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# ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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## National Adoption Month 2012: Life-Changing Programs for Children and Families

BY JACLYN NEWTON

**N**ational Council For Adoption (NCFA) is privileged to work with many organizations and programs that advocate on behalf of children, birthparents, and adoptive families. In honor of National Adoption Month, we have taken the opportunity to highlight just a few of the many important programs serving youth in foster care, orphaned and vulnerable children, expectant parents considering adoption, and adoptive families.

### Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute

#### Foster Youth Internship Program

RJ Sloke's life story is one of triumph over tragedy and finding hope when least expected. When RJ entered the foster care system at the age of thirteen, he left a childhood filled with abuse and neglect – only to experience years of being shuffled from one group home to the next, followed by various juvenile detention centers, until he aged out of the system.

However, in the midst of disappointment and turmoil, RJ met Karen Parker, a keyboarding teacher who was about to set his life's path in a completely different direction. When they met, RJ was repeating the ninth grade for the third time – not because he was receiving poor grades, but because he had transferred schools so often that his credits got lost with each transition. It wasn't until Ms. Parker took a vested interest in him that



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RJ was able to piece together his school credits, graduate from high school, enlist as an Army reservist, and attend college.

Of his life, RJ says: “For a child that has dwelled in the dark abyss of hopelessness all their life, it only takes one person to save them. It takes one person to restore hope within that youth. It takes one person to let that child know that there is someone out there that genuinely cares about them... It took me a while to meet that type of person. But when I did, she set a fire underneath me that led me out of my struggle.”

Thanks in part to Ms. Parker’s constant love and encouragement, RJ joined thirteen other former foster youth this past summer as part of the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI)’s Foster Youth Internship (FYI) Program. CCAI’s FYI Program offers young adults who have spent at least two years in the foster care system the opportunity to complete a Congressional internship. The program began in 2003 as an effort to raise awareness among federal policymakers about the needs and unique perspectives of those who spent time in foster care. Since its inception, 133 extraordinary young adults have participated in the program and used their voices to leave a mark in the halls of Congress.

In addition to a full-time Congressional internship, CCAI offers retreats, advocacy trainings, and various networking opportunities to Foster Youth Interns accepted into the summer program. Throughout the summer, the interns research policy issues affecting children and youth in care across the country. These experiences allow them to create a policy report that is presented at a Congressional briefing and distributed to child welfare advocates across the country. As a result, federal policymakers can learn about the needs and experiences of youth in foster care from those who have experienced it directly, and go on to use this new knowledge to inspire legislative change. Interns participating in CCAI’s FYI program benefit both personally and professionally, gaining experience and skills that will bolster their careers for years to come and laying the foundation for them to be lifelong advocates for improving the foster care system.

For RJ, this past summer was one he will never forget. Not only did he have the opportunity to intern with Sen. Roy Blunt, write a Congressional report, and present his research and recommendations to Members of Congress, one of his own report recommendations – the A+ Plus (Access to Papers Leads to Uninterrupted Scholars) Act – may soon become law. This law would ensure that child welfare agencies have access to a youth’s academic records, a topic close to RJ’s heart. After he shared his own story with Sen. Blunt, the senator signed on as a co-sponsor of the bill. Of his summer as a Foster Youth Intern, RJ says, “Never in my life have I had such strong support.”

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For more information on this program, please visit [www.ccaainstitute.org](http://www.ccaainstitute.org). 2013 Foster Youth Internship Program applications will be posted in early November.

## Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption

### Wendy's Wonderful Kids

Tyreese and his four siblings were in the child protection system for most of their lives, beginning in Chicago, and continuing when they moved to Minnesota. Before entering the system, they experienced significant domestic violence and abuse. A recruiter from Wendy's Wonderful Kids (WWK), a signature program of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, began working with them, slowly introducing them to the possibility of living with another family and being part of the adoption process.

