

**ADOPTION EXCELLENCE AWARDS
2014**

CATEGORY #1 FAMILY CONTRIBUTIONS

AWARDEE: **Karen & Adam Owens**
 (Category #1 Family Contributions)

ADDRESS: Boyertown, PA

Karen and Adam Owens have used their personal experiences to encourage and inspire other people to recognize that every child, no matter how challenged, has potential that can be nurtured and developed. In 2009, the Owens's biological son passed away from a rare chronic illness when he was three years old. Mr. and Mrs. Owens knew that their experience with their son had a purpose and that it prepared them to make a home for other children with special needs. They have since dedicated their lives to giving other kids dealing with illness and disability the same loving family and life their son had. With their birth daughter's full support and enthusiasm, the Owens adopted three medically fragile children over time. All of their adopted children struggled with myriad issues including cerebral palsy; seizures; developmental delays; limited vision; inability to eat, talk or walk; and brain injury. Despite these challenges, Mr. and Mrs. Owens were determined to maximize their children's potential and give unconditional love, safety, and encouragement. Mr. and Mrs. Owens are very active and exposure to new experiences is always encouraged. With the help of nurses, therapy, and school classroom adjustments, the Owens have helped their children overcome many obstacles, such as improving motor, cognitive, and social skills; and learning to walk and communicate. The Owens seek additional support from foundations to help with physical limitations so their children remain active. Accompanying the family is often a caravan of wheelchairs, feeding pumps, oxygen tanks, and a variety of other medical supplies. This does not impede the Owens determination to expose their children to everyday and unique opportunities; this past year, the children were able to go skiing with the use of special adaptive equipment. To support other families raising children with special needs, the Owens and their social worker founded Chronically Cool Families (CCF). Families participate in support groups and attend outings together, forging a bond among parents, siblings, and children affected by chronic disease. Mrs. Owens also runs a popular blog, which tells the story of her family's experience with their biological and adopted children. At its height, the blog had 60,000 readers. More than 3,000 people follow Mrs. Owens's Instagram where she answers questions about adoption and about the care of medically fragile children.

AWARDEE: **John & Karen Scheele**
 (Category #1 Family Contributions)

ADDRESS: Springwater, NY

When John and Karen Scheele became certified foster parents in 2008, they never realized that a few years later they would have adopted six children and that the course of their lives would change forever. The Scheeles had three biological children when they became foster parents to a female sibling group of two. The girls were extremely traumatized and came from a family in a high profile case. This did not deter the Scheeles, as they were able to work well with the sisters and never allowed their own feelings to get in the way of working with the birth parents, agency, doctors, court system, or caseworkers. Mr. and Mrs. Scheele were able to adopt the girls when they were unable to return to their birth parents. In 2011, the Scheeles became foster parents to a sibling group of 3, also involved in a high profile case. When the birth mother of this sibling group gave birth to another child, he was also placed with the Scheeles. The Scheeles family was able to guide the sibling group, severely abused and malnourished, to a place where they fully trusted them and provided them what was needed to meet all of their needs. As a result, the sibling group thrived physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and academically. When they were free for adoption, the Scheeles could not imagine their lives without them and permanently increased their family to eleven. Mr. and Mrs. Scheele quickly developed a reputation of excellence in their community with schools, the Department of Social Services, and family court. They have proven themselves as a united front with the parenting skills to work with traumatized children. Adopted herself, Mrs. Scheele knows the value of a child's life story which gave her the foresight to save pictures, articles, and other items to help her children make sense of their past when they are old enough to understand. The Scheeles are also patient and caring toward birth parents, sending them pictures and updates every year. Mrs. Scheele is a certified foster parent trainer and she and her husband also assist the agency in foster adoptive recruitment activities. The love and structure provided by the entire Scheele family to abused children has contributed to a safe environment where learning and growth are embraced.

