the birth family. The birth family and adoptive family work together, always keeping the child’s best interest in the forefront when making the arrangements for the placement and afterwards. Cooperation, respect, and love permeate the adoption process through Adoption Choices.
Kelly and Cory Muchmore of Duncan, Nebraska want all children to know they matter. From the moment they walk through the front door they are family, whether for a few days or a lifetime. They have opened their home to over 18 children. As their own biological children neared adulthood, including Kelly’s daughter, Tayler (now 30), and their two children together, Dillon (now 24) and Savanna (now 17), the Muchmores felt called to respond to needs in their own community. In 2012, they accepted a foster placement of six-month-old, Lilly. As they were preparing to adopt, they accepted what they thought was temporary emergency respite for six-year-old Andrew, but it soon became a longer-term placement. Both were adopted in 2015. Kelly and Cory fostered siblings, James and Milo, before adopting them in 2018. They continue to welcome the healthy involvement of the extended family. This year, Kelly and Cory finalized the adoption of another pair of siblings, Amelia and Liam, after a long and complicated process. Today, Andrew (15), Lilly (10), James (9), Milo (7), Amelia (5) and Liam (4) are all thriving. Kelly and Cory laugh while telling stories of their children enjoying day-to-day life. These are sweet memories that children who live with trauma do not always get. Seeing their children flourish is a beautiful testament to the transformative power of a permanent family.
Christina and Larry Nickerson
Virginia
Recommended by U.S. Senator Mark Warner

Christina and Larry’s foster care journey began in fall 2006 when Christina saw an advertisement on the need for foster parents in their Virginia community. 17 years later, Christina and Larry are still active foster parents and welcome youth into their hearts, home, and family. The Nickersons have cared for many teenage boys over the years who now range in age from 18 to 30. The 18-year-old resides at home and is working towards independence. Their kids have continued to grow into successful adults, one with a degree from George Mason University, one working in restaurant management, one who joined the Army, and lots of other accomplishments. Christina and Larry are so proud of all their kids, and have especially proud memories of their kids at their high school graduations. Since the beginning, the Nickersons worked with Braley and Thompson Treatment Foster Care and Fairfax County Department of Family Service. Christina has served on the Spotsylvania County Department of Social Service Advisory Board, Stafford County Public Schools Special Education Advisory Board, Germanna Community College Great Expectation Advisory Board, and New Found Families of Virginia Board of Directors. Christina and Larry are proud to say they have built their family through permanent foster care placements and now have a family they never thought possible.
Charles Anthony Owen is a native of Louisiana; he was born in New Orleans at the Methodist Home Hospital for Unwed Mothers. He was adopted at six weeks of age by Creighton and Gloria Owen of Leesville, Louisiana. Charles graduated from Leesville High School in 1981 where he was a ten time varsity letterman and honor graduate. After high school, he attended Louisiana Tech University where he received his Bachelor of Science and Master of Business Administration; upon completion of college, he was commissioned into the Air Force as a 2nd Lieutenant. Charles served as an Intelligence Officer for 20 years and retired honorably in 2006 as a Lieutenant Colonel. During his service he deployed to four different wartime engagements and was decorated for each action. In 2014, he and his wife Carolyn returned to their hometown of Leesville. Charles was elected to the Louisiana House of Representatives in 2019 where he currently serves. In 2022, Representative Owen was the primary author of a landmark adoption reform bill that restored the rights of adult adopted persons to obtain access to their original birth certificate. To date, over 1,100 Louisianans have received their original birth certificates. Charles authored a book and award-winning screenplay on the life of his birth mother. Charles and his wife, Carolyn, have two grown daughters.
Katie and Zach Peterson have built their beautiful family on the foundations of faith, love, and a whole lot of humor. They married in 2006 and their little family of two grew in both expected and unexpected ways in the years to follow. They lovingly adopted their first son, Matthew (age 15) in 2008. Soon thereafter, their family of three nearly doubled in size when they adopted their twin daughters, Greta and Clare (ages 13), in 2010. After complications with a pregnancy that resulted in the heartbreaking loss of their unborn daughter, Rachel, in 2012, this family felt blessed when Katie, after months of monitored bed rest, gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Virginia (Ginny – age 9) in 2014. At this point, big brother Matthew was growing concerned he was quickly becoming outnumbered by all his sisters. So, the Petesters received their most precious Christmas gift to-date with the birth of Joseph (Joe – age 8) in December of 2015 whom they lovingly adopted soon thereafter. But this family was not done growing yet. As Katie has been known to say, “The best things in life are most certainly unplanned.” It was with pure joy that they announced their pregnancy just months after adopting baby Joe. The Peterson clan welcomed the now “baby” of the family, Maryn (age 7), in December of 2016. Another Christmas blessing. Nothing says busy like a household full of six children – three of whom were under three years of age at one point. The Petersons embody the belief that unplanned does not mean unwanted or unloved. Their once little family is now a family of eight. And most likely, if there were any more blessings to come their way, Katie and Zach would just make room on the fireplace mantle for yet another Christmas stocking and a whole lot more humor.
