

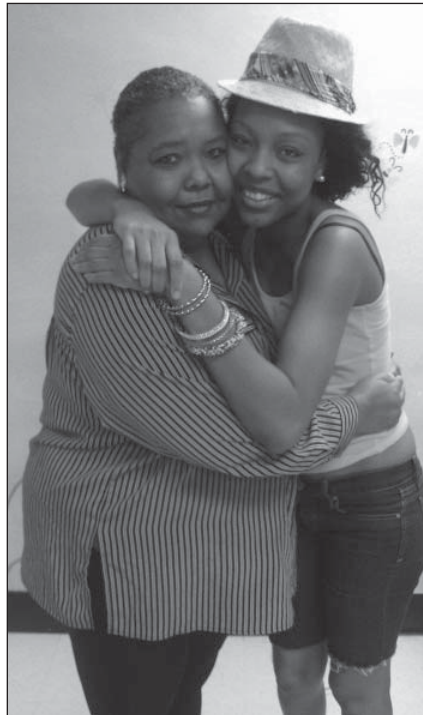
# Family Finding

## *Fulfilling our Promise*

late last year I was visiting Pennsylvania on behalf of Children's Home Society of North Carolina.

I was there to learn about Pennsylvania's efforts to integrate Family Finding practice into their child welfare system and how we might replicate some of their successes in North Carolina. Children's Home Society has been a leading agency in the implementation of Family Finding practice, and in 2011 we launched an effort to significantly expand and sustain the practice across North Carolina. Family Finding is an innovative practice that uses techniques and technology to search, discover and engage extended biological family members and other caring adults in the care and placement of children living in out-of-home care. Our goal is to identify safe, caring adults who will provide a child with a lifetime network of support and the opportunity to be adopted into a forever family. We believe that children do best when raised in a family and the promise of family membership is possible for every child.

While in Pennsylvania I met Ashley, a bright and talented 20-year-old college student. She was about to graduate and embark on her next great adventure. It's generally a time when we celebrate our achievements and imagine that anything is possible. However, in just two short months Ashley was going to become a former foster youth. She was going to age out without a family to call her own. Ashley came into foster care as an infant. She was adopted at age 5 but the adoption lasted for only four years. At age 9, she re-entered foster care where she spent the rest of her childhood. The foster care system had been her sole source of support. On her 21st birthday, however, her support system would van-



Ashley meets her mom for the first time.

ish and she would be left alone in the world with her 2-year-old son.

There are more than 400,000 children living in foster care, 100,000 of them are waiting for a family to call their own. As a public child welfare system we make a promise to each and every one of these children that we can keep them safe, find them a permanent family and help them succeed in life. Every year we fail to fulfill that promise to the 25,000 children who age-out, according to the 2012 AFCARS Report. These children suffer adult outcomes such as homelessness, incarceration and unplanned pregnancy at rates that far exceed those of their peers who have not been in foster care, according to the report "Midwest Evaluation of the

Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 23."

Last year, Ashley was included in that number. But as I have come to know Ashley, and so many young people just like her, I am convinced that this does not have to be the fate for 25,000 children every year. These children have families, large families. We can provide services that ensure children have lifelong relationships with their family that provide safety and stability, unconditional support and a foundation from which they can develop into healthy, loved and productive adults. Our Family Finding program at Children's Home Society is being implemented with these principles in mind.

When I met Ashley she shared her experience of growing up in foster care and being on the precipice of aging out. She also said she and her son were going to spend Thanksgiving alone. Through choked back tears she lamented this reality; wishing that something had been done to help her find her family. The truth of the matter is that Ashley, like all of the kids we work with, has a family and does not have to spend holidays alone. This is reinforced for me every day as we deliver Family Finding services in North Carolina.

Now that she is an adult, Ashley, with the help of a Family Finder, decided to contact her first social worker to find information about her mother. As it turned out, her mother was contacting the social worker at the same time. Ashley gave the woman her address and asked her to share it with her mother. The next time I spoke to Ashley on the phone the mailman arrived to deliver

a letter, the first communication with her mother. Ashley has since been to visit her mother, aunts and uncles, cousins and spoke with her grandfather over the phone. Through these encounters she has learned invaluable things about herself, her family and why she was in foster care. She could finally answer those burning questions that have weighed so heavily on her for the past 20 years.

