

Persistent foster mom refutes “he’ll never make it” and sees son graduate high school

Some foster parents feel that their children don’t receive enough or adequate specialized services. But what do you do when the specialists warn you repeatedly that your foster child will never speak, read, or get through school? Do you believe them and throw in the towel? Linda Johnson didn’t.

Linda has been a foster parent since 1976. She stopped counting the number of children for whom she cared after reaching number 200. That was ten years ago. Linda came close to adopting seven or eight times, but circumstances always intervened so that the adoptions never took place. Heartbroken, she still didn’t give up.

Her son Noah was finally adopted in 1998. He is now happily married and gave Linda her first “official” grandchild in May 2006. However, Linda is grandma to scores of children whose parents were former foster children in her home. They call and visit on a regular basis.

Now living at home are four siblings, who came to Linda in 1996 when the group ranged from age 3

to age 8. She worked towards their reunification with the Department and their birth mother. It was difficult, but the children were able to return home for a time. Unfortunately, when their mother’s circumstances seriously changed, the children needed to be placed back with Linda.

All four of the children had special needs, but none more so than Jared. He wouldn’t talk. The many psychiatrists diagnosed him with several mental health issues and numerous disorders. They told Linda that Jared would never speak, read, or complete school.

After years of failure in traditional behavior disorder programs, Jared was placed in Galesburg’s Phoenix program, an alternative school for students with behavior disabilities. As an experienced educator herself and long-time foster parent, Linda doubted Jared’s diagnosis and questioned the ineffective treatments.

Linda says, “He was so medicated that he couldn’t speak!”

She took him to Dr. Marino in Moline, who finally diagnosed Jared as autistic. He was taken



While some experts said he would never make it, Jared graduated high school. Adoptive mother Linda Johnson was his advocate, instructor and cheerleader.

off all of his medications and began to communicate and interact within his world. Although Jared’s prognosis was much better, Linda was told that Jared would never complete school. Still, Linda taught Jared how to read and worked on his behavior.

“I tried different behavior modification techniques to gauge how he responded. Once he was

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Graduate, con't.

able to tell me how he thinks and feels, I was able to respond in a manner consistent with his special thought processes," she said.

Eventually Jared learned and caught up with his peers. Linda recognized that children with autism and Asperger's Syndrome can become especially focused on a specific interest. When he exhibited an avid curiosity in archeology and paleontology, Linda encouraged him. Once he responded to this learning experience, she eventually worked with Jared to broaden his interests.

After three years of high school in the Phoenix program, Linda advocated for Jared to attend Abingdon High School. The district was very skeptical of this plan so Linda promised to come to the school daily if needed. Jared believed he was ready, and Linda believed in Jared. It turned out that other than regular school conferences, she never had to go to the school for behavior problems. Jared graduated with his senior class in June 2006. Jared and Linda continue to work with Dr. Morino, who is advocating for Jared to go on to higher education. Can he do it? Linda thinks so.

Quincyanans honored for foster parenting

Jim and Peggy Christianer wish more people would become foster parents. The Quincy couple was honored with the SAM Foster Parent Award, annually handed out by the Adams County judges of the Eighth Judicial Circuit. The award is named in honor of Samantha Otte, who passed away six years ago from complications of cystic fibrosis and a liver transplant surgery.

The Christianers and their two foster sons accepted the award from Judge John Wooleyhan at the Adams County Courthouse.

"We've had a lot of fun with the kids," Jim Christianer said. "If you understand how to work with them, it's very rewarding... I really wish more people would consider becoming foster parents."

The award is for foster parents who provide a home for neglected, abused, or dependent children with complex medical or emotional needs. The Christianers were nominated by the Department of Children and Family Services and Chaddock.

The Christianers' two foster sons, Nathan and Donnie, have come a long way since coming to the Christianer home. Donnie, 18, will graduate from high school next year and has a part-time job.



Jim and Peggy Christianer are joined by Judge Wooleyhan (back L) and the parents of Samantha Jane Otte, for whom the SAM Award is named.

Nathan is 10. Both boys had been in several foster homes before finding a stable and loving environment with the Christianers.

"There is always a need for more foster homes," Wooleyhan said. "You don't have to go to Chicago or Cook County to realize there is a need right here in Quincy."

Jim and Peggy got interested in foster care about 10 years ago when they saw a foster care booth at Riverfest. They've taken care of between 30 and 40 foster children.

"It's hard sometimes," Peggy said. "And sometimes the goodness pays off. You just have to spend time with them."

