COMMUNITY HELPS LOCAL FOSTER YOUTH PREPARE FOR SUCCESS WITH BACK TO SCHOOL DRIVE

By Mikaela David, Community Relations Assistant

Summer flew by and it’s now time for school! This summer PSF has been working hard coordinating donors and volunteers to help us get our children ready for the upcoming school year. Our annual Back to School Drive provides the children in our care with everything they need to kick the school year off right. This year, we worked with local community organizations, faith-based partners, businesses, and individuals to fill over 535 backpacks for our kids.

Filling all the backpacks with the perfect supplies for each child wouldn’t have been possible without all of our generous donors, volunteers and one very special partner. Saint Leo University Gainesville Center graciously opened up their office to be our home base for packing backpacks for 2 weeks. This drive truly wouldn’t have come together without them. A huge thank you to individual donors, anonymous donors and the community organizations on page 6 for being an integral part of this year’s Back to School Drive!
Esteemed Community Partners and Friends,

As our agency moves through the summer months and into a new fiscal year, I reflect on the great work our staff has done through some change in our organization. While our organization encounters new policies, they are helping us better serve the children and families throughout our region. Within PSF, our Family Team Conferences (FTC) staff have begun transitioning into new roles in order to better serve families and children in our area and ensure youth can remain at home whenever safely possible.

To this end, PSF has teamed up with DCF to create an Integrated Practice Team in our area. Our FTC staff will now serve as a part of this team to help families meet their needs through a community-oriented and individualized planning process. While this plan is new to our team, we expect it will help us meet the needs of families in our care.

Movement at the national and state legislative levels also continues to impact our operations. On the state level, our 2018-2019 fiscal year budget from the Department of Children and Families (DCF) has remained consistent with the 2017-2018 fiscal year budget, allowing us to continue to do the important work we do for local families. Meanwhile, a piece of national legislation passed February of this year, the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), is the most transformative legislation that we have seen in years. We are working hand-in-hand with our partners at the Department of Children and Families and the Florida Coalition for Children to assess how this will impact our local system of care, and we will keep you informed along the way.

Through this period of change, recruiting local foster parents to care for an increasing number of children in foster care remains a top priority. I am pleased with the work of our Community Relations and Recruitment team and the Licensing Team as they work to identify innovative solutions to this statewide shortage. Turn to page 6 of this newsletter to learn more about these efforts.

Our Board of Directors is also experiencing major changes. With much appreciation for their years of service, I join our staff in thanking Jo Haley and Don Caldwell as they step off the Board. Both Jo and Don are founding members of the Board of Directors and have led our agency well over the past 15 years. While they will be missed, we will fondly remember their tireless dedication to our organization.

I would like to leave you all on a positive note by sharing that 184 local youth found their forever homes this past fiscal year. To all of these families, we congratulate you on these momentous occasions and thank you for providing local youth with love and stability.

MESSAGE FROM THE CEO

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FROM THE EDITOR’S DESK: COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND RECRUITMENT UPDATE

As school begins across our 13 counties, I like to think about the more than 500 children who are starting their year with brand new supplies and backpacks thanks to your support. The Back to School drive has continued to serve more youth each year, and this year was no exception! As my team and I joined staff and volunteers to pack backpacks over three weeks, it brought me such joy to think about the surprise that would be on the faces of teens receiving brand-name backpacks or Kindergarteners who would be able to start their first day with backpacks adorned by characters from Paw Patrol or their favorite Disney Princess. We even had one child who came into our office wanting to pick out his own backpack and supplies, as well as one for his sister who was not with him that day. The child left carrying two backpacks stuffed to the brim and a large smile on his face. He kept repeating, “My sister is going to love this. She is going to be so excited.”

This moment would not have been made possible without the support of a growing list of donors who respond to our need and then some. On behalf of this young boy and every child served, thank you.

We also had to bid a fond farewell to Hannah Green, our Outreach Recruitment Specialist. Many of you know Hannah, and some of you may have made a decision to foster or adopt after hearing her speak at events around town! This young lady worked tirelessly to increase the support available to local foster youth, and we wish her all the best as she goes on to pursue her education in the United Kingdom. We know she’ll continue to do great things!

