

# ACCENT<sub>on</sub>KIDS

A Publication of Franklin County Children Services

WINTER 2015



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Protecting Children by Strengthening Families

# ACCENT on KIDS

A Publication of Franklin County Children Services

## Winter 2015

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This publication is available online at [childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov](http://childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov)

# You Can Help Children Through Holiday Wish

Do you remember how you felt as a child when the weather turned cold, carols filled the air and the hope of new toys filled your dreams at night? For more than 50 years, thanks to the generosity of people like you, Franklin County Children Services has granted the wishes of more than 168,000 children through Holiday Wish. These are children who may have experienced abuse, neglect or other difficult home conditions and rely on the generosity of our community to put the joy back into their holidays. Last year, our community provided gifts for more than 5,500 children.

Please consider helping to make these children's holiday wishes come true through the Franklin County Children Services Holiday Wish program. Holiday Wish is a gift-giving program for community donors to provide gifts for children in need. Donations may be considered tax deductible.

There are several ways to help:

- Sponsor one or more young children at \$40 each
- Sponsor one or more older youth at \$50 each
- Make a monetary donation of any amount online at [childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov](http://childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov). You can also write a check to the FCCS Children's Fund and mail it to Holiday Wish at 855 W. Mound Street, Columbus Ohio 43223.

- Donate new, unwrapped toys of any kind.

FCCS relies on donations of funds and toys, as the agency's tax dollars cannot be used to support Holiday Wish. For more information, call Holiday Wish at (614) 275-2525 or email [holidaywish@fccs.us](mailto:holidaywish@fccs.us).



### Holiday Wish is open for donations:

- Monday through Friday: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Wednesday, December 2: 8 a.m. to 7 p.m.
- Saturdays, December 5 & 12: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
- Sundays, December 6 & 13: 12 p.m. to 3 p.m.
- Closed on November 26, 27 and December 25
- Closed at 1 p.m. on December 24

## Honoring Families During National Family Week

National Family Week is a celebration held in November that embraces the premise that children's lives are better when their families are strong. The celebration is observed during the week of Thanksgiving. For the past nine years, Franklin County Children Services has participated in this national event in conjunction with its community partners in the Family-to-Family Program.

A celebration is held that honors families for their successes. Community advocates are recognized for their commitment to supporting families and helping them to remain strong. FCCS partners with St. Stephen's Community House, Gladden Community House and Central Community House to host this annual celebration.

Five families and five community advocates will be honored for their achievements. The families will be commended for overcoming challenging obstacles in their lives. Advocates will be recognized for their work in building and supporting their communities. The event is scheduled for Monday, November 23 from 5-7 p.m. at St. Stephen's Community House, 1500 E. 17th Ave. For more information, call (614) 275-2638.

# Family-to-Family Program Offers a Helping Hand

By Bruce Cadwallader

At St. Stephen's Community House, families do not have to go far to find resources and services from the Family-to-Family program, which is as unique and diverse as the community it is designed to serve.

For Columbus resident Johnny Green, help came 18 months ago in the form of assistance with seven children—four of her own and three from a sibling whose children she agreed to care for.

"I felt like I was drowning and I went to them for help. It's nice to know I don't have to feel that way," Green said. "I learned how I can pass on some of this stress and don't have to do it all by myself. I'm also starting (college) classes soon, all made possible thanks to St. Stephen's."

Thankfully, Green didn't have to do this alone. Family-to-Family was there every step of the way and helps more than 200 families each month. The families who come through the doors of the various sites may need assistance ranging from financial resources, housing or employment assistance to counseling and guidance on how to access community resources. Some families may need help in a crisis, such as a grandmother who suddenly becomes the caretaker of her six grandchildren or the single parent looking for after school help.

A grassroots community partnership established in 2000, Family-to-Family aims to help FCCS-referred families right in their own neighborhoods, keeping them strong, stable and self-sufficient. In addition to St. Stephen's East, North and the South location, which is at the newly-remodeled Reeb Avenue Center, Family-to-Family partners with Central Community House on the near east side, and Gladden Community House on the city's near west side in Franklinton. Serving families in 13 of Columbus' 29 zip codes, the program recognizes that children and families are best served in their own communities.

