



Los Angeles Honors Foster Care “Heroes” and Success Stories

Legislator Builds Momentum for Change in California’s Foster Care System

Karen Bass



During the 2005 Foster Care Awareness Campaign, Assemblymember Karen Bass unveiled plans to create a California Legislative Select Committee on Foster Care. As Chair of that committee over the past year, Assemblymember Bass has conducted hearings throughout the state, listening to testimony from youth living in foster care, relative and foster caregivers, professionals from the child welfare system, and leaders in the advocacy community. Assemblymember Bass developed a vision of achieving reform of California’s foster care system, addressing how the many agencies and systems that “parent” foster youth can more effectively work together and collectively address critical challenges and issues impacting foster children and underscoring the importance of creating new approaches to assist relatives who are providing care for foster youth. As a result of efforts of legislators such as Assemblymember Karen Bass, the California legislature is now considering a far-reaching, bipartisan package of more than 20 bills aimed at reform of the state’s foster care system.

Social Worker Specializes in Helping Relatives Caring for Foster Youth

Claudia Bustillos



Abused and neglected youth in our state should have what we want for our own children – a stable, secure, and supportive home. More than 34% of California’s foster children (29,061 children) are living in the homes of grandparents and other relatives. Research demonstrates that foster children who are able to live with relative caregivers are more likely to stay close to their original home, enabling them to maintain school stability and remain more closely connected to friends, family and their cultural heritage. Department of Children and Family Services Kinship Supervising Social Worker Claudia Bustillos works with relative caregivers and their families. “I love my job,” comments Claudia. “You see success stories every day.” Her positive outlook is not only wonderful to see; it’s contagious. She is able to motivate participants in her support groups as well as provide them with information and assistance. When asked why she became a social worker, Bustillos explains it was because of people who touched her own life, and because it is “where I could make the most change.”

Foster Parents Give Medically Fragile Children a Loving Family

Ernesto and Donna Del Alto



Studies show that when youth enter the dependency court system, approximately 80 percent have a chronic medical condition, and about one in four have three or more chronic problems, including failure to grow, asthma, anemia, neurological conditions, and visual, hearing, or dental problems. Ernesto and Donna Del Alto became foster parents for a critically ill infant girl, who needed a liver transplant in order to survive. She had been declared ineligible for the transplant simply because she was in foster care, and it was assumed that foster parents would not provide the life-long support needed by an organ recipient. Once they obtained approval for the liver transplant, however, the baby languished, and the Del Altos were told one evening to go home and prepare her funeral. With tears in their eyes, the Del Altos describe how they declined to leave the hospital, because they “wanted the last thing she felt to be love.” Virtually at the last moment, the baby was given a new liver. When she recovered, The Del Altos adopted her, and in the next few years went on to adopt three more medically fragile children from foster care, including a child who cannot see, hear, speak or swallow as the result of her abuse. The Del Altos provide an inspiring model of what it means to love and care for children. They do not in any way consider themselves extraordinary. Despite the demands of providing round the clock medical care to the children, Donna Del Alto is studying to become a nurse. Pointing with pride to family photographs, the Del Altos say they adore their girls and can’t imagine life without them.

Pediatrician Establishes Center for Medical Treatment of Foster Youth

Astrid Heger, MD



Many foster children have had only erratic contact with health care providers prior to placement, and social workers seldom have an opportunity to review the children’s health history with their birth parents or track down missing health data. Dr. Astrid Heger began to collaborate with child welfare and health service agencies ten years ago to establish the county’s first one-stop healthcare services center for foster children. Plans are now underway to replicate the Community-Based Assessment and Treatment Center at other county hospitals. Additionally, Dr. Heger is building a coalition to deliver multidisciplinary services to foster children who suffer developmental delays as the result of prenatal exposure to alcohol, a problem for which an estimated 80% of foster youth are at risk. Dr. Heger observes, “When I first started evaluating children for possible abuse, I believed that once I did my forensic evaluation my job was done...I realized that I needed to build a better system where we were partners in guaranteeing that a foster child was never forgotten and when they returned home or to society, they were better than when they were detained.”

