



Sari Grant, Administrator  
Resource Family Support and  
Permanency Division

November is National Adoption Month. As such, it is a time to dispel myths about the adoption process and raise awareness for the many children in foster care who are waiting patiently for a loving, permanent home. But for the real-world matchmakers in the Matching Coordination Unit (MCU) at the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), adoption and permanency are goals worth highlighting year-round.

MCU staff work tirelessly every day to recruit prospective adoptive parents and pair them with children who are waiting for a forever home. Sari Grant, a 36-year DCFS veteran who is a manager within the Resource Family Support and Permanency Division —of which the MCU is a part —considers recruitment of families for foster youth to be one of the most important functions within the department.

“My heart has always been with the kids who need families,” said Sari, noting that many of the children the MCU works with have experienced multiple placements and are at risk for becoming homeless or incarcerated. “What could be more rewarding than finding a family for a child who doesn’t have one? I do this because I truly feel like I am making a difference.”

The MCU works to find homes for approximately 350 children and youth at a given time, most of whom are older, part of a sibling group or considered to have special needs. These characteristics make finding permanent placements challenging, but the dogged staff in this unit are relentless in using everything in their bag of tricks to find matches. Creativity is key as they tap into a variety of special programs to search for innovative ways to reach potential adoptive parents, constantly working to perfect the art of matching vulnerable youth with a home and family that is “just right.”

“We constantly have to think outside the box,” said children services administrator Stephanie Clancy, who oversees the Heart Gallery program within the MCU. “Circumstances change and we have to adapt, learn what works, what doesn’t and how to advocate for our kids successfully.”

The Heart Gallery was first implemented in Los Angeles County in 2006 after a similar program in New Mexico gained national recognition for its success. Knowing that a picture can often convey much more than simply reading a case file, this program enlists the services of professional photographers to take pictures of youth waiting to be adopted, which are then featured on the [Heart Gallery website](#), social media and adoption websites run by external organizations, as well as in the annual Heart Gallery calendar that is passed out to faith-based and community organizations and prospective resource parents.

The Heart Gallery has grown over the years into one of the most successful program adaptations in the nation, with people coming from other jurisdictions to learn from Los Angeles. When the pandemic stymied the ability to continue with the traditional photo shoots and in-person displays, Stephanie came up with the idea for “front porch” images. Approximately 95 professional photographers

volunteer their time for the cause, driving across the county to take compelling photos of youth at their place of residence.

“We are visual people, and a good picture can really make a difference,” Stephanie said. “When a picture catches you it draws you in, and that’s what you need in this work. The Heart Gallery is about looking at kids through a different lens, getting to know them from a different perspective rather than just what’s in a court report.”

From working with the [Fostering Families Today](#) magazine to feature children in Los Angeles County waiting to be adopted, to partnering with the [RaiseAChild](#) organization to host monthly matching events, creativity and teamwork underlies many of the MCU’s other efforts as well.

“Collaborations and partnerships are key to successful recruiting efforts,” said Bryan Miller, a supervisor who manages a number of the programs within the unit. “It’s also important to recognize that every child’s needs are different, and we have to recruit for and match children accordingly. Adoption can be a very abstract concept for the children we work with, so we often end up having to choreograph a delicate dance of sorts, trying to prepare them for recruitment and matching efforts while many specifics are unknown.”

According to Sari, many older foster youth express a desire not to be adopted, likely wanting to avoid further feelings of rejection. For social workers juggling high caseloads, such an assertion can be easy to accept, but also risks setting youth up for a lifetime of feeling like they do not belong anywhere.

“Kids don’t always realize the full impact, but it’s our job to help them understand,” Sari said.

One of the unit’s programs, [KidSave](#), is intended to address this issue by enlisting the help of caring adults who want to support foster youth but may not feel ready to pursue adoption. These adult “hosts” are matched with older youth in DCFS care, functioning as a mentor and advocate to help them find a family and reduces some of the pressure on the youth. Some hosting matches have been so successful that they have lead to long-term relationships and even adoptions.

As with the Heart Gallery, the ongoing pandemic has generated added obstacles for the unit’s work to recruit and pair families with youth awaiting adoption. Success depends in large part on the ability to

forge connections, which is challenging at a time when isolation and social distancing are paramount. Through creative thinking and a collaborative approach with external partners, however, the MCU has found ways to continue making links and facilitating the relationship-building that is an essential part of a successful match and eventual adoption.

Before health restrictions were implemented, the unit hosted monthly KidSave events that brought together children and youth waiting to be adopted with potential mentors, allowing both parties to interact and connect with each other organically. Staff have pulled out all the stops to make the now virtual events as fun and engaging



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**STEPHANIE CLANCY**  
Heart Gallery Administrator

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as possible, utilizing smaller breakout rooms where participants can play online games and get to know one another, while enjoying pizza that the organizers have delivered to each home.

While the MCU staff are thrilled when they can make a successful match for those youth who are referred to their unit, they cannot help but dream even bigger, beyond the boundaries of this small section within DCFS. As Sari noted, there are so many children under DCFS care, and each one of them deserves a forever home and family to call their own, which is why the MCU staff are so passionate about what they do.

“There is no magic formula to making matches that will work, and it can be difficult if expectations are not met,” Bryan acknowledged. “Sometimes we just have to believe for these kids that their next match will be the right one.”

Along with the rest of the team, Stephanie strongly encourages all social workers not to give up on the prospect of permanent adoptive placements for the youth they work with. Musing about the creative ways that the MCU can help with the recruitment and matching children with their forever family, she expresses optimism and a desire to help unite as many families as possible.

“When you see a child who has been in many placements finally find their place and start to shine, you realize that these pictures, these events that we hold, they make profound differences for kids in foster care who need permanency,” Stephanie said. “There is no better way to stabilize a child than giving them roots. I believe that every child is adoptable, and there is a family for every child out there.”



**Watch this slideshow to meet more members of the Resource Family Support and Permanency Division team.**

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