Available services include educational support, parenting classes, support and networking events, and after-school day programs for youth ages 6 to 18. Groups focus on socialization and age-appropriate skill development.

For more about how Franklin County Children Services' Family-to-Family program is helping strengthen and empower families in their own communities, call (614) 341-6161 or visit [childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov](http://childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov).

## New Reeb Center Assists South Columbus Families

By Bruce Cadwallader

A renovated Reeb Avenue Center has opened to house the new St. Stephen's South Family-to-Family program, as part of a \$12.5 million project to help south side families care for children, find jobs and sustain a neighborhood.

Completed with city, state and federal money, along with private donations, the center will breathe new life into these non-profits: Boys & Girls Clubs of Columbus, Eastway Behavioral Healthcare, COWIC/Ohio Means Jobs Franklin County, Godman Guild, St. Stephen's South Family-to-Family, ConnectOhio, Mid-Ohio Foodbank, Community Development for All People, Lutheran Social Services, and the City of Columbus South Side Neighborhood Pride. The center stands on the site of the 111-year-old Reeb Elementary School and opened for business on Sept. 25.

The center, at 280 Reeb Ave., will offer a fresh-food market run by the Mid-Ohio Foodbank and a South Side Roots Café will offer weekday public lunches and a Saturday brunch. A day-care, job training site and addiction services will also be offered.

Major donors included: City of Columbus, State of Ohio, The Grote Family/Donatos, Crane Group/The Crane Family, Don and Nancy Kelley/Donald W. Kelley & Assoc., Kids Come First Coalition/HUD Federal Stimulus Funds, Nationwide, The Columbus Foundation, Grange Insurance, and Baumann Plumbing. Reeb School Renewal Endowment Donors are: American Electric Power, H. Baumann Family, Anderson Concrete with Doug & Kerri Anderson, Columbus Castings, The Schumacher Group, Huntington Bank, Dispatch Printing Company, Michelle Heritage and Tanisha Robinson, Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein Family, Bob Evans Farms, Henry Hauser Family, Worthington Industries Foundation, Park National Bank, Glimcher Properties, John and Emily Ness, and anonymous donors. For more information on the site, go to [www.reebavenuecenter.org](http://www.reebavenuecenter.org).



South side children give a big thank you at the Reeb Center grand opening ceremony.

# Children Services Spotlight: Jesse Looser

By Pam Prosser

Jesse Looser began working at Franklin County Children Services straight out of college 16 years ago. His first job as a child welfare caseworker at Intake has now led him to directing a regional casework office.

While in college at the Ohio State University, he was having difficulty deciding what to do after graduation and had switched his major several times. Then his advisor mentioned that Looser might want to try an internship at FCCS. "Before my internship here, I was trying to decide between a career in education or criminology," said Looser. "I got to Children Services and instantly loved it." The work as a child welfare caseworker was exactly what he had been searching for. "I loved going out into the field doing home visits and working with children and families. I know this statement can be overused, but nothing else describes it as well...I chose child welfare because I felt I could make a difference."

Now, as the director of FCCS's East Region (roughly the area east of interstate 71 in Franklin County), Looser supervises 139 employees who work on ongoing cases to make sure children are safe and help families through troubled times. For the first 14 years, he worked at the agency's Intake and Investigations Department,



where he would often be the first contact families and children had with FCCS. He was an Intake caseworker investigating calls of physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect of children. Over the years, his commitment and dedication led Looser to be promoted to casework supervisor, Intake associate director and region director for the past two years.

"One of the key things I've seen in this work is that our clients are often portrayed in a negative light," says Looser. "But once you sit down and talk to them, you see that they aren't that different from us. They just have a few more challenges."

