

CONNECTS

CASEY

WINTER 2007
A REPORT FROM THE
ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

IN THIS ISSUE: Momentum Building in the Quest for Permanent Family Connections; Groups Honored for Their Work With Families; Notes of Recognition; INSITES



JOE RODRIGUEZ

MOMENTUM BUILDING IN THE QUEST FOR PERMANENT FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Nadege Mardy Breeden beams when she talks about her mother. “I know if I call her at three or four o’clock in the morning, she will always be there. That’s the difference,” she says, referring to the time she spent in foster care. Entering the system at age 12, suffering from physical abuse and the death of her father, it would have been difficult to imagine her life today as

an adopted daughter, a college graduate, a new mother, and a successful professional.

When Nadege was first placed with Sheree Breeden, “it was supposed to be just temporary,” Nadege reflects. But the two soon began “creating a relationship” in which Nadege talked about things that she had never been able to share with anyone. Breeden was strict but loving and consistent.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Johnny Madrid, near his Wall Street office, has become a compelling voice for permanency after growing up in many foster care settings and “aging out” without a permanent family or home.

CASEY CONNECTS

Winter 2007

A quarterly newsletter published by

The Annie E. Casey Foundation

701 St. Paul Street

Baltimore, MD 21202

Phone: 410.547.6600

Fax: 410.547.6624

www.aecf.org

James P. Kelly

Chairman

Douglas W. Nelson

President

Ralph Smith

Senior Vice President

Tony Cipollone

Vice President

Dana Vickers Shelley

Director of Strategic Communications

Deborah L. Cohen

Editor

Betsy Rubiner

Contributing Writer

Kristin Coffey

Copyeditor

Kathryn Shagas Design

Design and Production

© 2007, The Annie E. Casey Foundation,
Baltimore, Maryland

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's vulnerable children and families. In pursuit of this goal, the Foundation makes grants that help states, cities, and neighborhoods fashion more innovative, cost-effective responses to these needs.

MOMENTUM

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

When Nadege turned 21 and was attending college, Breeden adopted her. "It was the best day of my life," Nadege says. "This is permanent."

For many children in the foster care system, especially teens and older youth, finding that one person—or family—to count on throughout life remains an unrealized dream. Those who "age out" without a permanent family or home often face depression, homelessness, substance abuse, or incarceration. Even for those who achieve success, there remains a sense of loss.

Johnny Madrid, age 25, excelled in school and sports, earned a scholarship to a private high school, and graduated with an urban studies degree from Stanford University. He now lives in New York and works as a financial analyst for Goldman Sachs. Madrid's accomplishments are that much more impressive because he grew up in foster care, living in 19 different settings after his mother died when he was 11 years old. Madrid aged out of the system without a permanent family or home.

"People tell me I'm a success story," Madrid said in a 2004 video chronicling his life as part of a digital storytelling project supported by the California Permanency for Youth Project and the Stuart Foundation. "But I think of all those times when self-destructiveness overwhelmed me... the nights I slept in my car during college holiday breaks... Most of all I think of that hole in my heart and that sense of loneliness."

Madrid, who won scholarships and recognition for his work to reform foster care, became a powerful spokesman in an emerging national movement to ensure that *no child grows to adulthood without a lifelong connection to a caring adult*. At a national convening last September on permanency hosted by the Casey Foundation in Washington, D.C., professionals, practitioners, and policymakers from more than 40 states came together to discuss not just why this needs to happen but how. Casey

Family Services, the Foundation's direct services agency, led the organizing and planning for the convening. The meeting highlighted efforts nationwide to help the nearly 25,000 young people who age out of foster care each year with no permanent family by:

- Working to prevent unnecessary placements and keep children safely with their families, relatives, and legal guardians.
- Involving young people directly in decisions and proceedings concerning their welfare.
- Addressing disparities that result in disproportionately higher numbers of racial and ethnic minorities in foster care.
- Using team planning and problem solving that involves young people and other key people in their lives and communities.
- Seeking out and going back to family members as a source of support and potential long-term connection for the young people in foster care.
- Fostering a permanent connection with at least one adult—coach, teacher, friend's parent, social worker, mentor, or another adult willing to provide lifelong support.
- Continually working to help older children and youth maintain contact with family members, including siblings.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and the 2004 Pew Commission Report on Children in Foster Care both underscore the importance of finding permanent family connections for children at risk of or already in foster care.

