

ACCENT_{on}KIDS

A Publication of Franklin County Children Services

WINTER 2013



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Protecting Children by Strengthening Families

WINTER 2013

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Adoption Creates Important Family Bond

By Joetta McCruter-Polk

November is National Adoption Month, and this special observance celebrates the creation of family through adoption. For one family in particular, their adoption experience created a loving family for children in need and enabled brothers to stay together.

Meet foster and adoptive parents Tracy and James Lee.

"I can't say enough about the FCCS

adoption program and our caseworker Kelly Crawford," says Tracy. "I was single at the time and had no children when I first considered adopting. It was 2008 and my nephews Dominick and De'Andre were in separate foster homes. I was determined to keep them together."

Both Dominick, 16, and De'Andre, 13, are very glad their aunt came forward and welcomed them into her home. "It's awesome to have my brother by my side," said Dominick.

Tracy became a licensed foster and adoptive parent with the National Youth Advocate Program and took on the additional responsibility of fostering boys ages 12-17. She has adopted three and fostered 11 children. "Being a foster parent was my way to give back. I feel all of these children were meant to be here with me," she said.

After they married in 2012, James also adopted Tracy's three boys. "Our boys are very respectful. They give and show us love and kindness. They tell me they love me at least 20 times a day," said Tracy.

James describes the foster and adoption experience as something very new to him. "I have my own biological children, but I also wanted to give back. I knew it would be challenging taking on a new family. But my biological children embraced my new family



The Lees (clockwise from top left) Elijah, De'Andre, Tracy, Dominick, and James.

and we are now a big blended family," said James.

"I'm into sports and the boys aren't. But we discovered that we have other things in common like enjoying the Christmas holiday. I like that they call me dad," said James.

Seventeen-year-old Elijah, who was adopted in 2011, discussed adoption and adjusting to his new family. "Being adopted really didn't feel any different. I've always felt a part of this family. I just fit in," said Elijah.

The Lee family would consider adopting again. They feel it's their way of giving back to the community.

On November 20, FCCS will celebrate National Adoption Day with seven families who will finalize the adoptions of 11 children at Franklin County Probate Court. FCCS is partnering with several organizations in celebrating this occasion, including Nationwide Insurance, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Wendy's Wonderful Kids, the Public Children Services Association of Ohio, and the National Center for Adoption Law and Policy.

For more information about adoption, call FCCS at (614) 341-6060 or go to www.franklincountyohio.gov/children_services and search for adoptable children.

50 Years of Giving, 50 Years of Joy

Holiday Wish Celebrates a Special Anniversary

By Bruce Cadwallader

It literally took a village to build Holiday Wish.

The cottages at Franklin Village, which opened on Gantz Road in 1951, was the site of the earliest recorded holiday gift giving to children under FCCS care. At the time, it was the residential quarters for abused and neglected children.

Women baked and brought birthday cakes. Churches and civic groups planned activities for the children. By the mid-1950s, it was routine for families to drop off dolls and toy cars for the children.

In 1958, records show the Maple Grove United Methodist Church obtained a list of children's "special wishes for Christmas" from the director and church members donated and wrapped gifts.

A year later, Anderson Concrete stopped giving cards and gifts to its customers and employees at Christmas, instead choosing to donate \$175 that year for specific gifts for the kids at Franklin Village. That idea evolved into today's mission of Holiday Wish: fill the specific requests of children through donations.

Anderson is considered our first corporate donor and their generosity continues today!

Other businesses began to follow their lead and the idea of an organized wish list



grew from a few cottages to the entire foster and dependent child list on the agency's caseload. Children under agency care but residing at home also benefitted.

By 1973, supervisors were running out of space to store the donated items. In her report, Volunteer Services Director Debbie Silvey, reported that more than 2,067 children benefitted from the annual gift-giving program with help from 306 groups and 766 individuals. Donated gifts were being stored in a mobile trailer.

"It will probably be necessary to add three more seasonal staff people," Silvey wrote in her internal report. "All of these people would be required to answer the telephone and type ... working space continues to be a problem. The mobile home used this year would definitely not be large enough to

house any more staff people and storage of gifts was limited."

In 1980, the Wish program unveiled its new Christmas-themed phone number, which is still in use today, (614) 275-2525. Any "public-spirited citizen" was asked to call the number and make a pledge to fill a child's wish. Today, donors may send an email to holidaywish@fccs.co.franklin.oh.us or donate online at www.franklincountyohio.gov/fccsholidaywish. Checks made payable to Holiday Wish may also be mailed.