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Partnering with Parents Fair in Peoria

The DCFS Clinical Division, Peoria DCFS staff, private agency staff and the Family to Family community sponsored an informational fair for parents on November 2 at the Civic Center in Peoria. The fair was non-stop activity from 3 in the afternoon until 7 in the evening. The focus of the event was informing parents about services to enhance the lives of children and their families.

There was an ever-changing line up of speakers to offer frank discussion of DCFS policies and how they affect parents. Regional Administrator Bob Blackwell detailed the positive outcomes that can result when parents and child welfare staff work together. The Family to Family initiative that is supported by the Casey Foundation was instrumental in providing numerous information booths about services to children and families in the area. There were representatives available to discuss educational and vocational



Central Region Administrator Bob Blackwell spoke at the Partnering with Parents information fair. He was joined by Mary Bullock, Larry Chasey and Ray Gates who contributed to the event hosted in Peoria.

services. Volunteer professionals were on hand to present information about many medical, dental and mental health services within the community. Agencies that provide assistance with housing and other financial needs were also represented.

Speakers offered advice on navigating the court system and showcased parents who were successfully reunified with their children.

“The feedback from parents and staff was very positive. Leadership from the DCFS divisions of Operations, POS Monitoring, ACR and Child Protection all committed significant time and personnel to bring important information to parents,” said Ray Gates, manager of the Clinical Division’s Office of Parent Support Services, which sponsored the event.



Parents browsed among dozens of tables with staff sharing important information to help their families.

I am Leaving Now

I came to you frightened, distrustful and angry

I came to you unwilling or unable to accept your love, nurturing and kindness

I came to you expecting nothing so I would never be disappointed

I am leaving now.... As a secure, independent person ready to trust

I am leaving now...able to accept and give love

I am leaving now And all the expectations I never had were met

I am leaving now But only to move forward in my life because you taught me how

I am leaving now But I will be back to show you who I've become with your love, guidance and support

Anonymous

Central Region Training Calendar

Important Information!

The DCFS Office of Foster Parent Training is realigning the training offerings in the Central Region and statewide. To register for courses or for more information, call 877-800-3393.

DCFS Lending Library offers alternatives for education credits

The DCFS Lending Library can be used as an alternative for obtaining approved training credit for license renewal. The Lending Library is a resource to allow foster and adoptive parents access to a multitude of books, audio cassettes and videos for self-directed training in parenting and family life. The materials span 17 categories.

Licensed foster and adoptive parents can borrow materials for a two-week period at no charge. The order form is available in the 3rd Edition of the Lending Library Catalog, which can also be viewed on the DCFS web site at www.state.il.us/dcfs.

Excerpts from the many titles available to borrow

When a Child or Youth is Sexually Abused...A Guide for Youth, Parents, and Caregivers
by *Children's Aid Society Foundation*

Foster parents can read this comprehensive booklet or listen

to the audio cassette. Both give the same overview of child sexual abuse focusing on the caregiver/child relationship after disclosure. The information contained in this booklet/audio cassette is valuable to all caregivers of children who were sexually abused.

Reading Level: Easy
Credit: 1 hour

Bruised Before Birth: Parenting Children Exposed to Parental Substance Abuse
by *Amy Bullock, Elizabeth Grimes and Joan McNamara*

This book introduces and describes the signs and effects of a child that was prenatally exposed to drugs. It offers various parenting tools, techniques, and strategies that may assist in positive and effective caretaking.

Reading Level: Easy to Moderate
Credit: 2 hours

Educational Advocacy

Two 3-hour sessions = 6 training hours

It is mandatory for one foster parent in each family to attend Educational Advocacy Training in order to be re-licensed. Educational Advocacy Training is offered following each Foster PRIDE/Adopt PRIDE training and many additional times. This six-hour course covers information foster parents need to know so that they can advocate for their foster children's educational rights and needs.

Peoria Area

CANTON *Spoon River College*
Dec. 7 & 14 (Thu) 6-9 p.m.

GALESBURG *Carl Sandburg Coll.*
Dec. 4 & 11 (Mon) 6-9 p.m.

PEORIA *Proctor Hospital*
Dec. 6 & 13 (Wed) 6-9 p.m.

Champaign Area

NORMAL *BabyFold*
Dec. 16 (Sat) 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Springfield Area

SPRINGFIELD *Lincoln Land Coll.*
Dec. 2 (Sat) 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Central Connections

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Anyone can call the regional reporter with foster parent association news and schedules; local training notices; features on foster families and community members working for children; photos; and ideas for news articles or supportive services that would be helpful for caregivers to know.