Coming up, our team will start planning for our annual Wish Upon a Star Drive! If you’re ready to make someone’s holidays merry this year, please give us a call!
Foster Family Spotlight: The Sweat Family

By Hannah Green, Outreach Recruitment Specialist

Amanda and Jason Sweat have been fostering for 4 years and they have welcomed 15 children in their home during that time. They have 2 biological children, 3 adoptive children and they are currently fostering a 4 month old. Read below to discover how fostering has changed their lives and learn why they wouldn’t have it any other way.

What first led you to become a foster parent? Would you do it all over again?
I work as a Pediatric Nurse and I would see kids at work needing foster placement. Some kids would have a delay in discharge from the hospital because a home couldn't be identified right away. I kept thinking, “We can do this! There's no reason we cannot provide a safe place for kids to stay.” God really worked on my heart and, in turn, my husband’s heart to get licensed so we could do just that. Yes, I would absolutely do it all over again. No doubt in my mind!

What was your first thought when your first foster child entered your home?
“What have we done?!” Just kidding. It was after midnight and two precious little boys just got dropped off at our door dirty, hungry and tired. We jumped in with both feet and have never looked back!

As a foster parent, how do you handle parenting abused or neglected children?
Children of ALL ages in foster care have experienced some level of trauma, even in-utero. We have found it best to stick to a schedule and a routine. This helps children know what to expect next, limits anxiety and helps them anticipate what’s next. Lots of patience, love and consistency!

What would you say to a person who is interested in fostering, but is afraid that they would get too attached?
WE GET ATTACHED! If you’re not attached to a kid that's living in your home, you’re doing it wrong. These kids need someone to love them unconditionally, attach to them and show them how to be attached. Does it hurt when a child leaves your home? Absolutely. But it’s not about us, it’s about the children and what they need.

What has been one of your favorite moments as a foster parent?
We had a little girl in our home who had some pretty extensive medical issues. We were told early on that she may never walk or talk. We worked hard in different therapies and she left our home walking, talking and sassy, as any toddler should be.

Looking back, what has it meant to you to be a foster parent to a child that needs a home?
You can be the turning point in a whole family's life. There's nothing more rewarding than that. You step in when their whole world has been turned upside down. Your home becomes their calm in the storm.

What type of relationship do your bio children form with the foster children?
Our bio children are fantastic with foster children. They are always willing to help, be a friend and be a support. They really become good friends and act as siblings to the children in our home.

What advice would you give to someone who is considering starting the foster journey?
Will it be hard? Yes. Will it be worth it? Absolutely! Don’t be afraid to ask questions and plug into local support groups and resources. You won’t be alone; you’ll have a village supporting you! Once your eyes are opened to this world, you will never be the same. There will be struggles and difficult times but seeing children grow and thrive and seeing biological families gain skills to restore their family is so rewarding!
Kila - 16 years old

Kila is a teen who loves softball. She is determined, personable and lovable. Kila loves the outdoors but also loves to get dressed up and do her makeup! Kila would describe herself as a makeup enthusiast – she enjoys doing makeup for herself and friends. Kila is one to be proactive and teach herself new techniques. Kila has big dreams for herself. She is very determined to make the big leagues and attend college to become a physical therapist. She also wants to open a treatment center for individuals struggling with substance abuse. Kila is a burst of energy, intelligent and easily makes friends. You can often find her singing, hanging out with friends or watching makeup tutorials.

Kila is would do best with a family who will encourage and support her, so step right up to bat and get to know Kila!

Please contact Sarah Aikin at Sarah.Aikin@pfsf.org or 352-244-1655 for additional information on Kila.