In 1987, FCCS dropped the reference to Christmas, instead calling it the Wish List Program and a year later it was officially renamed the Holiday Wish Program. Emphasis on the gift-giving program was aided by strategic media relations and improved community support. Holiday Wish operations moved from Gantz Road to 855 W. Mound St. after it opened in 2004.

Because FCCS operating funds come from tax dollars, those monies cannot be used to buy gifts for children. However, the agency's Children's Fund has been authorized to accept tax deductible donations of gifts and cash on behalf of the children it serves.

Thank you central Ohio for 50 years of giving!

How You Can Help Children Through Holiday Wish

Many children eagerly anticipate the coming holiday season. But for some, the holidays are not so festive. Many of these children are unable to spend the holidays with their families or their families are unable to provide gifts. These are children who may have experienced abuse, neglect or other difficult home situations and rely on the generosity of our community to put the joy back into their holidays. For the last 50 years, Franklin County Children Services has granted the wishes of more than 150,000 children under the care of the agency. Last year, our community provided gifts to more than 5,000 children. Year after year thousands of individuals, businesses, churches and civic groups have come forward to help. All donations to Holiday Wish may be tax deductible.

There are several ways you can help:

- Sponsor One or More Young Child @ \$40 each. Call us at (614) 275-2525 to obtain your match!
- Sponsor One or More Older Youth @ \$50 each. We buy a gift card for a teen!
- Donate New Toys of Any Kind and bring them to 855 W. Mound St. (weekdays 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.)
- Make a Donation of Any Amount online at www.franklincountyohio.gov/fccsholidaywish
- Prefer to donate with a check? Send it to Holiday Wish, 855 W. Mound Street, Columbus, Ohio 43223.

Employee Spotlight

Social Service Aide Scheriee Bowles

By Cynthia Greenleaf

For social service aide Scheriee Bowles, every day is an opportunity to influence and inspire families in crisis. Bowles is one of 26 social service aides (SSAs) at Franklin County Children Services whose job is to work closely with birth parents who have children in out-of-home placement, supervising family visits and taking care of transportation. SSAs also help families work on their case plans, whether it's passing on a job lead, helping to find suitable housing, or linking to a community resource, "I am constantly feeding them information," Bowles said.



Scheriee Bowles

There is no such thing as a typical day for Bowles, who supervises 15 to 20 family visits on a weekly basis. Since visits don't always go as planned, or a parent or child might have an unexpected issue, an SSA has to be flexible and ready to deal with anything at anytime. "I think we are the superheroes of the agency," Bowles said, laughing.

Bowles started at FCCS 16 years ago, helping young women transition into independent living as part of the agency's Emancipation Department. While she thoroughly enjoyed this job, Bowles truly shines as an SSA, embracing the chance to build relationships with birth families and to be there for parents going through a rough time. As part of her daily responsibilities, Bowles

interacts with families facing difficult circumstances and often sees parents at their lowest point, when their children have just come into agency care and they are visiting them for the first time.

As an SSA, Bowles never forgets the power she has to make a stressed parent's experience with Franklin County Children Services a little better, whether it's offering a friendly smile, a word of encouragement, or a readiness to listen. When she sees a family in the Intake lobby, Bowles says she is set on making them feel as welcome and comfortable as possible, asking them "How can I help you? What can we do to make your visit better?"

Maintaining empathy and compassion for children and their families is essential when you're an SSA, according to Bowles, who knows firsthand what it's like to be overwhelmed and struggling. A Columbus native, she became a mother at the age of 16 and later raised five children as a single parent, in addition to three nephews and a niece. At one point, Bowles had nine children at home and was working three jobs to make sure everyone's needs were met. (Incidentally, she succeeded as a mom and then some: one son is a sports agent for NFL players and another is an athletic director at a local high school.) When working with a family in crisis, Bowles never forgets what she's been through. "I think 'this could be me, this could be any of us,'" she said. "You need to put yourself in their shoes."

The most rewarding part of Bowles' job is reunification: when she sees children who have been away in foster care – for months, if not years – able to finally go home to their parents. "That is the best feeling in the world," she says. "When kids go home, it gives you a sense of 'we did it.' You are overwhelmed. It's almost like Christmas day."