"While we can make a child's life less dangerous by taking him out of harm's way, we can't make any child's life truly secure without ensuring that he is part of a loving and lasting family," said Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, in remarks at the convening.

Casey Family Services, which provides services for children and families in the child



JJ Hitch, center, who fled his childhood home, was adopted by his grandparents. Here, he plays cards with his sister, Toni, and brother, Jake.

“We can’t make any child’s life **TRULY SECURE** without ensuring that he is part of a loving and **LASTING** family.”

welfare system throughout New England and in Baltimore, is at the forefront of this movement, as are Casey-supported initiatives such as Family to Family, the Casey Strategic Consulting Group, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, and Community Partnerships for Child Protection. Casey’s efforts to foster permanent family relationships for vulnerable children also are woven into its work to improve family economic success, promote responsible neighborhood development, enhance early childhood development, and bolster resident leadership and engagement.

At the convening, what was most exciting was “the sense of an increasingly strong national consensus that permanence for youth is possible, powerful, and must be a national priority,” says Sarah Greenblatt,

director of the Casey Center for Effective Child Welfare Practice. Across the country, there is evidence of this movement. For example:

- Indiana, North Carolina, and Oregon secured waivers of federal regulations and used funds more flexibly to improve their family preservation and reunification programs so that fewer children enter foster care.
- A tripling of abuse and neglect prevention funds and a doubling of family preservation funds in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, since 1997 have cut the foster care population by 30 percent and enabled over half of all children requiring foster care to be placed with relatives and 80 percent to stay with siblings.

- By shifting the goal in New York City from long-term foster care and “emancipation” to family permanence, the number of youth with a stated goal of “independent living” decreased from 1,584 to 843 while the adoption rate for older foster youth increased.
- From 1997 to 2002, the subsidized guardianship demonstration program in Illinois created permanent homes for over 7,000 foster children and increased the overall permanency rate by as much as 12 percent while saving taxpayers \$25 million in foster care costs.
- In the past two years, Maine has reduced the number of children in residential group care by 40 percent by instituting family team meetings that bring together people with a connection or interest in a child to identify those interested in being involved with the child and providing a permanent home.

In Maine, the Casey Strategic Consulting Group worked with state leadership to train managers and staff to reframe how they plan and make decisions about children. Casey Family Services’ Maine Division has launched or redesigned programs to focus on permanent family connections—and supportive services—for children and families.

“This is a good example of how the Foundation, at different levels of involvement with state reform, can work collaboratively together,” says Mark Millar, director of Casey Family Services’ Maine Division. “The key is to have buy-in from leadership and the ability to be clear on what the values and goals are for the organization.”

GROUPS HONORED FOR THEIR WORK WITH FAMILIES

The Casey Foundation has honored four more organizations for doing exemplary work to strengthen families and neighborhoods as part of FAMILIES COUNT: The National Honors Program.

Launched in 2000, FAMILIES COUNT has recognized 50 organizations to date. Each receives an unrestricted \$500,000 award. The 2007 honorees were announced during the week of Thanksgiving, which has been designated as National Families Week. They include:

ECD/HOPE (ENTERPRISE CORPORATION OF THE DELTA/HOPE COMMUNITY CREDIT UNION), in Jackson, Mississippi, has developed over \$300 million in financing and provided financial support to low-income families in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. ECD/HOPE creates community conditions that support family success while providing families with financial services and education. Partnerships with public, private, and nonprofit organizations enable ECD/HOPE to develop affordable housing, entrepreneurship, and neighborhood jobs.