Calling all Superheroes!
By Mikaela David, Community Relations Assistant

PSF is excited to announce our fourth annual Superhero 5K is scheduled for November 3, 2018 at Westside Park in Gainesville! Last year’s event was a success, and we want this year’s to be even bigger! PSF created the Superhero 5K to honor the “superheroes” who adopt super kids in foster care. If you are interested in registering or learning more about the race, please contact Tricia Braitsch at patricia.braitsch@pfsf.org.
As summer is wrapping up, the Resource Center summer programs are also coming to an end. Each year our Gainesville locations, Library Partnership (LP), Cone Park Library Resource Center (CPLRC), and SWAG Family Resource Center (SWAG FRC) offer summer camps to community children. The summer camps are co-facilitated in partnership with CDS Family & Behavioral Health Services and this year the camps incorporated free activities from other local providers including Meridian Behavioral Healthcare, UF-IFAS, Girls Scouts, Barre Forte, and more. The sites served a combined 60 children with the goal of preventing the “summer slide” of learning through provision of interactive educational and enrichment opportunities for students. Each camp had a unique curriculum with focus areas including reading, math, science, physical fitness and social emotional well-being. Students were also provided with breakfast and/or lunch through a partnership with the Alachua County Schools’ Food and Nutrition Program. In addition to on-site activities, students from select sites participated with swimming lessons through the City of Gainesville Parks & Recreation Department and all students were invited to attend field trips which included visits to Cade Museum and Depot Park.

Although unable to facilitate an on-site summer camp due to the logistics of a rural location, Tri-County Community Resource Center (TCCRC) also provided some fun activities for local children. TCCRC Manager Beverly Goodman supported Meridian’s summer camp by providing a full day of activities for children. Additionally, in appreciation of the local 4-H who help to care for TCCRC’s community garden, these students were also invited to end of the summer party that included food and activities. As with all Resource Center programming these summer activities could not happen with the support of local partner agencies and volunteers.

The Resource Centers are highly dependent upon donations and grants to maintain both daily operations and programming at each of the locations. The Alachua County Resource Centers were recently awarded two grants. The first was an anonymous award that will be used to further support and enhance existing children’s programming and develop a scholarship program for teens and young adults. These funds will also be used to purchase of a 15 passenger van for use by the Resource Centers to transport children and adults to off-site programs. The Resource Centers were also selected as the recipient of an Alachua County CAPP grant. This grant will support programming designed to build the social and emotional competence of children and youth residing within the communities served by the Resource Centers.

PSF continues to have opportunities to both learn and share with others about our Resource Center Model with the goal of replication in other communities. In May 2018 PSF’s Sr. VP of Clinical & Community Services, Pebbles Edelman, participated with the 21st Century System Convening in Phoenix, Arizona. Edelman led an “Innovation Station,” sharing with several groups from around the nation, about the innovative work being provided through PSF’s Resource Centers as one of Casey Family Program’s Community of Hope sites. Additionally, our Director of Community Relations and Recruitment, Patty Carroll, presented at the Administration for Children & Families’ Child Welfare Administrators’ Meeting for Region 7, co-presenting with Casey Family Programs about the Resource Centers and Communities of Hope.

For more information about the Resource Centers please visit www.pfsf.org/resource-centers.
Our very first Info Night was held on April 27, 2017. The original intent of Info Nights was to host two or three every year. However, we quickly realized the growing success and the direct correlation to the increase of PRIDE class enrollment. Little did we know that we would host a total of fifteen Info Nights over the course of the next fifteen months. So, why have Info Nights been a game changer for Adoption and Foster Recruitment? The number one thing I hear as a recruiter is, “I am fearful of the unknown.” There are so many myths that surround child welfare, and it can be a challenging system to navigate.

At PSF, we acknowledge that fostering and/or adopting is a commitment and the process takes time. Therefore, it is key that Community Relations and Recruitment assist and walk people through the beginning stages of this journey. A phone call is great, but being in a room filled with prospective adoptive and foster parents, along with current caregivers and PSF staff brings it to a whole other level. There is also NO pressure. We want people who attend to be educated and feel more equipped and empowered. Some people are not in the right season to foster or adopt, and that is okay. We simply plant seeds and hope that people will pick up the phone when the time is right.

My favorite part about Info Nights is when we have our phenomenal foster and adoptive parents speak about their experiences. It is so inspiring, and I do not take their time for granted. Many of our caregivers have multiple children in their home and live very busy lives. Nevertheless, they still come and speak their truth. Their passion shines through, and it is an honor to hear their stories. I also love when I witness an individual or a couple who previously thought they could never foster or adopt change their minds by the end of the Info Night. Honestly, that is one of the best parts of my job.