Families Honored During Week of Celebration

By Tammy Grant

National Family Week is an annual celebration observed during the week of Thanksgiving. The celebration honors families and highlights the community connections that build, support and strengthen families. Working together to develop family ties and striving to keep families together in their own community are the goals of National Family Week. A strong community support system helps in creating a happy well-rounded family.

During National Family Week, across the country, numerous community organizations, social service agencies, schools and universities will honor families within their communities. In Franklin County, time will be set aside where people reflect on the power of community-based support in helping families achieve stability and strength. In partnership with St. Stephen's Community House, Gladden Community House, and Central Community House, Franklin County Children Services will honor families from each settlement house who have overcome obstacles in their lives. Community leaders will be recognized for their work and commitment to the areas they serve. National Family Week is acknowledged every year by a proclamation from the President of the United States.

This year, National Family Week will be held during the week of November 24. A special recognition celebration will be held at St. Stephen's Community House (1500 E. 17th Ave - Columbus, Ohio 43219) on November 25 from 5 to 7 p.m. For more information, call (614) 275-2638.

Single Father Enjoys Parenthood

By Pam Prosser

“I love working with this family,” says Shannon Evans, a Franklin County Children Services caseworker in the East Region office. She speaks highly of Pepe – a single dad raising his nearly 3-year-old daughter Cecilia. “It’s nice to see a dad step up and fight for custody of his child.”

Cecilia’s mother was unable to care for her and Cecilia spent more than a year in foster care, while Pepe worked to get custody. After 10 years as a child welfare caseworker, Evans was impressed by Pepe’s commitment to follow his case plan attending parenting classes and more. “He did everything he needed to do and came to every visit with Cecilia. All with a smile on his face,” says Evans.

A home visit is when caseworkers meet with families in their homes, making it easier on clients and giving caseworkers an opportunity to evaluate the living situation. During such a visit in October, Evans explained to Pepe (through an interpreter) that Cecilia would need additional vaccines when she turned 3. Pepe, who works full-time in a construction job, also updated Evans on the child care arrangements. “I don’t take her to the daycare center anymore, because she would cry and hold onto me when I tried to drop her off,” said Pepe. “Now I take her to a sitter’s house and she runs into the house ready to start playing.”

Pepe, who speaks Spanish and only a little English, has had full custody of Cecilia since July 2013. Cecilia speaks English and understands some Spanish. “I’m learning more English and she’s learning Spanish. She always knows what I’m saying and I can understand her needs without verbal communication,” he said.

When Pepe’s not working, all of his time is spent with Cecilia. They play with dolls, look at books, and on nice weekends, go to the park. Sometimes on Sundays, they watch the local soccer teams play. Evans asked Pepe if he was still playing soccer. He said, “No, I



FCCS Caseworker Shannon Evans talks to Pepe and Cecilia.

take care of her. Nobody can take care of her like I can. She might run off. We just watch the games.”

Working with FCCS was no problem for Pepe. “Some people say it’s a big problem working with Children Services. But I don’t mind because it’s for the best...it’s for my daughter.”

Pepe and Cecilia’s time with FCCS is coming to an end. They will be going to court at the end of the year to terminate the court order for services.

As Evans prepared to leave Pepe’s house, she told him that the FCCS Holiday Wish program gets donated gifts for children and asked him if he would like to submit a gift wish for Cecilia. Pepe smiled and said in English. “Oh, yes. That is good. She likes Dora.”

Pepe was honored in October by the Public Children Services Association of Ohio with the Family of the Year award.

Stay Connected: Follow Us Online, by Email & on Social Media

Franklin County Children Services strives to keep the public informed about what’s going on in child welfare and at the agency. In addition to speaking engagements and community events, literature distribution, regular publications to the community, and media interviews, FCCS is reaching people worldwide through our website, e-newsletter and social media.

To connect to FCCS, visit the agency’s website at www.franklincountyohio.gov/children_services. Here you can find information about events and campaigns, parenting tips, brochures and publications, as well as links to community resources. Web users will see how to report child abuse, request information about adoption and mentoring, and make tax deductible donations online to Holiday Wish and the Children’s Fund.

You can also stay connected by subscribing to our monthly online newsletter, *Connects*, and to our quarterly printed publication, *Accent on Kids*. Signing up is easy. Just go to the FCCS website homepage and click on the Sign Up for our Newsletters link. These publications highlight child welfare issues, community partners, agency employees, successful youth and families, and caring mentors and volunteers. They also feature segments on upcoming activities and parenting tips.