Wendy's Wonderful Kids awards grants to public and private adoption agencies, which are then used to hire adoption professionals who will implement proactive, child-focused recruitment programs exclusively targeted at moving America's longest-waiting children from foster care into adoptive families. Wendy's Wonderful Kid's recruiters carry caseloads of children the system seems to have forgotten. Like Tyreese and his siblings, children receive full attention from their recruiter to ensure that their needs are being met.

After talking with his WWK recruiter about the possibility of adoption, Tyreese asked, "So this will be a family I get to live with forever and ever? Until I have gray hair?" From that point on, the children and their WWK recruiter would talk about "forever and ever families, until you have gray hair."

Ronald was the kids' P.E. teacher at their elementary school. Daneese, the oldest of the five, trusted him enough to tell him one day at school that she was in foster care and would need a new home – an adoptive home. Ronald came home and told the story to his wife, Tina, and said, "I wish we could adopt them." Tina said that she had never heard Ronald share such a significant connection with one of his students. They had children in their classrooms before that were part of the child welfare system, but this case and these children seemed to make a particular impact on him.

Tina contacted the child services worker and WWK recruiter, expressing their interest in adopting the children. She and Ronald knew that there

were three kids, all school-aged, but then they learned that there were two younger toddlers at home. Were they ready to take this on? The family shared that they resided in a two-bedroom townhome; both were teachers and had experience with kids from the child protection system. The recruiter suggested that they take some time to think about adopting all five children.

The next day, Tina and Ronald called back, stating that they wanted to be considered as adoptive parents for the sibling set – yes, all five kids! When their Wendy’s Wonderful Kids recruiter and their child services worker told the children about their new family, they were so excited to learn that it was someone they already knew. Tina and Ronald sold their townhome on a short sale, bought a foreclosed six-bedroom home, renovated the home for their needs, and completed their adoption classes and homestudy all within three months.

Wendy’s Wonderful Kids now has over 200 recruiters nationwide, and has helped to place over 3,000 children with permanent adoptive families. For Ronald and Tina, going from a family of two to a family of seven hasn’t been an easy transition, but the Wendy’s Wonderful Kids recruiter stayed in constant communication with them to offer support and ensure their success as a new family. And both parents and children know that they will be together “until they have gray hair.”

## Lifeline Children’s Services

### Foster Care Partnership

Lifeline’s foster care program began in the fall of 2009 as a handful of resource families. Over the past three years it has served 80 youth, and currently has 36 children in care and 42 licensed resource families. “Our staff has been amazed at how little recruitment we have had to do, because numerous area churches have called us to inquire how to start a foster care program in their church,” says Casey Voorhees, Lifeline’s foster care social worker. “We have been overwhelmed by the response of the local churches in bringing forth families that are committed to providing excellent care to children in need.”

Lifeline recognizes that partnership is key to the success of the program. The agency is currently partnered with several county-level Alabama Department of Human Resources offices, and has found a number of foster families that understand the importance of partnership and collaboration. Foster families care for the children that come into their homes on a temporary basis, and also partner with biological families to

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work towards reunification and reconciliation of the family unit whenever possible. These partnerships between birth families and foster families are at the heart of Lifeline's foster care program.

"Our foster families are motivated to approach birth families with love, grace, and humility, recognizing that reunification will be most successful if the family is truly changed," explains Casey Voorhees. She says that Lifeline recently had the privilege of walking alongside a foster family that truly "lived this out": The parents, M and J, came to Lifeline in January of this year to begin their foster care journey. They completed training and received their first placement in June, a sweet, wide-eyed, 16-month-old boy named C. He was quiet and reserved when he first came into their home – he rarely cried or expressed any emotion. There was also a language barrier between C and his new foster parents, so at first they communicated through facial expressions, signs, hugs, and gifts. During the months that C spent in M and J's home, however, he became a different child. He spoke his first words, began expressing himself more and more, and developed an infectious grin and laugh. He knew that he was loved, and that resulted in stunning progress in his development.