Raise the Future: Nevada serves primarily older foster youth to reduce the time they spend without a permanent family. Raise the Future goes above and beyond to ensure that youth in foster care feel loved, valued, and are connected with caring adults who will provide long-term relationships and support. Research has shown that programs like Raise the Future improve permanency, educational outcomes, reduce homelessness, and overall improve well-being of the most vulnerable young people. The heart of this organization is about connecting children with permanent families, and helping Nevadans who want to build their family through adoption.
Judy Sartain is a well-respected family law attorney within the State of Georgia for the last 28 years, practicing with a focus on adoption law. During her career, she has finalized approximately 900 adoptions. Adoption is not just a professional passion to her, but also a personal one. Two of her five children are adopted from Russia, making it incredibly special as it also impacted her family positively. With her personal connection to adoption, she has a unique understanding of the difficulty within the legal system allowing her to have significant empathy for families going through the foster or adoption process. Judy Sartain has fought tirelessly to positively impact the adoption and foster system within Georgia. She has been a featured speaker at many adoption, child welfare, and legal seminars to educate and raise awareness of adoption and foster care. She has also raised awareness of the financial and emotional support needed for those who are within the foster and adoption system. Judy Sartain is the author of *A Beginner's Guide to Georgia Adoption Law*, which provides a simplified overview of the adoption process within Georgia to prospective adoptive parents. Judy Sartain is respected by all those involved within the process of adoption and foster care. Judy Sartain will continue to be a vital part of the adoption and foster system for years to come.
Ginny Shaver is an Alabama State Representative, representing House District 39. Rep. Shaver shepherded the recent rewrite of the Alabama Adoption Code, through a bill that streamlines adoptions by setting definite time parameters to move the process along faster, reducing court procedures by allowing for electronic communications, and saving prospective parents time and money by updating the state’s adoption law language to be clearer. It is estimated that the bill can take off as much as a year of the typical adoption process. Her bill passed unanimously in the Alabama House this March and saw quick action in the Senate. This bill will directly impact the 5,700 children currently in foster care in Alabama. Rep. Shaver’s advocacy and legislative efforts have proven successful in improving adoption in the state of Alabama.
Megan and Tim Shelton have dedicated their lives to making lasting positive impacts throughout their community. Tim has served twenty-five years in the Presbyterian Church of Danville in numerous capacities, which range from facilitating church programming to maintenance work. Although Tim’s retirement took place in 2020, amongst Zoom parties, the church put together a twenty-two-minute video of community members who honored his legacy and recognized him for being a valued and treasured co-worker who was called a “jack of all trades.” Megan is the Director of the Behavioral Health Unit at the Ephraim McDowell Regional Medical Center where she runs both the adult and geriatric psychiatric programs. As Director, she leads with confidence to make decisions best suited for her patients, staff, and program. As you can see, both Megan and Tim have been outstanding advocates helping nurture and foster strong relationships and networks in their community. However, they wanted to extend their service to others outside of their community and set out to adopt a child. Finally, after eleven years of waiting and trying, Megan and Tim adopted a child. This persistence exemplifies their commitment to persevere and ensure they were able to create a family of three. Megan and Tim have bettered their community in many ways.
Julianne “Juli” Stadler has been employed with the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare as a Child Welfare Social Worker for more than 33 years. Juli has held several different positions over the years, including 17 years as a Child Protection Case Manager, prior to transferring to the Foster Care Licensing team in 2014. The wealth of experience and knowledge Juli brings to her teammates, foster families, and child welfare in general is a tremendous asset. Juli is eager to share this knowledge with others and often acts as a mentor to her fellow co-workers. Juli is organized, culturally competent, and empathic. She is well-known for her ability to earn trust and build a supportive environment for the foster families on her caseload, which includes often going the extra mile in identifying resources and trainings which benefit the individual needs of each foster family. Juli’s integrity and dedication are evident in her daily work and interactions with others. She works to eliminate systemic barriers, promote equality, and has had a profound impact in the field of social work.
Steadfast, Standing Firm Against Youth Homelessness Inc.’s mission is to provide safe housing in a caring, supervised, and home environment for unaccompanied homeless youth and for youth transitioning out of foster care. Steadfast works to provide safety and stability for the growing number of youth encountering homelessness by providing safe housing. Using a holistic approach, Steadfast addresses the individual needs of each youth, provides character building activities, mentoring, educational and life-skills programs, as well as connections to resources in the community that support mental and physical well-being. By increasing stability in young people’s lives, Steadfast empowers them to create their future story and reach their greatest potential as healthy, independent adults.