Daily connections with FCCS can be made by “liking” us on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Keep up on news and tips to strengthen your family and brush up on parenting issues. You can also find out about upcoming community events and see photos and videos from FCCS activities.

By staying connected to FCCS you can stay informed about what’s happening as the community works to protect children and strengthen families.

A Mentor's Support Can Last a Lifetime

By Leesa Evans

Imagine you have just learned that you will be having your first child, or that you have been laid off at work, or that your mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness, or that you made honor roll for the first time. Quickly think of one person who you know will be in your life forever that you would call upon for support. Now, take a moment and imagine what it would feel like to not have that person in your life. Young people need enduring personal connections if they are going to thrive and become successful adults. However, the reality is many children find themselves without these vital connections which can result in a sense of hopelessness.

Becoming a mentor to a young person is a way to help them establish a life-long relationship. Mentors can become that person the youth can trust and go to for anything. A former youth in foster care said, "A permanent connection is someone that you can talk to, someone that you can laugh with, and someone that can help you through a problem."

Mentors also become family to children who are waiting for a forever family. The story of FCCS mentor Roxanne is unique as she has been matched with the same youth for more than eight years. Within this time Roxanne helped the girl through difficult

times, including moves from her biological home to foster care, a disrupted adoption, and time in residential care. Through it all, Roxanne has been there for her mentee. In the eyes of her match, Roxanne is family. "I love my big sis and will keep her until the day I die," said the youth.

With the holidays approaching many will reflect upon the important relationships in their lives. Holidays mean many things to many people, but most everyone when asked will say the holidays are about being with family. For many youth in the care of FCCS, being with family is not possible for one reason or another. This is when mentors can make the magic happen. In one case, FCCS had six youth matched with mentors who were placed in two different foster homes. The idea of them not being able to be together at the holidays was not okay for mentors Gary and Cheryl Krygier so they planned a family party. In addition to coordinating the event, they also made sure each child had a brand new bike. The Krygiers realized that lasting connections and memories are critical to the well-being and healthy development of children.

Become a mentor and give a child a permanent connection that will last a lifetime. For more information on mentoring, call (614) 275-2690 or go to www.franklincountyohio.gov/children_services.

Malaika: A Year in Review

By Monique McCrystal

"Taking the time to look within, there I find courage and strength to win, Inside I find beauty, confidence and peace, Within lies the essence that makes me unique!"

This quote is an excerpt from the poem *Looking Within* and was written by Franklin County Children Services Malaika mentor Carrie Hudson. It epitomizes what the women and girls of Malaika have been doing this past year – looking within.

Malaika is a culturally-specific mentoring program for African-American girls involved with Franklin County Children Services. Mentors are matched one-on-one to guide girls toward development of self-esteem and provide positive and meaningful relationships. For mentors involved with Malaika, it is more than a program or a service – it is an unwavering expression of passion and commitment for helping African-American girls.



Malaika mentees make crafts.

In addition to providing valuable relationships, the Malaika program offers culturally enriching activities for mentors and mentees. In 2013, Malaika grew leaps and bounds, providing unique and quality programming surrounding the *Looking Within* theme.

The year kicked off with a community art project. The girls worked under the instruction of Creative Women of Color to make art pieces. These pieces were then featured in the annual FCCS Youth Art Show and Silent Auction to benefit the agency's Children's Fund. Malaika girls ended the school

year by gathering at a local library to make bookmarks featuring the *Looking Within* poem and participated in the Columbus Metropolitan Library's reading challenge. They focused on reading books written by African-American authors.

Continued on page 7

Orthodontist Makes FCCS Kids Smile

By Marion Thompson

“We give kids a chance to smile and that can change their lives,” said Dr. Jackie Berkowitz. For the past six years, Dr. Berkowitz has partnered with Franklin County Children Services to provide orthodontia care to kids who are involved with the agency at a significantly reduced rate.

When he was asked by a member of the FCCS Board if he could provide this service, Dr. Berkowitz was eager to help. “This part of the population had been underserved and I wanted to make sure these kids received the best care,” he said.

While working with FCCS, Dr. Berkowitz has become a big fan of the agency. “Initially, I was unaware of all of the services that the agency provides,” he said. “Working with them has been amazing ... I’m very impressed.”

Berkowitz Orthodontics has treated 30 to 40 FCCS kids over the years, and they’ve been able to provide the same rates to FCCS, although the rates for their general practice have increased. “It’s something we’re happy to do,” he said.