When I asked her what it was like the first time she met her family, she said, “As I was standing in my great aunt’s living room surrounded by happy faces and listening to tears of joy, I looked at my auntie and thought to myself, ‘wow, blood family.’ If you’ve ever known the feeling of loving someone without ever meeting them; that’s how I felt. I love my family and I am ecstatic to begin our journey together.”

Ashley has only just begun the path toward family membership, but is showing great promise. The last time we spoke she said she and her son spent Thanksgiving with her family last year. The question that remains is why did she have to wait 20 years to reunite with her family? Family Finding provides our foster care system with the tools and strategies to fulfill our promise of family membership to every child.

In 2011, Children’s Home Society was awarded funding from The Duke Endowment, Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and the Social Innovation Fund to expand Family Finding services in North Carolina and develop plans to sustain the practice. This funding was made possible because of the success of Children’s Home Society’s pilot project, which ran from 2008-2011 and is being evaluated by Child Trends, an independent, non-partisan research center. During the pilot project Children’s Home Society served 88 youth. The average number of known family connections at the start of those cases was only three. Our Family Finders were able to discover an average of

59 family members per child. Among the youth served, 86 percent of them had at least five relatives commit to being part of their lifetime network of support and 52 percent had at least one relative commit to adoption or guardianship. The success of the pilot project indicated that Family Finding could improve our ability to achieve both relational and legal permanency with children in foster care, even those thought to be the hardest to place. To read Child Trends’ articles on their Family Finding evaluation, visit [www.childtrends.org](http://www.childtrends.org).

During the last year, Children’s Home Society has hired 25 Family Finders and five program supervisors to serve 21 County Department of Social Services agencies across North Carolina. We are delivering services in rural and urban counties. We are doing Family Finding with children new to out-of-home care, those lingering in foster care and even those who have aged out but are receiving services voluntarily.

Family Finding is a six step process, which includes; Discovery, Engagement, Planning, Decision Making, Evaluation and Follow-up on Supports. Our goal with every case is to discover a minimum of 70 relatives and other caring adults who were previously unknown to the case. This starts by talking with the youth about who has been important in their lives and to whom they want to be connected. Inviting them to participate in this process helps them to feel valued, supported and gives them some control over the decisions that affect their lives. By casting such a wide net we are able to engage a large number of adults who can provide safe, supportive and unconditional relationships. With family members engaged, our Family Finders conduct a Planning meeting with the family to identify the needs of the child and begin to consider how the family can come together to meet those needs. The decision-making meeting is conducted to formalize plans and define the different roles that family members are going to play. These roles can range

from sending a birthday card to regular visitation or being a permanent placement. But a permanent placement alone is not the ultimate outcome. Family Finding also provides children with critical knowledge about their family of origin — information that will help them to answer questions like who am I, where did I come from and when am I going to belong to a family?

Children must belong to a well-supported family and network of caring adults, which has the resources and capabilities to help them heal, reach developmental milestones and ultimately to succeed. As we continue to grow our practice and serve more children across North Carolina, this is the vision that we bring to our Family Finding practice. We are fulfilling our promise to children and youth so that they, like Ashley, can receive the benefits of family membership.

For more information about the program, contact Matt Anderson at [mvanderson@chsnc.org](mailto:mvanderson@chsnc.org) or visit [www.chsnc.org](http://www.chsnc.org). ☘

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Matt Anderson, MSW, is originally from Pittsburgh, Pa., and currently resides in Greensboro, N.C. He earned a master’s in social work from the University of Montana and has extensive experience in the youth services field with a focus on child welfare, youth engagement and the creative use of media as a catalyst for change. Anderson works for Children’s Home Society of North Carolina and is a director of planning of sustainability. Anderson’s responsibilities include business development and public policy work related to expanding and sustaining the Family Finding practice in North Carolina. As a partner in Porch Productions, he also produced the feature documentary, “From Place to Place,” about three foster care alumni who set out to change the system that raised them. Anderson serves on the National Association of Social Workers Communications Network Advisory Committee.