Fostering Hope

Coalition Newsletter | Winter 2022

FOSTER & ADOPTIVE CARE COALITION
FOR EVERY CHILD... A PLACE TO CALL HOME

Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition

For Every Child . . . A Place to Call Home

www.foster-adopt.org

1750 S Brentwood Blvd., Suite 210

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Letter from the Board President

Jackalyn Olinger-Rochelle

It is our favorite time of the year once again! Every year thousands of donors like you come together to support our kids. Year after year, it never loses its magic for us to see that outpouring love from the community.

Other than our Little Wishes campaign (the first of more than 4,000 gifts have already arrived at families' homes!), the holidays are a time for reflection, gratitude, and excitement for a new year.

It's been a year of tremendous growth. We are well on our way to doubling in size over the next few years – meaning we will soon be able to offer our groundbreaking services to every child impacted by foster care in our community. We're conscious of and humbled by this opportunity and responsibility, yet excited for the change we'll be able to create.

And we haven't lost sight of who made it all possible! Your support over the years, your advocacy for our kids, and your ambassadorship on behalf of our team created the momentum necessary at the perfect moment in time to catalyze this tremendous statewide investment. Your voices together keep our kids' needs in the spotlight – as they should be until every single child has a place to call home.

Looking forward, the foster care community we always imagined is today within our grasp. A community where no child languishes in a facility when they're ready for a home. A community where support is tailored to each unique family. A community where all families have access to rigorous, ongoing, and cutting-edge training. We are closer than ever to a community where no family's need is too small and no hurdle too great to prevent a child from finding their forever family.

That vision is no longer decades away, but years. You could measure it in months. And that is what we are most excited for this holiday season, and why we're so grateful to you. ■

Jackie O. Rochelle, Board President

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Holiday Little Wishes Season Kicks Off: ***Grant Wishes for Kids!***

Grant Wishes at www.foster-adopt.org

Lego sets, baby dolls, brand-name athletic shoes and hoodies...these are some of the 4,000+ holiday wish requests we've received from children impacted by foster care. YOU can make their holidays brighter by granting a holiday Little Wish!

Visit the Little Wishes page at www.foster-adopt.org to see the list of wish requests by toy, child's name, or price point. After you grant a wish online, we will make sure the gift is sent to the child in time for the holidays. You can write a holiday message to the child too!

You can also grant a wish online in honor of someone special. We'll send you a card in the mail - perfect to present to a teacher, family member or friend.

Keep your eyes on www.foster-adopt.org to see how many wishes have been granted as we count down to our December 20th deadline! ■

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Adult Adoption:
An Overlooked Path to Permanence

Cheyana's life hasn't been easy. Until recently, she lacked consistent parental relationships. Despite the hurt stemming from that, she still managed to find slivers of joy along the way. She expresses herself through creation, primarily through painting and drawing. To her, it serves both as a source of joy and self-expression. And while there have been plenty of times when she's been in need herself, she has a passion for helping others. Cheyana currently holds a job at an art studio. Here, she's able to combine her love for art and her passion for helping people in need of relief.

Cheyana entered foster care in October 2014 at the age of 12. She bounced between homes for years until the Coalition took on her case in January 2020. Cheyana was 17 years old and a senior in high school when she entered the Coalition's Extreme Recruitment® program.

With Cheyana's 18th birthday fast approaching, Maddie—the Extreme Recruiter assigned to her case—quickly realized it would be the first-ever adult adoption case in the Coalition's 30-year history. Despite her age, Cheyana was unfettered in her determination to find a forever family.

Through family finding, Maddie was able to locate a relative, Cheyana's maternal grandmother, who was willing to take her in. The team agreed to work with Cheyana's grandmother toward adoption. Throughout the investigation, they found that Cheyana's mother, with whom she did not have a good relationship, lived with her grandmother. That information rendered this placement void.

The Coalition later received word from Cheyana's mother that she would be moving to California, so she was allowed to move in with her maternal grandmother following her mother's departure.

However, a few weeks after move-in, her mother returned from California, so Cheyana was forced to leave. She was again faced with the uncertainty she knew all too well.

There was no one in Cheyana's family both willing and able to adopt, so she agreed to move forward with the general recruitment process.

"The notion that once someone is 18, they can't be adopted anymore is not true. Don't count young adults in foster care out. They can be adopted. If you know of a young adult seeking a family, that's still attainable for them."