Over the course of those months, M and J also developed a relationship with C's birthfather, V. V had made some poor choices in the past that resulted in C's removal, but in everything he did it was clear that V loved C with all of his heart. M and J also loved C with all of their hearts, but recognized that loving him meant working with his father so that their family could be reunited. During his first visit with C, V came with a carload of diapers, wipes, toys, and groceries. M and J started sending pictures to V during visits, even taking him the Father's Day card and gift that C had made at school. Through these small actions, M and J tried to communicate that they were on V's team as well – and that they were rooting for him to have his son returned to him.

Five months passed, and the day came for the judge to rule on whether or not C would be returned for his father. Sitting in a little room at the Family Court, a social worker walked in and told V that he would be taking C home with him that day. Tears of thankfulness and joy flowed from his eyes. M and J were in tears that day, too – tears of joy mixed with some sadness.

V wanted M and J to stay involved in C's life. He said that he was thankful to them for caring for his son, and they were able to communicate that they were grateful and excited to remain involved in the lives of both C and V, and that they considered them both to be part of their family. Since then, they have indeed remained in close contact; M and J provide childcare for C on weekends when V has to work, have them both over

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to share meals, invite them to attend their church, and stay in touch with phone calls and text messages. Their relationship has grown from a foster parent/birthparent relationship to a true friendship.

## Gladney Center for Adoption

### China Heritage Tours

For over 125 years, the Gladney Center for Adoption has helped children find families through adoption. As a part of its wide array of comprehensive and lifelong post-adoption services, Gladney's China Heritage Tour program offers the unique and important opportunity for adoptees to return to their birth country with their adoptive families, visit their birth city, and experience other sites of interest in China.

Gongzhan Wu, Vice President and Managing Director of Gladney's Asia Programs, coordinates each tour and endeavors to address the personal and emotional aspects of the journey with participants. "I realized that parents were daunted by the logistics of the trip and actually making it happen," he says, explaining how he began working with adoptive families that wanted to return to China. "I had several families approach me – they all said similar things, such as: 'It is hard to find someone to trust who can help us plan this experience,' or 'We want to work with someone who understands just how personal this trip is for us.'"

In 2003, Gladney established its China Heritage Tours program, and Gongzhan organized the first trip for an adoptive family. Since then, the program has grown and thrived. Gladney's tours are customized, culturally based sightseeing experiences individually planned for any adoptive family or group of families interested in visiting their child's birth city and Social Welfare Institute. Whenever possible, a child's finding place or foster family may also be visited.

One of the staff members who assists Gongzhan in preparing families for the trip feels that the most important resources in Gladney's planning of the tours include the agency's dedication to adoptive families, Gongzhan Wu's knowledge of Chinese protocol and governmental regulations, and Gladney's personal contacts in China. "We are very fortunate to have guides throughout China who have years of experience working with Gladney Center and with adoptive families; they are familiar with the adoption process and the orphanages in their area," says the staff member.

Seventeen-year-old Victoria Alves and her family traveled this past summer on a China Heritage Tour. She found the visit to her birth

province and XinYu City to be both important and memorable. As she later explained, “The most meaningful part of the visit was finding out that the woman who was my caregiver while I was at the orphanage, Mrs. Li, was also the person who found me at the gate and brought me inside. It was clear to my mom that Mrs. Li had cared for me, and this made my mom happy to know that someone loved me for my first five months.” Victoria was able to show Mrs. Li a scrapbook her family had made over the years, and saw that Mrs. Li was genuinely happy to see her grown up.

The hardest part of the tour for Victoria was when they visited the children in the orphanage. They wondered if many of the children would be without permanent families for most of their lives. When visiting the crib room where the babies were being readied for naptime, both Victoria and her mother broke down crying. “I cried because I want these babies to have a home with loving parents, like I have, and my mom cried because she was remembering when I was a baby and first came home,” Victoria said later. At the same time, she and her mother took comfort in knowing that the children were well cared for.

Many families that have participated in a China Heritage Tour recalled similarly meaningful experiences, noting that the caregivers and staff at the orphanages were warm and caring – and very enthusiastic to meet the adopted children who had returned to visit. For orphanage staff, it was important as well as rewarding to see these children several years older, happy, healthy, and loved.