Former Foster Youth Beats the Odds to Attain Financial Self-Sufficiency

Christopher Mallory



The average age of financial independence in America today is 26 years of age. Despite this national trend, we expect foster youth to attain financial and emotional independence by age 18, when many of them are abruptly turned out of the child welfare system. Emancipated foster youth earn an average of \$6,000 per year, a number well below the national poverty level, especially since the self-sufficiency standard for a single adult with no children in Los Angeles County is \$20,751 per year. Christopher Mallory entered foster care at the age of 9 and remained in foster care and group homes until he emancipated when he was 18. During those years, Christopher attended several different elementary and high schools and had only limited contact with his parents and his older sister, also placed in the foster care system, whose whereabouts were often unknown to him. Although Christopher faced stressful psychological issues on his own, he managed to successfully graduate with honors from high school. He was recognized as Student of the Year at one of his many high schools. Christopher now seeks to support and educate other foster youth by serving as a peer counselor in the ESTEP (Early Start to Emancipation Preparation) program at Long Beach City College. Christopher is determined to beat the odds and succeed as an elevator repair mechanic. And he has looked beyond simply his own economic well-being -- financially assisting his sister and playing an important part in the upbringing of his niece and nephew.

Attorney's Work Aids Foster Youth and Their Families

Marjorie Shelvy



Marjorie Shelvy, Senior Staff Attorney in the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, has attained nationally recognized expertise in the area of foster care benefits. Her tireless advocacy on behalf of children and families qualifies Marjorie Shelvy as a true Foster Care Hero. In 2003, Marjorie served as lead counsel in *Rosales v. Thompson*, litigation that sought to enable many more children living with their grandparents or other relatives to be eligible for federal foster care assistance. That case sought relief for numerous children who were denied federal foster care benefits in the past. In some cases it would have made it possible for children to live with relatives who could not afford to take them in under the old policy, giving children the advantage of remaining with their families, rather than needing to be placed with unfamiliar foster families or group homes. Throughout her career, Marjorie has passionately promoted the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community.

Former Foster Youth Aims for Legal Career to Help Other Foster Youth

Patrice Washington



“What you have been through in the past can shape your future. Kids need someone to fight for them,” observes Patrice Washington. As a result of her unwavering determination, Patrice will soon be a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley. Patrice entered foster care at age 6. Separated from her five brothers and sisters, she acknowledges she felt lost for many years. Fortunately, one of her high school teachers convinced her that, despite her average start in high school, college was an option. With encouragement, Patrice worked hard to turn her grades around. She graduated from Compton High School with a 3.7 grade point average and was awarded a scholarship from United Friends of the Children because of her focus on academic achievement, her ability to overcome obstacles, and her drive to succeed. While at Berkeley, Patrice spent her summers working as a legal intern, first for a judge in the LA County Superior Court and next at The Alliance for Children’s Rights. Patrice will graduate with a BA in Legal Studies and plans to attend law school.

Mental Health Therapist Works to Transform Painful Childhood Experiences

Jeanette Yoffe



Children living in foster care, by definition, undergo life-shattering upheaval. Jeanette Yoffe began her life-long relationship with the adoption and foster care system at age 15 months, when she was placed in a foster home in Long Island, NY. At age 7, she was adopted by a loving family. Despite this positive outcome, she was insecure and continued to ask her parents, “When are you going to give me away?” Not knowing her own birth story and having no one to help her deal with her feelings about being in foster care had a profound impact on Jeanette. As an undergraduate, she wrote an award-winning one-woman show; “What’s Your Name? Who’s Your Daddy?” that dramatizes her personal journey through foster care and adoption with scenes such as a 7-year-old auditioning for an adoptive family, imagining what her birth mother was like, and speculating why she had to “let her go.” After earning a masters degree in Clinical Psychology, Jeanette became a Mental Health Therapist at Southern California Foster Family and Adoption Agency and developed a series of groundbreaking interventions for working with foster and adoptive children. Jeanette is able to use her personal experience and innovative techniques to help children deal with their initial placement into foster care and to assist families during the foster and adoption process. Jeanette’s life story has given her unique insight, and her dedication to her career is a great inspiration to the children and families she works with, transforming children’s lives from despair and loss toward resiliency and hope. Jeanette says, “Children in foster care are vulnerable. They have a voice, and we as educators, therapists, and social workers need to help them find that voice and express it however possible.”