CATEGORY #2 INDIVIDUALS/PROFESSIONALS

AWARDEE: **Judge Anne Simon**
(Category #2 Individuals/Professionals)

ADDRESS: New Orleans, LA

For more than 30 years, Judge Anne Simon has served children in the child welfare system as a juvenile judge and advocate. After serving as a district judge in the 16th Judicial District Court for nearly 20 years, Judge Simon became the first Court Improvement Program (CIP) Judicial Fellow in Louisiana following its creation in 2009. As the CIP Judicial Fellow, Judge Simon serves as the direct link to local judges and courts to ensure that efforts to make decisions at permanency hearings are timely, thorough and complete. Her primary role is to serve as a link between the Louisiana Supreme Court, local judges and lower courts, child welfare agencies and other stakeholders. She was also the first mentor for new judges assuming Child In Need of Care cases. In this role, Judge Simon teaches and guides new judges, attorneys, and stakeholders through the complexities of child welfare law, how to remove barriers, and adhere to federal and state timelines. To correct misperceptions and confusion among child welfare stakeholders

finalized fourteen of these adoptions.

AWARDEE: **Yolanda Demont**
(Category #2 Individuals/Professionals)

ADDRESS: Orlando, FL

Ms. Demont is a well-respected Adoptions Supervisor with Children’s Home Society of Florida – Central Florida Division. Over the course of her career, she has learned and practiced new ways of achieving permanency for youth in foster care through strong connections across agency and community collaborations. Ms. Demont works diligently to explore all options for raising awareness and recruiting family resources, including partnering with private contractors to complete unmatched home studies; training community partners in the adoption competency model; providing monthly support groups; and hosting monthly parents night out for adoptive parents. Her commitment to finding forever families led to additional funding for Children’s Home Society to hire another county Adoption Specialist. Ms. Demont uses all means available to do outreach for children and families, including print media, radio, church recruitment, and using community volunteers and mentors. She works closely with the Wendy’s Wonderful Kids recruiters to assist families with the matching process and has worked with local medical agencies to help educate families regarding children with medical needs. Ms. Demont and her staff attend regular recruitment events in the community and have several collaborative partners to assist in finding homes and completing child specific recruitment efforts, including Back to School and Holiday Drives. Most notably, Ms. Demont is known locally as an expert and leader in the child welfare community. This recognition has helped Ms. Demont create and maintain multiple, quality partnerships including the Sheriff’s Office, public schools and universities, other child placing agencies, foster parents, community camps, legal services, the local entertainment and hospitality community, and local hotel and restaurant chains. Partnerships have been established to provide for such services as reducing barriers to educational attainment and offering free or reduced activities during seasonal breaks. Ms. Demont is always seeking new opportunities to partner with emerging and long-established organizations in an attempt to provide more resources for children and families. Since assuming her role as Adoptions Supervisor in 2007, Ms. Demont has been responsible for finalizing over 650 adoptions.

AWARDEE: **Dawn Scott**
(Category #2 Individuals/Professionals)

ADDRESS: Little Rock, AR

Dawn Scott produces and anchors KTHV-TV Channel 11’s award winning program “A Place to Call Home.” In partnership with the Arkansas Division of Children and Family Services, “A Place to Call Home” features Arkansas children who are available for adoption. On the television segments, Ms. Scott conducts interviews with waiting children in venues where their stories about the importance of permanency can be heard and seen. With Ms. Scott’s connections and relationships with local businesses, civic groups, and other organizations, she films interviews in unique places such as a children’s library, nail salon, dance studio, animal

shelter, ice cream shop, the zoo, and other interesting places. The children love visiting with Ms. Scott because she takes time to listen and makes sure the children are treated in the most special way for their special day. As a result of her poignant “A Place to Call Home” segments, the community is more aware of the state’s children in foster care and has expressed a unique interest in adoption. More specifically, the program has made the public aware of the older children, sibling groups, and children of color that are waiting for a family. Over 55% of the children featured on the program have found forever families. In December of 2012, Ms. Scott put together a Christmas Special and invited children who had been featured on “A Place to Call Home” and Adoption Specialists from the Division of Children and Family Services to a celebration, the Place to Call Home Christmas Party. A local museum donated space for the event and Ms. Scott found a church to donate gifts for the children. Arkansas’ First Lady was in attendance and spoke and a portion of the event was broadcast live on television. There was an overwhelming response from the public and the Division of Children and Family Services received many inquiries about adoption. Ms. Scott’s efforts generated enough support and success that a second Christmas Special was held in 2013. Ms. Scott’s passion has made the partnership between KTHV and the Division of children and Family Services one of their most successful recruitment tools. With her leadership, Ms. Scott constantly generates new ideas and opportunities for featuring waiting children and highlighting adoption from foster care in Arkansas.