Dr. Berkowitz feels his practice doesn’t just care for teeth; the group takes care of people. He and his staff are dedicated to giving every patient first class service. The doctor believes that orthodontia can have a significant effect on a child’s outlook. “We hope that giving a child a great smile will increase their self-esteem and confidence,” he said.



Dr. Jackie Berkowitz

Children Services Adoption Caseworker Monty Hawkins agrees that Dr. Berkowitz and his staff provide a wonderful service to the children they refer. “When a child goes into the office nervous or scared, he makes them feel comfortable and compliments them by saying things like ‘you’re just gorgeous’ or does little things like letting them pick out colorful rubber bands” said Hawkins. Adoptions Caseworker Kelly Crawford agreed and shared how he talks to the youth about their music, their clothes and relates to them on a personal level. “He’s excellent.” said Crawford. “He makes the kids feel good.”

Dr. Berkowitz said the only challenge he has experienced while working with FCCS kids has been making sure that they keep up with their scheduled appointments, as their living situations change. “Kids can miss appointments when they’re moving from home to home, but we do what we need to do and make it work,” he said. Children Services staff agree that the office is very flexible and accommodating when working with the parents and children on their cases.

Dr. Berkowitz speaks fondly of the FCCS kids that he has treated over the years. “We really get to know them and develop relationships,” he said. “One is at Spelman College and another is playing football for the University of Cincinnati.”

Malaika (continued from page 6)

Rather than taking the summer off, mentees participated in yogART, a creative series combining yoga and art that promotes healthy and alternative methods of self-expression. Mentors and mentees ended the year with an overnight retreat, where they connected with each other while disconnecting from the day-to-day distractions of technology and stressors. This retreat served as momentum to carry them into 2014, when Malaika will kick-off its rites of passage program for girls in grades 6-12.

Over the past year, Malaika’s activities which encourage self-reflection, while promoting positive self-images have resulted in personal growth for all involved. Mentors and youth look forward to celebrating continued growth in the upcoming years.

There are 60 youth being served through the Malaika program, however there are many girls still waiting for a mentor. To learn more about Malaika, call (614) 275-2690 go to www.franklincountyohio.gov/children_services.



Malaika mentors and mentees find serenity through yogART.

Should a Child be Left at Home Alone?

By Marion Thompson

Is it safe to leave a child at home alone, and if so, at what age is it appropriate – these are questions that are on the minds of many parents these days. There are no easy answers. However, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (US DHHS) offers some guidelines concerning this issue.

Parents can make an informed decision about leaving children unattended by asking themselves these questions:

- Is your child physically and mentally able to care for himself or herself?
- Does your child obey rules and make good decisions?
- Does your child feel comfortable or fearful about being home alone?
- Is your home safe and free of hazards?
- Does your child know where you are and how to contact you at all times?

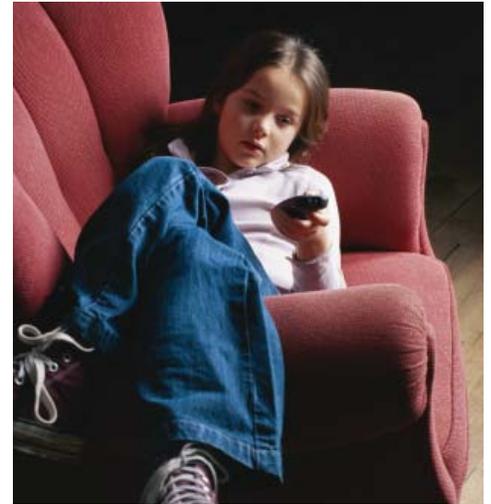
Parents should also consider alternatives to leaving children alone at home whenever possible. Children may become bored, frightened or simply feel uncomfortable when left alone. Participating in clubs, afterschool programs or sports activities may be options for keeping children safe, active and engaged while parents are unable to supervise them.

Thelma Martinez, FCCS Intake & Investigations associate

director, says there are several things a parent should think about before leaving a child home alone. “Consideration should always be given to the length of time a parent will be away,” says Martinez. “Parents might also consider having brief trial periods to help ensure things go smoothly while they are away.

Children should not be left home alone overnight.”

When parents feel their best option is to leave a child unsupervised, it’s a good idea to have a plan that outlines rules and responsibilities for the child. This should include a safety plan, contact information for adults, a list of resources that are close by, and a schedule for checking-in with the child.



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