For Gongzhan Wu, the most rewarding part of any tour is hearing about the adoptee’s experience. Each child and each parent will take from the trip something unique and personally meaningful. Gongzhan says that it is important to be as flexible as possible and give every member of the family the space to process and share their experiences and emotions. For many adopted children and teenagers, the return trip to their place of birth and their orphanage helps them learn and understand more about their identities as Chinese adoptees. It offers them one more piece of their puzzle, and allows them to continue to grow and add other pieces in the future.

NCFA is partnering with Gladney Center’s China Heritage Tours program to lead a tour for adoptees and their families from December 23, 2012-January 2, 2013. To find out more about the program, visit [www.GladneyAsia.org](http://www.GladneyAsia.org).

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## Show Hope

### Adoption Aid Program

Show Hope believes that the millions of orphaned children around the world should not be left waiting, and works to address this urgent need and transform the lives of these children. By awarding financial grants that allow adoptive parents to meet the high cost of adoption, Show Hope helps to provide children with forever families. The organization also provides crucial medical treatment for at-risk orphaned and vulnerable children with special needs.

According to Show Hope co-founder Steven Curtis Chapman, who began the ministry with his wife Mary Beth, “We celebrate the thousands of children that Show Hope has helped experience the miracle of adoption, but the truth is, the need is great. Adoption Aid donations through Show Hope will help make adoption a reality, transforming the life of a child.”

Since Show Hope opened its doors less than ten years ago, monetary donations to its Adoption Aid Program have helped to provide more than 3,500 waiting orphans with forever families through Show Hope grants. “Children all around the world are separated from loving families due to this financial barrier,” explains Scott Hasenbalg, Show Hope’s Executive Director. “Show Hope’s Adoption Aid grants build a bridge of hope that allows families to welcome those children and provide them with loving homes.”

Additionally, hundreds of orphaned children with special needs have received much-needed medical care through Show Hope’s Special Care Centers in China. Isaac was two years old when he was brought to Maria’s Big House of Hope, one of many special care centers in China built by Show Hope to provide medical care to at-risk orphans. Isaac has spina bifida and was paralyzed from the waist down. When he arrived, he was extremely malnourished, but the care he received helped transform him into a happy and healthy child, known for his big smile and heartwarming laugh. His future adoptive parents, Rebekah and Nathaniel, saw videos of Isaac online that touched their hearts, but could not meet the high cost of adoption – they had just adopted their son Caleb through a grant provided by Show Hope. Rebekah and Nathaniel received another grant from Show Hope, allowing them to expand their family and adopt Isaac. Now part of a loving family, his smile continues to warm the hearts of those around him.

Chloe is another of the many children adopted thanks in part to Show Hope's Adoption Aid program. As she wrote in a note to Show Hope: "My mom and dad told me that you gave money to help them go to China to adopt me. I'm so glad you gave money to my parents because I love them so much! ... When I'm a mom I want to adopt from China!"

## America World Adoption

### Welcoming Angels

Marie Hutchins and her husband had always considered becoming foster or adoptive parents, but were never able to commit for various reasons. But when Marie received an email from her church's orphan and foster care support group about America World Adoption's Welcoming Angels program, she saw the international hosting ministry as a wonderful opportunity to temporarily foster a child – little did she know that the email from her church would change her life forever.

The Welcoming Angels program attempts to raise public awareness about the needs of older orphaned children, while advocating for them to find forever families. It is a Christian-based program that provides older orphaned children between the ages of eight and sixteen with the opportunity to live with families in the United States for a short-term stay of four to six weeks. During this hosting period, children participate in Christian family life, make new friends, and experience American culture. While host families are not required to adopt, they must make a commitment to advocate for the children they host and help them find forever families. Welcoming Angels partners with churches, orphan ministries, individuals, and families to build hosting communities.