Looser also serves as the administrator of the FCCS Best Practice Council and is the project lead on the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services' Committee on Engaging Fathers. He is married to his high school sweetheart, Barb and has two sons, Jonny and Jack.

## TAP Experience Provides Healing for Young Artist

By Marion Thompson

Chel-C has been making art as long as she can remember. Her ability to express herself through drawing, painting, sculpting and working with found objects has led her through some tough times in her life. The young artist has refined her talent and influenced others by participating in Franklin County Children Services' Therapeutic Arts Program (TAP) over the past 10 years. Now 22, she remains involved with TAP and shares her skills and insights with others in the program.

Chel-C spent much of her young life moving from place to place and dealing with the trauma of abuse, while being involved in the child welfare system. She credits the TAP program with helping her to feel understood. "It's a place where people were patient with me. I didn't find that in other places," she said. TAP not only helped her develop into an accomplished artist, it also helped her work through feelings of loss, low self-esteem and being disconnected. "I have an ability that can't be taken away from me and I have accomplishments," she said. In the near future, Chel-C plans to get her GED. Her ambition is to learn to weld, so that she will have not only a trade, but another powerful skill to use in creating art.

A great deal of Chel-C's work is an expression of her feelings about the difficult relationships she's had with family members and others. In the past, she clung to individual pieces for comfort and



Chel-C poses among her artwork as well as two pieces created by her 2-year-old daughter, Onie, during a recent agency art show.

security. Now that she is a mother and feels permanently connected to family members, friends and mentors like FCCS Assistant Deputy Director Kim Toler, TAP Program Coordinator Cheri Johnson and her former caseworker, (now Associate Director) Monica Civils, Chel-C believes she can share her art with others. Her pieces were featured prominently during the agency's recent art show and silent auction.

Johnson is awed by Chel-C's work. "I haven't taught Chel-C about art," she said. "I just show her different techniques and she lets her imagination take off and does

amazing things."

Chel-C enjoys working alongside the youth in TAP. "We just share what we do. I feel like the younger ones look up to me and can talk with me, because it was not that long ago that I was going through what they're going through," she said.

Johnson is gratified by what TAP has done for Chel-C and others. "When I look at where she came from and the young lady that she's become, I'm so proud of the healing that we've helped her to have. As an agency, this is what we've accomplished for many kids who are involved with TAP."

To learn more about the TAP program, visit [childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov](http://childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov).

# Adoption Brings New Daughter for Single Mom

By Joetta McCruter-Polk

November is National Adoption Month and for Keisha Britford and her family it is a very special time. In November of 2014, their lives changed for the better as they welcomed Ava as a permanent part of the Britford family.

In 2012, when she started fostering children under the care of Franklin County Children Services, Britford was already a single mother to Ajaih and Aasha, now 20 and 16. But she felt she had enough love to share by taking in foster children and later adopting Ava, now 11.

Starting as a respite caregiver for her sister, who was a foster parent, Britford eventually signed on to be a foster and adoptive parent. Ava was Britford's first foster care placement. "When Ava first came to my home, I said to myself, 'She is my child,'" said Britford.

Before Ava was placed in the Britford home, she felt as if she never fit in anywhere. She had been in several foster homes and

had an adoption that fell through. Britford says of meeting Ava, "She was a child who never smiled." After a lot of love from the Britfords and plenty of support from her FCCS team, Ava has made much progress and has blossomed into a happy pre-teen.



Keisha Britford (far right), with her daughters (left to right) Aasha and Ajaih as they celebrate the adoption of Ava on National Adoption Day 2014.

## Celebrating Adoption

FCCS will celebrate National Adoption Month in November and Adoption Day on November 19 with the finalization of the adoptions of 22 children by 6 families.

According to FCCS Associate Director of Adoptions and Emancipation Raquel Breckenridge, "This celebration of adoption is made possible by the efforts of judges, attorneys who volunteer, child advocates, and foster care and adoption professionals." FCCS is also partnering with the Dave Thomas Foundation, probate court, and the National Center for Adoption Law and

Policy at Capital University Law School in this effort.