FAMILY SERVICE ASSOCIATION OF SAN ANTONIO, INC., in San Antonio, Texas, strengthens 50,000 vulnerable families annually through programs easily accessible at six neighborhood centers and 38 schools. Its newest center, The Neighborhood Place, is a hub for services, including counseling, parenting classes, substance abuse prevention, education, employment opportunities, and child care.

MARY'S CENTER FOR MATERNAL AND CHILD CARE serves immigrant and underserved families in and around the nation's capital. In addition to health care, it provides preventive care, home visitation services, case management, family literacy and education, programs for adolescents, and a home-based child care licensing program that enables mothers to start businesses.

SOUTHERN GOOD FAITH FUND (SGFF), in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, has helped thousands of families develop the skills and economic foundation to move their families forward. SGFF works with families to build assets and helps entrepreneurial parents launch or expand businesses. The Career Pathways program works with employers and community colleges to help parents advance to better jobs. SGFF also advocates for policies that support families throughout the region.

"These organizations inspire us with their determination to ensure all families can succeed in the economy, in their communities, and with their children," says Ralph Smith, senior vice president of the Casey Foundation. "Our continuing

challenge as a nation is less about know-how than it is about will—the willingness to care enough and do enough so that all families can realize their dreams for their children." To learn more about FAMILIES COUNT and the honorees, visit www.aecf.org/familiescount/2007.

The Arnolds, Thomas, Tisha, and their daughters, Aiyana, left, and Tahlia, gather in front of the home they bought with help from the Asset Builders program offered in the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta by the Southern Good Faith Fund.



BOB DAENWRICH

NOTES OF RECOGNITION

JAMES BELL/W. HAYWOOD BURNS INSTITUTE



After working for years as an attorney on cases involving the conditions of confinement for juveniles, James Bell, (left) founded a non-

profit in 2001 dedicated to reducing the overrepresentation of young people of color in the juvenile justice system. For his accomplishments as executive director of the W. Haywood Burns Institute in San Francisco, Bell has been awarded a James Irvine Foundation Leadership Award, which recognizes and supports California's most innovative community work.

The Burns Institute works closely with the Casey Foundation's Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative. After analyzing data to determine why young people end up in the system, Burns Institute staff bring together community members, law enforcement leaders, and juvenile justice decision-makers to devise alternatives. As a result, the number of young people confined in juvenile hall has dropped by up to 15 percent in several counties. The award includes a \$125,000 grant that will be used to increase public understanding of juvenile justice issues and promote other community reforms benefiting young people of color.

MIM GEORGE AWARD

In recognition of "its tireless commitment to improving the lives of disadvantaged families and seeking solutions for court-involved youth," the Casey Foundation has won the 2006 Mim George Award from the National Alliance of Sentencing Advocates and Mitigation Specialists, which promotes humane and equitable sentencing and confinement decisions.

WILSON GOODE/AMACHI

The Rev. Wilson W. Goode, Sr., (center) has received a \$100,000 Purpose Prize, recognizing exceptional people over 60 who use their experience to address some

of society's greatest challenges. The award was given by Civic Ventures, a California think tank that draws on the skills of older adults to address social problems.

Goode, former mayor of Philadelphia and an ordained minister, was one of five award-winning "social innovators." He was recognized for his work as director of Amachi, a faith-based program that has provided mentoring to over 30,000 children of incarcerated parents in over 85 cities. Amachi is an initiative by Public/Private Ventures, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit. (See *Casey Connects*, Winter/Spring 2003.) After Goode's father was incarcerated when Goode was 14, he was inspired by mentors at church



to finish high school, attend college, and achieve success. "My own life experience indicates that mentoring works," he says.

