

## Charleston girls transform visiting rooms with their gifts of toys and time

To most people, Jordyn and Taylor Gandolfi appear to be your typical, run-of-the-mill girls. They enjoy tumbling, dancing, swimming, cheerleading and hanging out with their friends. What sets them apart from most kids, is their knowledge and their empathy for children being cared for in the child welfare system. Jordyn and Taylor along with their mom and dad, Kathy and Mike, are a foster family in Charleston and they know first hand the joy and the pain that comes with fostering. What makes them even more special is that the kids decided to do something to help.

While working towards her confirmation requirements at church, Jordyn, age 13, was asked to choose a service project that was meaningful to her. She did not have to think about it for long. She knew she wanted to do something to help children in foster care. Jordyn talked over some ideas with her mom and the two of them decided to contact Joan Ebinger, the caseworker for Annie, who was living with their family and soon would be adopted. Annie had spent a great deal of time in the visiting room in the Charleston Field Office, so Jordyn decided her project would be to fix it up for other foster kids.

“I felt kind of bad for the kids who had to come there and I wanted to make it nice,” said Jordyn.

But what started as a spruce-up turned into much more. Jordyn was joined by Amy Woods, a mentor from church, to start sorting and cleaning the toys. Jordyn added to them with toys of her own. Then her younger sister Taylor and Taylor’s best friend Kirsten climbed on board with an idea.



*Jordyn Gandolfi*



*Taylor Gandolfi*



*Annie Gandolfi*

“Our birthdays were coming up and we decided instead of toys for us, we wanted toys for the foster kids,” declared Taylor.

Taylor and Kirsten held a joint birthday party and asked for Wal-Mart gift cards instead of gifts for themselves. The girls were hoping they might collect \$200 in gift cards and were very excited to find that their families and friends had generously donated \$405. They made big plans to use the cards to fill the “wish list” for toys and furniture for the visiting room that Joan and colleague Debbie Smith had compiled from the staff.

The crew headed to Wal-Mart to pick out an array of brightly colored and amusing toys that Taylor and Kirsten hoped would make a visit between a foster child and their parent just a bit easier. As they shopped, they kept in mind Annie, who by this time had become Taylor’s sister through adoption.

“These girls were buying for other kids. They would never get to play with any of these toys, and they were having a ball,” Joan remembered excitedly. This was money that would have been spent buying birthday gifts for both Kirsten and Taylor.

## Gifts, con't.

Instead, dolls, trucks, a tool set, a tea set, a rocking horse, dress-ups and more made their way into the cart via the shopper's hearts. Kathy promised her daughters she would load up the family minivan to transport their gifts and supplies. With Annie at her side, she watched as Taylor, Kirsten, Joan and Debbie transformed the visiting room into a warm and welcoming room overflowing with the spirit of community. Kathy and Mike knew that what they had worked so hard to instill in their daughters was paying off right before their eyes.

"We wanted our daughters to appreciate what they are fortunate to have and to grow up to give back to the world," said Kathy. "We taught them not to be judgmental of others, and that fortune is truly the luck of the draw."

Annie had come full-circle. She had been granted permanency into a family who believed that no one should be judged based on what they have or do not have. Annie watched as her two older sisters gave back what they had received.

The gifts went even farther than what the girls imagined. With all that was purchased and the items that the Gandolphis donated, they outfitted another visiting room as well. When everything had been arranged and Debbie stepped back to take it all in, "It looked like home," she thought.

## Youths donate suitcases for children in transition

Mary Tolakson wanted to share her childhood experience of community service with today's youth. Three years ago she helped to organize a junior service club through her life insurance company. The Modern Woodsmen of America youth group recently made life a little smoother for foster children in the Central Region.

Mary wanted to put her group's "good deed-doing" efforts into helping foster children in central Illinois. She contacted Lynda Petrick, Central Region Foster Care Manager, and asked how they could make a difference in the life of a foster child. Having been a caseworker for several years, Lynda remembered that often times a child used a plastic bag or paper sack to carry their belongings when they moved to a different home. Suitcases, Lynda suggested, might help make a move just a bit easier.

So on "Join Hands Day" in June, Mary and her group of kids, ages pre-school through senior high, collected 90 suitcases in the small central Illinois community of Mahomet. "It feels great to help another kid," stated one eight-year-old collector. Another child, age 13, said she "liked knowing she may be making a difference for another child."

