

**The New York Times**

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

**January 31, 2010**

## **A Determined Quest to Bring Adoptive Ties to Foster Teenagers**

**By [ERIK ECKHOLM](#)**

ST. LOUIS — After a day of knocking on doors chasing fleeting leads, Carlos Lopez and his partner finally heard welcome words: Yes, a resident confirmed, the man they were seeking lived in this house and would be home that evening.

Mr. Lopez, a former police detective, now does gumshoe work for what he calls a more fulfilling cause: tracking down long-lost relatives of teenagers languishing in [foster care](#), in desperate need of family ties and in danger of becoming rootless adults. That recent day, he was hoping to find the father of a boy who had lived in 16 different foster homes since 1995. The boy did not remember his mother, who had long since disappeared.

Finding an adoptive parent for older children with years in foster care is known in child welfare circles as the toughest challenge. Typically, their biological parents abused or neglected them and had parental rights terminated. Relatives may not know where the children are, or even that they exist. And the supply of saints in the general public, willing to adopt teenagers shaken by years of trauma and loss, is limited.

The intensive searches in St. Louis reflect a growing national shift toward relatives as caretakers, a quest that has often been limited by a seeming scarcity of known suitable kin. But scores of foster and adoption agencies around the country have found that assertive efforts relying on the Internet, the telephone, advertisements and, in some cases like this one, door-to-door questioning by full-time investigators, can turn up dozens of relatives for almost any child. Many of them turn out to be willing to help nieces, nephews and grandchildren they had never seen.

“The lost relatives are a largely untapped resource for adoption,” said Melanie Scheetz, director of the nonprofit [Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition](#) here, which employs Mr. Lopez. “The system has overlooked all these amazing, strong people who are out there and willing to help.”

The potential of such searches was first established about a decade ago by Kevin Campbell, a former head of a charity in Washington State. In his initial work, mainly using computer databases, Mr. Campbell located 40 to 150 relatives each for most children in his program, reaching as far as grandparents’ siblings.

“Some relatives recoil when contacted,” he said; the surprise calls can rekindle ugly family histories. “But many want to help and are willing to consider adoption.”

Many foster children are intensely curious about their biological families, said Mr. Campbell, who is now a

consultant and trains agencies in a six-stage strategy of counseling and searches known as [Family Finding](#). But the children also must be prepared to learn unpleasant facts.

“People have a right to know the truth about their families,” he said. “We work with youths to get answers, knowing that some of the answers may not be hopeful.”

Efforts to help foster teenagers, including those in St. Louis, have been widely supported by grants from [Wendy’s Wonderful Kids](#), created by the founder of the fast food chain.

In the St. Louis area, at any given time some 400 foster children ages 10 and older whose parents’ rights were terminated are eligible for adoption. With a \$2 million federal grant and private aid, the Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition has begun unusually intense 12- to 20-week searches for family connections and potential adopters, which it calls Extreme Recruitment. Of 56 cases last year, 90 percent were connected with a relative and 70 percent were matched with adoptive parents, most but not all of them relatives, Ms. Scheetz said.

The pull of blood ties affected Robert Jackson, a 53-year-old meat packer across the Mississippi River in Fairview, Ill. He had not known that his troubled younger brother had fathered two children in St. Louis who soon ended up in foster care, with the parents’ rights terminated by a court. By chance, about two years ago he saw an advertisement in a local newspaper for potential adoptive parents that featured a picture of Charles, now 13, and Charlotte, now 12.

Mr. Jackson did a double take: the boy bore an uncanny resemblance to his brother, the girl resembled a sister, and Charles and Charlotte were family names. After confirming his suspicion, Mr. Jackson recalled, “I thought, ‘We’ve got to bring them back into the family.’”

He and his wife, Maxine, went to see the children and started the adoption process. Of that first meeting with his uncle, Charles said, “I thought he really looked like me.”

After his adoption, recalled Liz Johnson, a social worker and “recruiter” with the coalition here, Charles said to her: “I’m a real boy now. I’m not a boy in foster care anymore.”

While the outlook for these two seems bright, their case shows the potential complexity of such transitions. The children had the same foster mother for many years and were deeply attached to her, as she was to them, but she would not commit to adoption.

The children chose to move in with their newfound relatives, but suffered emotional turmoil and problems at their new school, which was far more demanding academically than the one they left in St. Louis. They still see a therapist weekly. Causing new heartache, Maxine died of cancer in December, six months after the children moved in.

To speed the process of recruiting parents and preparing children for adoptions, the St. Louis coalition employs Mr. Lopez and one other investigator full time alongside its social workers and starts transitional therapy for children before a parent is located, rather than waiting, as is common.

Many older children in foster care, after years of disappointments and rejections, initially say they do not want to be adopted. While children cannot be forced to accept adoptive parents, counselors help make them

aware of the advantages of permanent legal ties to caring adults.

Teenagers in foster care often learn how to be alone, said Latasha Holt, a 26-year-old cashier and former foster child who is studying to become a parole officer. Ms. Holt described her isolation in high school, when she lived in a group home and was too ashamed to let others know.

“I had friends until the school day ended at 2:15,” she said. “Graduation was extremely emotional for me because I didn’t have anybody there.”

Ms. Holt had to feed her younger siblings when she was only 7 because their mother disappeared for days at a time. The children all ended up in foster care.

Recently, Ms. Holt became the foster parent of her 18-year-old sister, Sharda. A legal adoption is in the works, and in the meantime she made sure that Sharda had a better graduation experience, throwing her a luau-themed surprise party.

The man found recently by Mr. Lopez and his partner, Sheila Suderwalla, a social worker, proved willing to cooperate. That man knew that a girlfriend from his teenage years had borne a boy, but he said he understood he was not the father. However, he agreed to a paternity test and he and his wife said that while they awaited the results, they could at least tell the inquiring boy about his mother.

“They may give us leads to other relatives,” Ms. Suderwalla said. “If nothing else, this will help give the boy a sense of his identity.”

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#)

---

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)