Goode rallied pastors in predominantly African-American communities and faith-based groups to encourage their congregants to mentor. Over 240 programs in 49 states are now affiliated with or inspired by Amachi. Des Moines, Iowa, one of Casey's *Making Connections* sites, is among the newest cities to create an Amachi program, using a \$185,000 grant to the local Big Brothers/Big Sisters from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Des Moines pastors organized the effort with help from Save Our Youth, a local mentoring program; the *Making Connections* site team; the Casey Foundation's Faith and Families team; and the Rev. Goode.

INDIANAPOLIS SCHOOLS

In Indianapolis, Mayor Bart Peterson's Charter Schools Initiative has won an Innovations in American Government Award from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, which includes a \$100,000 prize, and the George Washington Community School was one of three schools selected nationally to

receive an excellence award from the Coalition for Community Schools.

The Charter Schools Initiative was among seven winners culled from about 1,000 applicants. The number of Indianapolis charter school students passing state achievement tests rose by 25 percent over two years. There is now a rigorous application process to become a charter school and strict evaluations. "This program's real innovation is assigning responsibility and accountability in the Mayor's Office," says Patricia McGinnis, president and chief executive officer of the Council for Excellence in Government in Washington, D.C., which helps oversee the awards. "They've made buck passing impossible."

Formerly an academically failing high school that closed, George Washington reopened in 2000 with community support and a commitment to improve graduation rates and prepare students for post-secondary education. (See *Casey Connects*, Fall 2000.) Now a grade 6–12 community school that embraces innovative teaching strategies and has improved academic performance, George Washington works with community groups to provide health services, preschool, tutoring/mentoring, financial counseling, and adult education.

ATLANTA SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Two principals in Atlanta, a Casey civic site, have been recognized by Governor Sonny Perdue as High Performance Principals for continuously improving the performance of their schools since 2001. Armstead L. Salters, principal of Gideons Elementary, and Marcene Thornton, former principal of Capitol View Elementary, were among over 100 principals statewide honored for providing strong leadership. In 2006, U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings visited Gideons, where students' test results in science and math have improved. Capitol View has one of Georgia's highest student poverty rates and a high turnover rate. Last year, 90 percent of its students met or exceeded standards on a state curriculum



The Annie E. Casey Foundation

701 St. Paul Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202
Phone: 410.547.6600
Fax: 410.547.6624
www.aecf.org

Return Service Requested

PRSRT STD
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
LONG GREEN, MD
PERMIT NO. 2

RECOGNITION

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

test. Thornton is now principal of a new small public high school in Atlanta.

NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has given Casey Family Services' New Hampshire Division a 2006 Adoption Excellence Award for excellence in its work to promote adoption and other permanent family connections for children in foster care.

The award was presented to 13 recipients at a National Adoption Month Celebration on November 28 in Arlington, Virginia. The New Hampshire Division was honored in the Support for Adoptive Families category.

HHS established the Adoption Excellence Awards program in 1997 to recognize outstanding accomplishments in achieving permanence for children waiting in foster care. The awards honor states, child welfare agencies, organizations, courts, businesses, individuals, and families. For more information, visit www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/current_initiatives/aeawards.htm.

KAREN CROMPTON

Karen Crompton, executive director of Voices for Utah's Children, the state KIDS



Karen Crompton



Elizabeth Bryant

COUNT grantee, has received the 2006 Florette Angel Memorial Child Advocacy Award by Voices for America's Children, a nationwide child advocacy network. Crompton has advocated for improvements in health, child care, and child welfare policy, including a successful bill that extended Medicaid coverage to up to age 21 for young people aging out of foster care. "It was the only Medicaid expansion that passed this year, and it passed unanimously," says Crompton. Voices for Utah's Children also helped secure additional funding for CHIP (Children's Health Insurance Program), which resulted in the enrollment of an additional 16,000 children; helped preserve in-state college tuition for children of undocumented parents; and coordinated state candidate forums that increased public awareness of children's issues. "Her achievements and commitment are exemplary of the power a child advocate has to truly better the world for kids," says Tamara Lucas Copeland, former president of Voices for America's Children.