Mary and her group had a lot of support. The kids in the group made colored posters to hang around town to advertise the



*Jeff Smith of the Savoy Licensing Office fills a truck with donated suitcases for foster children.*

event. Modern Woodsmen of America donated financially for advertising on local radio stations and the Mahomet IGA store set aside part of the parking area that day as the collection site. Throughout the day, a steady stream of townspeople dropped by to donate a suitcase or two. Those who did not have one to donate brought money. With the money, Mary and her group bought hairbrushes, stickers, coloring books, and balloons to put inside each suitcase for a personal touch.

The suitcases were distributed to offices throughout Central Region. From Effingham to Rock Island, and Danville to Quincy, children in foster care will carry the reminder that other kids care about them. "I'm truly touched by the outpouring of generosity of this community," stated Lynda. "I am sure that being able to provide a foster child a suitcase will help ease the pain they are experiencing. All of us here at DCFS extend our heartfelt thanks to Mary and those involved in this thoughtful endeavor."

## “Trippin’ List” answers questions from Central Region teens

Hey! Central Region Teenagers! We, the members of the Central Region Youth Advisory Board thought it would be cool to get some time with you in each newsletter. Everybody on the Youth Advisory Board has been or still is in care with the Department of Children and Family Services. *We all know exactly what that’s like.*

During our discussions at our monthly meetings, we realized that life with DCFS most of the time means more questions than answers. So, we are going to pick some questions that we want to have answered. We’re going to research the official policy and maybe add a few of our insights too. We call this our **“Trippin’ List”**. It is chance to talk about the things that have us trippin’ out or trippin’ over ourselves trying to make this whole DCFS thing work. But we won’t just trip—we will get some answers.

***If you have a “Trippin’ List” question or would like to become a member of our regional board, the door is always open. Ask your caseworker for information or call the Youth Hotline at 1-800-232-3798.***

### How often can I visit my extended family members?

If the goal is to return home, visits with parents should occur weekly. If the goal is something other than return home, parent visits should be negotiated between the worker, youth, and parents, unless the court orders that they cannot occur. When it comes to brothers and sisters, visits with siblings, by law, should occur twice per month. For other family members, there is no established policy. Those visits should be negotiated between the youth and worker. Grandparent visitation may be ordered by the court under the Marriage and Dissolution Act. See policy 315.110 for more details.

### How often should my caseworker visit me?

If a child has been in the care of DCFS for more than one month, the caseworker is supposed to meet privately with the child at least once a month. This includes youth living in residential and independent living settings. For youth who have any identified special needs (children with mental and physical disabilities), the assigned caseworker should meet privately with them at least twice a month according to the child’s strengths and changing circumstances.

Caseworkers are also expected to maintain regular contact with youth in residential facilities. The

assigned caseworker will visit the facility and meet, in person at least monthly, with the residential provider and the child to review the treatment progress and planned discharge date. The only exception is if the residential facility is more than 150 miles from the field office. Then the monthly meeting may be held via teleconference with an in-person meeting every other month. Regional Administrators are permitted to develop special visit plans for youth in facilities more than 300 miles from the field office. \*Only the assigned caseworker (or supervisor if the caseworker is on leave) can make the visit. “Pooled visits”, whereby a worker will visit all the youth on his/her team are not allowed.

### Why do I have to get consent to have a family portrait taken?

Consent for photographs for personal use is not required. However, photographs used for publicity and media events require the consent of the Guardian according to Policy 327.4

*Youth Comment: My foster family has a family picture taken every year. It’s just for us, but I love it! I have an album with all my pictures in it. No matter where I go, I’ll always know where I’ve been. My Mom takes pictures sometimes when we visit. I put them in my album too ‘cause that’s my life too.*

# Central Region Training Calendar

## FosterPRIDE In-Service Training

All licensed foster parents and adoptive parents are welcome to attend any or all of the PRIDE In-Service Trainings to enhance their skills and meet yearly training requirements.