- Maddie Bobbitt, Extreme Recruiter

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KSDK 5 On Your Side's "A Place to Call Home" is a wonderful gift to our children and community! This award-winning, weekly program features children who are legally free for adoption. This program has been enormously successful; out of the hundreds of children who have been featured, more than 56% of them have, or are in the process of being placed in an adoptive

Cheyana lost her father at age 4, so living with him wasn't an option. The void his death created — paired with her poor relationship with her mother — has proved especially challenging throughout her life.

After several families inquired about adopting Cheyana, Maddie sat down with her to discuss their options. Cheyana expressed interest in two families, including Jake and Lauren's. Maddie set up a Zoom meeting for Cheyana to meet Jake and Lauren in November 2020. The meeting was a success. Jake and Lauren's bubbly personalities complemented Cheyana's shy demeanor. They did all the talking. The group instantly hit it off.

Their excitement at meeting Cheyana was undeniable; they gave her a virtual tour of their home and showed her the bedroom that would one day be hers if she chose to join their family. Maddie facilitated a few more Zoom meetings between the three, all of which went extremely well. Cheyana was confident Jake and Lauren were going to be her forever family. They have built a strong bond over the past two years. Jake and Lauren have been there for Cheyana through the good times and bad times. They had a great time on a family vacation last year.

Jake and Lauren have three biological children: a three-year-old and twin babies born in January of this year. Cheyana already views herself as their big sister, taking that role very seriously.

When Jake and Lauren first expressed interest in adopting Cheyana, they were very intrigued to learn what she wanted in a family. They centered Cheyana's wants and needs throughout the entire process. In an email to Maddie, Lauren stated, "What Cheyana is doing is extremely brave. She is legally an adult, but she is still putting herself out there, hoping to find a forever family. I have what she wants: a family, and I would love to grow it and share it."

On September 28th, at the age of 20, Cheyana (who now goes by "Aspen") officially became a part of the Harris family. After years of navigating a tumultuous upbringing, Cheyana is poised to move forward into adulthood with the support system she never had. ■

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Thank You for Making ***Foster Hope Day 2022*** *a Resounding Success*

You helped us surpass our ambitious goal of $320,000, ultimately raising $331,354 to ensure no child faces the future alone. We couldn't be more grateful that you once again made Foster Hope Day such a success. From our family to yours, thank you.

Our community's recent struggles have impacted our families more than most. But thanks to you and this community of generous volunteers, donors, and advocates, our families have had a chance to thrive. Children who have experienced trauma have a chance to heal through the support of a family. And those families have all the support they need thanks to the work you've made possible. The impact of your gift is something they'll remember for the rest of their lives.

While Foster Hope Day is the best day of every year, this year the Coalition was able to roll out a new and exciting feature: sponsor happy hour! From 6-8pm, our superhero sponsors enjoyed spectacular eats, super cocktails, and a gorgeous venue, The Hall, provided by Olive + Oak. We were so thrilled to catch up with you all face-to-face! We look forward to hosting next year's sponsor happy hour, and we hope you're there, too!

We also send out a special thank you to our wonderful staff members and volunteers who made the day come together by filling every hour with fun, laughter, and excitement around raffle prizes, opportunities to maximize your gifts, and special staff and family video features.

We set a new record for the number of teams created on Charidy. Between our Coalition families, staff, and sponsors, there was a total of 25 teams that collectively raised $50,283! Go teams!

Last but not least, thank you to our phenomenal Foster Hope Day Committee. None of this would have come together without this generous bunch of advocates for kids in care. Through a million challenges you made Foster Hope Day happen. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you.

At the Coalition, one of our core values is family. Specifically, the value reads, "We are family. We are connected and support one another in meeting the needs of our own families and the families we serve. We assume the best and are committed to each other."

On November 15th, once again, you proved that when we come together for a single purpose, we can make big and important things happen. Thank you! And thank you for being part of the Coalition Family.