I want to thank all of the amazing organizations that have graciously allowed us to use their various spaces and venues to host Info Nights. It truly takes a community, and we could not do it without all of you. If you are interested in learning more about our Info Nights whether hosting or attending, please contact us at 352-318-7604. Together, we can advocate for our local children and spread the word about the great need for foster and adoptive parents.
NINE REASONS TO ADOPT A TEEN

By Nicole Hernandez, Foster Care & Adoption Recruitment Specialist

1. TEENS WANT TO BE ADOPTED

Some people may think that because foster youth are older they may be cold or hard to get to know. However, you never outgrow needing a family! No teenager thinks they need a parent, but they all want one.

2. YOU CAN TEACH THEM DEFINITION OF A “FAMILY”

Thankfully, in the country and century we currently live in, families come in all demographics, shapes, sizes and types. A lot of teens in foster care often express that their only requirement of their family is love and support. As a parent, you have shed tears, lost sleep and done everything in your power to mold your family dynamic to what it is today. Would you be willing and open to sharing that with someone? By adopting a teen, you would be teaching them what it means to have a family.

3. YOU HAVE SUPPORT

Adoption is not always sunshine and roses. Radically changing a person’s life for the better is going to bring change, possibly fear, and understanding. Thankfully, you won’t have to go through it alone. There is a huge support network for post-adoptive families at Partnership for Strong Families, which you can be a part of as much or as little as you would like.

4. YOU GIVE SOMEONE A ‘NORMAL’

Having a parent there in those special moments is wonderful, but parents are also important during the more “routine” days of our lives. Having a mom or dad to call for advice or ask questions like how to check the oil in your car or just to call on the way home from a long day - these are normal things that your family can bring to someone’s life.

5. YOU QUALIFY TO ADOPT A TEEN

There are a lot of requirements for adopting a child from the child welfare system but it generally comes down to children simply needing a good home. Parents with good hearts is the biggest requirement! If you have an interest in learning more about adoption, please reach out to me at 352-213-7219 or Nicole.Hernandez@pfsf.org.

6. THERE IS STILL TIME TO CHANGE THEIR LIFE FOR GOOD.

Some people believe that by the time a child is a teen, their personality is set and you cannot have any influence on them. However, recent research into the brain shows that a person’s brain does not stop growing and changing until a person is in their 20’s.

7. BENEFITS AREN’T A FAMILY

Yes, children who age out of foster care do get college for free, but could you imagine life without anyone to help you move into your dorm or a family to go home to when college closes for winter break? What about getting married without a parent there to sit in the front row or walk you down the aisle? Teens who age out of foster care do not get those special moments that most of us have taken for granted.

8. BECAUSE THEY NEED YOU TO...

Everyone needs a sense of belonging. Through adoption, older youth are connected to a family that can provide a sense of stability, lasting connections, and guidance with important life tasks—including enrolling in higher education, finding stable housing, securing employment, and establishing healthy relationships.

9. IT’S A WIN FOR YOUR FAMILY, THE TEEN YOU ARE ADOPTING, AND YOUR COMMUNITY

The benefits that your family obtains from opening your heart and home to adopting a teen is immeasurable. It is also an over-all benefit to your community. A 2013 study by the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative showed that, on average, a young person who ages out of foster care costs communities $300,000 in social costs (e.g., public assistance, incarceration, lost wages, etc.) over his/her lifetime. That doesn’t include the physiological stress that teens endure. In teen adoption, everyone wins.
CONGRATULATIONS DONAVAN ARNOLD!
By Mikaela David, Community Relations Assistant

Congratulations are in order for Partnership for Strong Families board member, Donavan Arnold! He was named Board Member of the Year at the Florida Coalition annual conference. We are all grateful for the work he does for our local kids and for his leadership!

Donavan Arnold was born and raised in Gainesville. Mr. Arnold attended Lake City Community College and Santa Fe College before earning his real estate license. He is currently a realtor for Keller Williams Realty in Gainesville, which has given him a strong ability to build relationships and network within the community. His business background and experience in the Gainesville community have made him a welcome addition to the board.

Mr. Arnold became passionate about child welfare in 2013 when he and his wife became the permanent guardian for his two nephews. Mr. Arnold is a great asset to the board as he has worked with PSF first-hand and has a unique understanding of the issues that children and families in our care can face. He has a great commitment to helping PSF expand our presence in the community.