ELIZABETH BURKE BRYANT

Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, recently received the Nancy H. Gewirtz Social Action Award from the National Association of Social Workers' chapter in Rhode Island and the Mary Reilly Advocacy Award from Dorcas Place Family Literacy Center in Providence, R.I. "These awards reflect the close working partnerships we've had on so many issues of importance to children and families," says Bryant. Work with Dorcas Place has focused on advancing adult literacy and early learning opportunities particularly for children from low-income families.

CASEY FAMILY SERVICES WINS AWARD

Casey Family Services recently received the Sterling Award from Family Services Woodfield (FSW), which helps low-income individuals build skills and financial assets to achieve success. The annual award is given to an organization that supports building stronger families and communities. FSW honored Casey for its work with foster youth, its policy initiatives, and its technical assistance to other child welfare organizations in Connecticut and beyond. Formerly based in Woodfield, Connecticut, but now in Bridgeport, FSW was a 2004 FAMILIES COUNT honoree.

INSITES

WINTER 2007
A REPORT FROM THE
ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



SYSTEMS MAKING CHANGES TO PROMOTE LONG-TERM FAMILY TIES

Paul Maheux, a social worker with Casey Family Services in Portland, Maine, understands why it's hard for caseworkers and foster parents to “wrap their brain” around the goal of family permanence. As program director of a foster care agency before coming to Casey, Maheux recalls, the key goal was stability. “You try to keep these kids from bouncing from placement to placement—to keep them stable, keep them fed, keep them safe. We weren't realizing that the whole long-term emotional piece was being neglected.”

Through a major shift in Maine's approach and growing awareness that young people who leave foster care on their

own don't fare well, Maheux now realizes that “sometimes you have to delay stability on the road to a more permanent connection.”

“I have a lot of empathy for people in the community who are struggling with this,” he says. “However, I also have to consider times in the past when I have finished helping a child achieve stability only and they grow up without any

Joseph Testa, 18, right, a youth transitioning from foster care to independent living, shows Paul Maheux, his Casey Family Services social worker, a horticultural project he is working on at a vocational school greenhouse.

GROWING awareness that children fare poorly if they leave FOSTER CARE on their own has prompted a multipronged push for permanence.



permanent connections as I move onto my next case. You can be taught skills like keeping a checkbook, doing your laundry, or paying your rent. What they are really deficient at is relationships, conflict resolution—all those things you learn in a family setting. It gets as basic as where are they going to spend Thanksgiving dinner.”

What’s changed in Maheux’s practice is that “right away you start working on those connections.” If a foster family isn’t interested in a permanent connection, “we need to start looking” to broaden the search. The foster family can still be integral “in helping us find a new adoptive home” or long-term family relationship.

“Our whole Casey division in Maine has been redesigned to support permanency,” says Mark Millar, division director. This includes a demonstration program with the State Department of Health and Human Services to find permanent homes for children from age 7 to age 17 with severe difficulties who have been in “high-end” care and for whom parental rights have been terminated. The division’s family and kinship reunification programs, family preservation services, post-adoption support, and family team meetings also are structured to foster permanence.

The Casey Strategic Consulting Group also has been instrumental in helping the state shift its orientation and practices toward fostering permanence, says Jim Beougher, director of the Office of Child and Family Services. “Supervisors are increasingly on board, and that’s the key to transforming the system. This isn’t about money or about numbers but about kids having the supports they need as they become adults in our society.”

A TEAM APPROACH

When Jeri Wikaryasz was a child protective worker in Denver 12 years ago, she felt “overwhelmed” by the difficult decisions she had to make to develop a safe, nurturing, and

Pamelina Rose, center, visits in her home with Alesia Hankins and Eric Ploscik, the START team that helped her rebuild her family.

stable environment for children. “I felt so alone,” she says.