In Franklin County, there are more than 200 children waiting for adoptive families. Children available for adoption are mostly African American children over the age of 5, Caucasian children over the age of 10, siblings who want to remain together, and children with behavioral and emotional challenges.

For more information about adoption at FCCS, call (614) 341-6000 or go to our website at [childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov](http://childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov).

## Friendship Mentor Makes a Difference

By Marion Thompson

For Tom Craig, becoming a mentor for a youth involved with the child welfare system seemed quite natural. "I was adopted through Franklin County Children Services when I was 11 months old. My experience was very positive, so I've always wanted to make a difference for kids who weren't as lucky as I was," he said. Craig, who is single and works as an assistant manager at a local small business, has been a friendship mentor for Antonio, a 14-year-old adoptee, for four years.

The duo met while at Starfish Alliance's Royal Family Kids Camp, where Craig has served as both a counselor and dean of men over the past eight years. He got to know Antonio and decided to build on their relationship by committing to being the youth's mentor. "The individual attention and quality time that mentors give kids in tough circumstances is probably what they lack most—a consistent positive influence in their lives," he said.



Tom Craig (right) and his mentee Antonio went to see the OSU football team's 2015 National Championship trophy.

Craig is proud to be Antonio's mentor. "He's growing into a fine young man and a great athlete," he said of Antonio who is involved in track and basketball. They enjoy spending time together at local sporting events. The only challenge Craig finds in their relationship is the physical distance between them. "Antonio lives in New Albany and I live in Grove City, but we make it work."

Craig encourages others to mentor youth and meet the tremendous need that exists.

"It's easy to get angry about the bad things we see in the world these days, but I think that at the heart of a lot of bad situations

there has been childhood trauma. You can make a positive change in the lives of kids who've experienced trauma just by being there as an example for them. It's not hard," he said.

To learn more about mentoring a child through FCCS, call (614) 275-2690 or go to [childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov](http://childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov).



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## Safe Sleep Practices Save Babies' Lives

By Cynthia Greenleaf

The statistics are saddening: every week in Ohio, three babies die because of an unsafe sleep environment. Because this kind of tragedy is almost always preventable, Franklin County Children Services is committed to educating parents and other caregivers about how best to keep their sleeping babies safe.

"Whether it's a family in need at our intake level, a kinship grandparent who's stepped up to care for his infant grandson, or a teen mother in our emancipation program, our child welfare professionals are committed to getting the safe sleep message out," said FCCS Deputy Director Tina Rutherford. "Because it really could mean the difference between life or death, we want every baby to have a safe sleep environment."

As of 2015, providing safe sleep education is now state law here in Ohio for all child welfare agencies, so FCCS has and will continue to lead the charge on this critical issue, according to Rutherford.

What is "safe sleep" exactly? The easiest thing to remember is ABC: Babies are always safest **Alone**, on their **Backs**, in their **Cribs**.

**Alone:** Babies should never sleep with an adult on a couch, chair



or bed. In fact, two out of three babies who have died while sleeping were sharing a couch, chair or bed, so these practices are especially dangerous. It's OK to share a room with a baby, but never a bed. Sharing a sleep space puts your baby at risk: infants have died after being rolled over on in bed or wedged between couch cushions.

**Back:** Babies should always be put to sleep on their backs. Don't worry: an infant is actually less likely to choke in this position than if he's on his belly.

Remember: back to sleep, tummy to play.

**Crib:** Babies need their own safe, designated space for sleeping. Due to the risk of asphyxiation, a crib, bassinet or pack-and-play should always be empty. This is not the place for stuffed animals, blankets or bumper pads. Use a firm, safety-approved crib mattress with a tightly fitted sheet. And don't over-bundle your infant. Remember that if you're comfortable, the baby will be, too. Dress an infant in appropriate clothing such as a fitted sleeper or sleep sack. These are always safer than a blanket.

For more on safe sleep practices, visit [childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov](http://childrenservices.franklincountyohio.gov).