Thank you to our super sponsors listed below for making Foster Hope Day wildly successful. ■

Healing
Anonymous
Texas Roadhouse

Integrity
Tina Amrein
Donald & Elizabeth Cobin
Dowd Bennett
Edward Jones
Kennedy Capital Mgmt, Inc.
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Leah Stroup
Warehouse of Fixtures, TNG
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Shannon Downey Turpin
Ronald Zimmer

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More Than 650 Backpacks Collected & Distributed to Kids at the Coalition's ***Back-to-School Bonanza***

Every year as kids are gearing up for another school year, backpacks and school supplies are at the top of every parent's mind. Our goal at the Coalition is not only to provide kids with the supplies to set them up for success, but also to help them walk into school with confidence and style! After the success of our first drive-thru Back-to-School Bonanza in 2021, our donors, staff, and volunteers jumped into action to distribute backpacks to even more families at the beginning of this school year. With the support of our generous community and corporate partners, we were able to give away more than 650 backpacks and 150 uniforms to families!

Before the kids headed back to school in August, we hosted a two-day event to ensure every kid who needed a backpack got one they loved. The perfect weather and energy of our volunteers made this event a success. They spent time with each kid, asking for favorite colors and characters to ensure they found a backpack that was perfect for them. The intentionality and care of our volunteers made the day special for all of us. Our families were incredibly thankful for our community partners' commitment to getting kids ready for school each year.

We would love to give a special thank you to our 2022 donors and partners:

ARCO HR Team
Burns & McDonnell
Cigna Litigation Team
Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition Junior Board
Just Me Apparel
Kemper
Kirkwood Mom's Club
Lashonda Lambert-Howze & Friends
Lauren Mensie, Rebecca Butts, & Friends
Moms in Lafayette Square
Raymond James & Associates
Transmission & Distribution Department
Union Avenue Church
Warehouse of Fixtures
Webster Groves Presbyterian Church

Thank you for being a part of our Coalition Family! We are so thankful for your dedication to our kids and families! We could not do this work without your partnership and generosity! ■

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RESPOND

CULTURALLY COMPETENT FOSTERING

What is RESPOND?

- RESPOND is a culturally competent approach to foster care. Cultural competence is the ability of an individual to understand and respect values, attitudes, beliefs, and mores that differ across cultures, and to consider and respond appropriately to these differences in planning, implementing, and evaluating health education and promotion programs and interventions (National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University).
- RESPOND identifies existing cultural barriers and biases.
- RESPOND seeks input from child welfare professionals and members of these communities to better understand their needs.
- RESPOND was created as a direct response to the need for more African American foster parents in the St. Louis Metropolitan Area.

Why do we need more African American foster parents in the St. Louis region?

- Only 13% of local non-relative foster parents are African American.
- Twice the number of African American children are placed into foster care compared to Caucasian children.
- African American children remain in foster care nearly a year longer than their white counterparts.
- Several studies show that having a strong, positive cultural identity leads to:
  - Greater self-esteem
  - Higher education levels
  - Better psychological adjustment
  - Improved coping abilities
  - Decreased levels of loneliness and depression
  - Increased levels of social well-being
- RESPOND exists to increase the number of non-relative African American foster families for African American children in foster care
- Children placed within culturally similar foster homes have a better chance to heal.

For more information, please email jennyjones@foster-adopt.org or scan the code:

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State Funding Update: ***The Coalition Family Continues to Grow!***

In 2021, the Coalition received a generous contribution from the state of Missouri. Before using those funds, we wanted guidance from our community on what it needed most, so we reached out to 160 professional and community partners to help us. We landed on these four key areas:

1. Rapidly increase the number of foster parents in our region
2. Create permanent families for children as quickly as possible
3. Increase wraparound support & training
4. Tailored services for families and older youth

Since January 2022, we hired more than 34 new staff to serve our recruitment and support programs. This means we will be able to eliminate waitlists and better support our families. ■

Making Birthdays Special: ***West County Center*** *Partners with Coalition's Birthday Buddies Program*

Two years ago, West County Center contacted the Coalition with interest in providing gift cards for foster children who were likely to get little on their birthday. What a lucky day for us! Their shoppers (and store employees) have donated more than $14,000 in gift cards to youth in foster care. And their generosity just keeps growing! The mall and their stores have given us additional gift cards, donated a silent auction item, and they're getting ready to support the Cinderella Project too! We are SO grateful for all of their support! ■

New Board Member Spotlight: ***Joined in 2022***

During 2022 our Coalition Board of Directors grew! The Board is made up of a variety of corporate and child welfare representatives, many of whom are foster/adoptive parents. Meet our newest dedicated Board Members:

Hadi Al-Shathir, Thompson Coburn LLP
Brad Brown, Contemporary Productions
Don Cobin, Kennedy Capital Management
Katherine Kirby, Centene
James Perry, Edward Jones
Dara Webb, Mercy ■

Fundraising: ***Texas Roadhouse***

We would like to give a huge shout out to Texas Roadhouse for the eGift Card fundraiser. Because of their partnership and the generous community, we sold 3,118 gift cards and raised $19,657.70 for kids in foster care between July 1st through September 30th! ■

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Donor Spotlight: ***Chris Pondoff***

Chris Pondoff and his wife Ashley are proud adoptive parents of their son Charlie. Chris and Ashley completed several trainings with the Coalition, including our STARS training and continued licensure training hours. After becoming licensed foster parents, they were introduced to their now son, Charlie. "We instantly fell in love with our son Charlie the day we met him, but we understood with fostering a child that this whole process is NOT about US (Ashley and me), and instead, we needed to support reunification efforts to the very best of our ability while setting our desire and yearning for him to be our son on the back burner or to the side," says Chris. After nearly three years of fostering Charlie, they officially adopted him on January 22, 2020.

The Pondoffs continued their relationship with the Coalition via sponsorship and involvement with some of the Coalition's family events. Thanks to the Pondoff's and Chris's company, ED-RG, we were able to host more than 300 families at the Aquarium in the spring of 2022. They not only covered the costs of all tickets but also sponsored goodie bags for all the kids. "It is important for these kids and families to get together and form a community," Chris explained. Charlie and Ashley also love our community partnership with the Blues as they are both huge fans of Ryan O'Reilly.

When Chris was asked why he supported the Coalition, he said, "You mean aside from the amazing work and advocacy they do for these kids? Well, I can't help every kid alone. We can't help every kid alone. We need help. And the Coalition broadens our reach, magnifies our mission, and supports us when we're literally falling apart."

Chris and Ashley are both huge advocates of becoming foster parents and said this when asked what advice they would give to someone considering fostering or adopting, "If you're thinking about it, stop thinking about it and just do it. The more you think about it, the more you'll come up with reasons not to. The work is brutally difficult, even gut-wrenching at times, but to say it is 'worth it' is the understatement of a lifetime."

The Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition is extremely grateful to have the Pondoffs as supporters and advocates for our mission. We are currently working with them to create more family events to help nurture our community. ■

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Junior Board Member Spotlight: ***Joe Schwegel***

Joe is a recent transplant to Saint Louis, following his undergraduate graduation in May of 2021. He was introduced to the Coalition by longtime supporter, Ryan Blackburn. Joe is one of two adopted children in his family and feels incredibly passionate about the work the Coalition does. Being a firsthand recipient of the many benefits of adoption, Joe was thrilled to join the Junior Board as an Event Support chair to play a role in continuing the mission of the Coalition, "For every child....a place to call home." Joe is a financial analyst at the Matter Family Office in Clayton. He credits the support of his family, friends, and Matter for aiding his fundraising, volunteering, and advocacy efforts. ■

Youth Philanthrophy Spotlight: ***Sravya Reedy Guda, Hindu Temple Youth Group***

Sravya Reedy Guda is a member of the Hindu Temple Youth Group, an organization affiliated with the St. Louis Hindu Temple. In this organization youth discover the culture of Hinduism and learn to implement the principles of this religion in everyday lives.

"A few weeks ago, I was on the hunt for a fundraiser event, to raise money for foster care. I came to know that Navaratri, a 9-day Hindu festival celebrating Goddess Durga, was coming up. At that time, I approached the Hindu Temple Youth Group management to use this opportunity to execute a Mehendi Fundraiser Project and raise funds for the Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition. In this fundraiser, a crew of volunteer Mehendi Designers were put together to do Mehendi for around 6 hours in September, at our temple location.

Special thanks to our Youth Group Management, Teachers, and Students who helped make this fundraiser a success! This project was a great team-effort, with much help from our Volunteer Mehendi Designers, and our special Youth Support Crew. Our Youth Support Crew for this fundraiser includes Aksheetha Santoshkumar, Vinu Jayapradhaban, Neha Patlu, Sagar Singh, and Manisha Muthukaruppan." ■

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