Today, decisions about how best to protect a child and work toward a permanent family are made differently in Denver and Colorado Springs, with input from more experienced staff and family and community members included in a Team Decision-Making (TDM) meeting.

“We’re making, hopefully, a permanent plan quicker,” says Wikaryasz, now a TDM facilitator for Denver’s human services department. “It’s not just the caseworker making the decision.”

TDM is a tool used by Family to Family, a Casey Foundation child welfare reform initiative. Goals to spur permanency include reducing reliance on congregate care, shortening foster care lengths of stay, limiting the moves a child makes once in care, and, whenever possible, preserving or reunifying families. “Kids need to be with their families if at all possible,” says Wikaryasz.

Before, “kids lingered longer in the system and we didn’t bring families together to talk,” says Wikaryasz. Permanency is now brought up immediately and there’s a timetable.

The meetings involve the child protective worker, resource staff, service providers, and major players in a child’s life—parents, relatives, foster parents, friends, perhaps a favorite coach, and teenage foster care youth. Wikaryasz mediates these sometimes tense meetings, focusing on the child’s needs, encouraging ideas from all, and trying to reach consensus, although the department makes the final decision.

A caseworker may go into a meeting thinking a child needs to be removed from home, but during the discussion discovers resources that enable the child to remain home or near home with a relative.

“We’re getting information at the meeting. It may be things the caseworker hasn’t picked up,” says Wikaryasz. “We get surprises all the time. When it’s done correctly and you’ve got the people at the table and it’s a really live decision, it’s powerful.”

HELPING A PARENT RECOVER

As a child, Pamela Rose tagged along with her grandmother, a social worker, and saw how children without a dependable family struggled. So as a parent, when Rose lost custody of her children because of a drug addiction, she says, “I knew I had to get clean. I just didn’t know if I was able to.”

She did get clean and she got her children back—with help from START, a program offered by the Cuyahoga County Department of Child and Family Services in Ohio. Another Family to Family tool, START (Sobriety Treatment and Recovery Team) provides intensive services to drug-addicted mothers, assigning them a social worker and a family advocate who is often another mother in recovery from addiction.

Alesia Hankins and Eric Ploscik from START were assigned to Rose following the birth of her fifth child in 1998, when mother and child tested positive for cocaine. Rose was reunited with her child about eight months later. After a relapse, Rose completed inpatient treatment. Following the birth of her sixth child in 1999, Rose and her new baby tested negative for drugs. That year, Rose was also reunited with four children who had been placed in relatives’ care. “I was able to start life over as a parent,” says Rose.

Today, Rose is a single working mother in Cleveland. She has been drug-free for almost eight years. Working with Hankins, a recovering addict and parent specially trained as a family advocate, was particularly helpful. “When I found out she had gone through the same, like me, I really saw some hope,” says Rose.

When Rose relapsed, the team quickly caught on. “They stayed on me but they also understood and they didn’t give up on me,” says Rose.

START can speed permanency because “we’re visiting weekly and keeping contact,” says Hankins. Ploscik adds, “We’re

getting more involved quickly with services. We establish a rapport better.”

“Without START, I probably wouldn’t have changed my life. And my children wouldn’t have a mom who could take care of them,” says Rose.

YOUTH FORGE POLICY ROLE

Fleeing his chaotic childhood home, JJ Hitch quickly found supportive adults who have remained in his life as he enters adulthood. At age 14, he moved in with his grandparents and young aunt—and was later adopted by his grandparents. Now 19, he is grateful for his grandparents’ support and has a particularly tight bond with his 31-year-old aunt. “Permanency is a sense of security,” says Hitch. “Wherever I go or my aunt goes, I can always count on her. She wants to help.”

But Hitch knows former foster care youth who struggle alone.