**Module 1** - *The Foundation for Meeting the Developmental Needs of Children* (Four 3-hour sessions = 12 training hours)

**Module 2** - *Using Discipline to Protect and Nurture* (Three 3-hour sessions = 9 training hours)

**Module 3** - *Child Development* - New module being written

**Module 4** - *Child Sexual Development and Sexual Abuse* (Two 3-hour sessions = 6 training hours)

**Module 5** - *Supporting Relationships Between Children and Their Families* (Three 3-hour sessions = 9 training hours)

**Module 6** - *Working as a Professional Team Member* (Three 3-hour sessions = 9 training hours)

**Module 7** - *Promoting Children's Personal & Cultural Identity* (Two 3-hour sessions = 6 training hours)

**Module 8** - *Promoting Permanency Outcomes* (Three 3-hour sessions = 9 training hours)

**Module 9** - *Managing the Fostering Experience* (Two 3-hour sessions = 6 training hours)

**Module 10** - *Understanding the Effects of Chemical Dependency on Children & Families* (Five 3-hour sessions = 15 training hours)

**Springfield Area**  
888-817-1825

Module

**SPRINGFIELD - Lincoln Land Community College**  
Date and Time TBA 4

**JACKSONVILLE - Location TBA**  
Date and Time TBA 9

**Pre-Registration is required for all classes.**  
**Contact the number listed for your area.**

**Peoria Area • 888-507-7433**

Module

**CANTON - Wesley Methodist Church**  
Feb. 23, Mar. 1 & 8 (Mon) 6-9 p.m. 2

**EAST MOLINE - BHC Outreach Center**  
March 2, 9 & 16 (Tue) 6-9 p.m. 8

**GALESBURG - Lutheran Social Svc.**  
Feb. 19 & 26, Mar. 4 (Thu) 6-9 p.m. 5

**PEORIA - Lutheran Social Services**  
Jan. 31, (Sat) 9 a.m.-12 p.m. 1  
Feb. 7, 14 & 21

**PEORIA - Children's Home**  
March 4, 11 & 18 (Thu) 6-9 p.m. 2

**Champaign Area**  
888-467-6065

Module

**BLOOMINGTON - Comfort Inn**  
March 6, 13 & 20 9 a.m.-12 p.m. 4  
(Sat)

**CHAMPAIGN - IETC**  
Feb. 14, 21 & 28 9 a.m.-12 p.m. 4  
(Sat)

**PONTIAC - Location TBA**  
Feb. 9, 16 & 23 6:30-9:30 p.m. 2  
(Sat)

## 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 • 888-507-7433**

**EAST MOLINE BHC Outreach Ctr.**  
Feb. 17 & 24 (Tue) 6-9 p.m.  
March 22 & 29 (Mon) 6-9 p.m.

**GALESBURG Holiday Inn Express**  
March 23 & 30 (Tue) 6-9 p.m.

**LA SALLE Catholic Charities**  
Jan 20 & 27 (Tue) 6-9 p.m.

**MACOMB TBA**  
March 16 & 23 (Tue) 6-9 p.m.

**PEORIA Children's Home**  
Feb. 19 & 26 (Thu) 6-9 p.m.  
March 17 & 24 (Wed) 6-9 p.m.

**Lutheran Social Services**  
Jan. 26 & Feb 2 (Mon) 6-9 p.m.

**Springfield Area**  
888-817-1825

**LINCOLN A. Lincoln Mem. Hosp.**  
Jan. 24 (Sat) 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

**PITTSFIELD Pittsfield High School**  
March 6 (Sat) 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

**QUINCY The Crossing**  
March 27 (Sat) 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

**TAYLORVILLE St. Vincent Hosp.**  
Jan. 26 & Feb. 2 (Mon) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

**Champaign Area**  
888-467-6065

**CHAMPAIGN Empl. & Training Ctr.**  
Feb. 16 & 23 (Mon) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

**CHARLESTON Human Services Ctr.**  
Jan. 29 & Feb. 5 (Thu) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

**DANVILLE Comm. Church of God**  
March 13 (Sat) 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

**DECATUR Decatur Civic Center**  
March 16 & 23 (Tue) 6:30-9:30 p.m.

**NORMAL The BabyFold**  
Feb. 14 (Sat) 9 a.m.-4 p.m.

## Central Connections

### Sponsor

Deborah Kennedy, DCFS  
Central Regional Administrator

### Regional Reporter

Mary Katherine Dixon  
DCFS Child Welfare Staff  
Development Coordinator  
1806 Woodfield Drive  
Savoy, IL 61874  
Phone: 217-278-5300  
Fax: 217-278-5323  
E-mail: Mdixon@idcfs.state.il.us

Call with foster parent association news and schedules of local training, features on foster families and community members working for children, photos and news articles and supports all foster families can use.