Jules grew up with two sisters, who her parents adopted from foster care when she was young. After graduating from Samford University and Beeson Divinity School, Jules accepted a job at Alabama Baptist Children’s Homes and Family Ministries. Jules and Kyle married in 2019 and were compelled to become licensed foster parents. In 2021, they began fostering two young brothers. Amidst their adoption process, they moved back to South Carolina, where Jules and Kyle both accepted jobs at Connie Maxwell Children’s Ministries in Greenwood, South Carolina. Their adoption was finalized in November 2022, and the Thompson family continues to advocate for vulnerable children and families.
Following Brent and Doug Munster’s adoption of their oldest son, Sawyer, Doug and his friend Kecia Tomlin reached out to Gift of Adoption to explore the possibility of partnering to organize a race/walk to raise funds for adoption assistance grants. Gift of Adoption had recently started a Georgia chapter and a partnership quickly developed, resulting in the Chapter’s first 5K & Fun Run "Adopted by You" in 2017, raising more than $25,000 - enough to award five adoption assistance grants. From the start, Kecia and Doug’s advocacy helped get more people involved with Gift of Adoption and raised awareness of the organization and the financial burden of providing a permanent home for children in need. A young man named Peter won the inaugural 5K race. Peter had not heard about Gift of Adoption or the race but had been planning to work out in the park where the race was being held. He entered on the spot and finished with the best men’s time. When accepting his 1st place award, he shared with all those gathered that he had been adopted. Peter shared how much his adoption meant to him - the difference it made in his life and how glad he was that a charity like Gift of Adoption existed in Atlanta. After the inaugural race, Kecia and Doug formally joined the Georgia Chapter Board - leading the annual run/walk and spearheading new initiatives such as Night at the Gallery, an art-focused fundraiser. Thanks in large part to their leadership, Gift of Adoption Georgia has, as of April 2023, awarded more than $754,900 to complete the adoptions of 219 children into safe, loving, permanent families. Kecia and Doug have dedicated themselves to helping children and adoptive parents overcome the financial barriers to adoption and forming permanent, loving, and supportive families.
Jodi and her husband Jerry are parents of eight children, five through adoption. After many years as an adoptive parent, Jodi grew passionate about uniting and supporting mothers who answer the call to foster and adopt. In 2013, she founded Second Mothers, a community of women worldwide who encourage each other in the journey of adoptive parenthood and use their collective strength to advocate for vulnerable children everywhere. Second Mothers is active throughout the United States and in six other countries. Jodi leads Renew Retreat, a conference for foster and adoptive parents held annually on the East Coast. Jodi previously served for more than a decade as the Global Director of Orphan Sunday for the Christian Alliance for Orphans (CAFO), where she led expansion of the observance to more than 90 countries. Jodi is the author of Second Mother: A Bible Study Experience for Foster and Adoptive Moms and Fasten Your Sweet Belt: 10 Things You Need to Know About Older Child Adoption. She is the co-author of Healing the Hearts of the Adoption Triad, to be published in November 2024. Jodi received her master’s degree from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and is a Certified Chaplain. Her greatest joy is spending time with her children and grandchildren.
Nearly two decades ago, Tasha and her husband, Will, embarked on a journey to become parents through adoption for the first time. After thorough research, counsel, and prayer, they felt a deep calling to bring their daughter home from China. During this time, they also provided a loving home for a little girl they privately fostered for nine years, who eventually reunited with her biological family. While navigating her own adoption journey, Tasha’s deep desire to help children in need only grew. In 2010, she and her husband traveled to China for three weeks. Seeing the desperation and overrun institutions deepened Tasha’s dedication to helping children find safe and nurturing homes. After six long years, Tasha and Will’s sacrifice and determination paid off when they brought home their second daughter. The bond their adopted girls share, along with Tasha’s biological children, is indescribable. Tasha's passion for adoption led her to become an Adoption Specialist for Adoption Assistance. Initially, her primary focus was preparing families for the adoption process. Nowadays, Tasha dedicates herself to supporting birth mothers and providing volunteer birthmother counseling across the Commonwealth. Tasha feels more convicted than ever to support expectant mothers and live out her calling: providing life-saving opportunities to vulnerable women and their children. Tasha's mission is to raise awareness for open adoption, which allows women to preserve a relationship with their children while maintaining healthy boundaries. To Tasha, there is no greater job than finding loving, permanent families for children in need.
Stacy is the owner and supervisor of Pacific Northwest Guardian ad Litem (PNWGAL). Stacy started as a volunteer Guardian ad Litem (GAL), then known as a CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate) in Whatcom County in 2012. She has her Bachelor of Social Science and a minor in law and justice. Stacy took over as the owner of PNWGAL in 2014, serving children in Whatcom County. PNWGAL has been contracted to provide GAL services since 2015 in Skagit County. Though certified as a Title 26 (Family Law) GAL in 2016, Stacy’s devotion is to abused and neglected children. In 2017, she started the first volunteer advocate program (VGAL) for Skagit County and now focuses her time on supporting, supervising, and training her dedicated group. Through this work, Stacy has had a positive impact on permanency outcomes for hundreds of local children.