“They don’t have anybody they feel they can count on,” says Hitch. “You cannot be a functional 18-year-old living on your own and be 100 percent healthy physically and mentally.”

Hitch is one of several youth involved in a state taskforce in Michigan that has issued a 21-step plan to improve health care, education, job opportunities, and permanency supports for youth aging out of foster care.

The Michigan effort is supported by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative (JCYOI), formed by the Casey



JJ Hitch, center, relaxing near his home with his aunt, Janet, left, his grandfather, Daniel, and his sister, Toni, served on a state taskforce working to help youth aging out of foster care.

Foundation and Casey Family Programs to expand opportunities for foster care youth transitioning into adulthood.

Kate Hanley, manager of Michigan's adoption and permanency services, says JCYOI has been instrumental in bringing the power of youth voices into the discussion about how to reshape the system to better serve young people. "To hear them saying 'I feel abandoned, all alone, and I really need something' was a catalyst in real significant changes, in how we work with and listen to foster care youth," says Hanley. JCYOI "made that happen by bringing young people into the process when developing programs and policy."

The 2006 state taskforce report identifies establishing permanent relationships as a key challenge and stresses the importance of youth-driven permanency decisions. It recommends measures such as peer mentoring by other foster youth on the importance of permanence and using Internet search tools to reconnect youth with kin.

Today, Hitch is a suburban Detroit college student with a part-time job who lives with his grandparents, aunt, and three younger siblings. He is also an intern for FosterClub, a national network that does advocacy work. "If I didn't have permanency to fall back on, I'd fall and hit rock bottom," he says. "It plays a large role in my life, behind the scenes."

BEING HEARD IN COURT

Gloryanna Renshaw of Omaha, Nebraska, was in dozens of placements—foster care homes, group homes, hospitals—during her 12 years in state protective custody, from age 7 to 19. And that doesn't include a prospective adoptive home.

"After two months, they got rid of me," says Renshaw, 21.

But when Renshaw began speaking out at court hearings where important decisions were being made about her future, she began feeling better and tightened bonds with supportive adults who have stuck by her into adulthood.

"It made me feel extremely empowered that they were listening to me," says Renshaw, one of several former foster care youth pushing for more youth involvement in court proceedings at a recent state summit to discuss ways to improve the justice system for children in foster care and spur permanency. The summit was spearheaded by Nebraska Chief Justice John Hendry shortly before his retirement and was well attended by judges responsible for juvenile court proceedings and child welfare professionals.

Gloryanna Renshaw, who experienced many foster care placements, felt empowered when she was able to speak for herself during court proceedings. Renshaw is pictured with her newborn son, Jeremiah.

Nationally, youth involvement is becoming a key ingredient in permanency discussions. Some worry that being more directly involved in hearings or court proceedings

can be upsetting for children, but experts argue that with the proper ground rules, support, and preparation for both the young people and judges and lawyers, youth involvement encourages more informed and humane decisions.

"Kids need to know what they're getting into," says Renshaw. "They make decisions for us, but we have to live them out. It's extremely important that we're involved, know what's going on, and feel comfortable."

Renshaw was "really nervous" when she first attended a court hearing at about age 12, but she attended many more. "I love my judge," says Renshaw. "She was always wanting me there. Two times she postponed hearings and waited until I could come." Renshaw also feels some of the heartaches she experienced could have been avoided if she had been heard in court earlier.

Today, Renshaw, a part-time college student and supermarket employee, remains close to her judge, former guardian ad litem, and Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) worker. When Renshaw was 17, her CASA worker became her foster care mother. But when Renshaw first aged out of foster care, she insisted on going it alone. "The state said I was an adult so I felt like I needed to act like that," she says. "I was homeless a few times. I wasn't doing so well." She finally accepted the help of her foster mother, whom she calls mom. "It's amazing the comfort and serenity you feel when you have someone to call and someplace to come home to."