An orphaned boy from Ethiopia came to live with Marie and her family for a month. As Marie later wrote, "I wish there were words to describe how it felt to see him walk off that plane and into our arms. He later told us that he recognized us from our family picture that America World had sent him. And all I can say is that when he saw my husband standing there, waiting for him, his smile shattered my previously organized and well-planned-out world. I discovered in that moment that there really is such a thing as 'love at first sight.'"

Marie and her family attended baseball and soccer games, and went bowling, skating, biking, and swimming with their host child. He taught them new games laughed with them as they tried to learn words in his language. Soon, all the kids were playfully teasing each other as if they were family. It was a wonderful month, filled with fun and loving

memories. When the moment came to say goodbye, the family cried more tears than they thought possible. It wasn't long after the little boy left that Marie and her family decided to adopt him.

In the summer of 2012, 27 children participated in the Welcoming Angels hosting program. Of those 27 children, 20 were adopted by their host families, one was adopted by a friend or neighbor of the host family, and six were placed on America World Adoption's waiting child website. At this time, two of the waiting children have been matched with adoptive families, and America World Adoption continues to advocate for the remaining children. Welcoming Angels is currently recruiting host families for its Winter 2012 and Summer 2013 programs; for more information, please visit [www.awaa.org](http://www.awaa.org).

## National Council For Adoption

### iChooseAdoption

NCFA launched the first iChooseAdoption public awareness campaign in 2008. At its peak, the iChooseAdoption public service announcement was ranked in the "top 10" of all PSAs according to the Nielson Company. The iChooseAdoption.org website also launched in 2008, and features adoption information, birthmother testimonials, sample adoptive family profiles, a media page with viewable PSAs, and a search function allowing visitors to locate the nearest NCFA Member Agency or affiliate, where an expectant parent can obtain more information about the option of adoption.

The all-new 2012 iChooseAdoption campaign includes a full redesign of iChooseAdoption.org, featuring live chat and an Instagram feed, new social media outreach – including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram integration – brand-new television and radio PSAs, and a print campaign that will include the distribution of posters to high schools across the United States.

Miranda was just fifteen when she found out she was pregnant. Feeling scared and alone, with little support from the father of the baby or her own parents, Miranda turned to a pregnancy counselor who shared the option of adoption with her. She hadn't heard much about adoption in her community, and none of her friends and peers from her high school had even mentioned adoption. But Miranda knew in her heart that choosing adoption was the best choice for her baby, and decided to make an adoption plan for him.

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Now, two years later, Miranda is in college pursuing a nursing degree, and has an open adoption with the couple that adopted her son. She sees him on a regular basis and often spends quality time with his entire adoptive family, which also includes two older twin sisters who were also adopted as infants. Today Miranda is confident in her decision and grateful that her son will grow up with plenty of opportunities that she felt she simply couldn't offer him as a teenage mother.

At the time, Miranda's peers couldn't understand why she would "give up" her baby. In her conversations with them, she tried to explain the beauty of adoption. She wanted them to see adoption the way she saw it: she was giving her son a wonderful life. Though Miranda didn't let her friends influence her decision, the reality is that many young women facing unintended pregnancy are unsure what to do and are surrounded by peers, teachers, family, and others who may simply not even realize that adoption is an option. NCFAs iChooseAdoption program is intended to help people just like Miranda – and her friends and family – begin to understand and explore adoption as a loving, positive option.

## Conclusion

The programs featured in this article represent only a small sample of those established to advocate for and meet the needs of youth in foster care, orphaned and vulnerable children, and all children in need of permanent families of their own. Throughout the month of November, NCFAs will continue to feature other programs at [www.adoptioncouncilblog.org](http://www.adoptioncouncilblog.org).

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Jaclyn Newton is serving as a Social Work intern at National Council For Adoption for the 2012-2013 academic year. She assists in NCFAs advocacy efforts and has a special interest in policy and government relations. Jaclyn received her B.A. in Social Work from the Catholic University of America, and is currently pursuing her MSW at Catholic University with a concentration in Social Change.



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