CATEGORY #3 BUSINESS CONTRIBUTIONS/INITIATIVES

AWARDEE: **Wilkes-Barre Racing, Richard Pais**
(Category #3 Business Contributions/Initiatives)

ADDRESS: Wilkes-Barre, PA

Wilkes-Barre Racing is a nonprofit organization that organizes, promotes and conducts athletic activities for the purpose of raising money and awareness for foster care and adoption. After completing his first Ironman triathlon, Wilkes-Barre Racing founder and Executive Director Rich Pais, promised himself that his participation in future athletic events would have to be less about himself and more about a greater cause. Mr. Pais worked with the local Wendy’s franchise to raise over \$40,000 for the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption during their first “Ironman for Adoption” campaign. The reason Mr. Pais connects athletes and athletic events with adoption and foster care awareness is to help people understand that there is a larger community issue that needs ongoing attention and involves children who need loving families. Since 2010, Wilkes-Barre Racing has contributed funds to media advertising and awareness event planning, which has proven instrumental in raising awareness of children available for adoption in the foster care system. It has also supported the recruitment of families to serve as resources to children in foster care and sponsored community events where adoption and foster care agencies have provided information to the public. Every year, Wilkes-Barre Racing conducts numerous activities outside the athletic events that also support and encourage foster care and adoption, including sponsorship of matching events, a “Voices of Adoption” radio campaign, and a “Child of the Week” newspaper feature. Mr. Pais’s organization also distributes circus and sports tickets to foster children and sponsors a Family of the Year award to the best foster adoptive

families in the local area. His passion for creating fundraising events on behalf of children's programs has progressed to advocacy. Mr. Pais, an adoptive parent, was recently appointed executive director of the Luzerne County Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program.

AWARDEE: **The Washington DC and Federal City Alumnae Chapters (WDCAC & FCAC) of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.**
(Category #3 Business Contributions/Initiatives)

ADDRESS: Washington, DC

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. is a private, non-profit organization focused on providing assistance and support through established programs in local communities throughout the world. The sorority is comprised of a sisterhood of more than 200,000 predominately Black college educated women and has over 900 chapters worldwide. The Eastern Regional chapters of the sorority have dedicated its "Regional Day of Service" to raising awareness about foster care and adoption. In 2010, as part of the global day of service, the Washington DC and Federal City Alumnae Chapters of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. partnered with Washington, DC community organizations to host the first annual Foster Care and Adoption Expo. The goal of the Expo is to raise awareness about local children in foster care and collaborate with community partners to recruit prospective foster and adoptive families. This one day initiative has since grown into a yearlong series of community service events, commonly referred to as the Regional Foster Care and Adoption Initiative. The District of Columbia chapters have collaborated with partners such as Wednesday's Child/Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and Safe Shores – the DC Children's Advocacy Center to host programs, events, and activities that focus on raising awareness of the needs for children who are currently living in foster care. Over the past year, the Chapters have partnered with 19 local community organizations and agencies, including the Washington Metropolitan Council of Governments and DC Child & Family Services, to host several high impact programs designed to help inspire and prepare the community. Some of the partnerships have led to the following activities:

- The Angel Tree Project. Sorority members donated 175 gifts to children and youth in foster care.
- Black History Month Program. A special program during the month of February for children in foster care in need of a permanent family, including a program for disabled teens with special needs who are awaiting adoption.
- Life Skills Classes. Sorority members presented monthly life skills workshops at a program designed for young teen mothers in foster care.
- "Freeze Mob" Demonstration. Nearly 80 Sorority members, friends, family, and community partners created a Freeze Mob by gathering on the National Mall in Washington, DC for the planned purpose of raising awareness.

CATEGORY #4 MEDIA/SOCIAL MEDIA/PUBLIC AWARENESS

AWARDEE: **Children’s Action Network, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption and Triage Entertainment for *A Home for the Holidays***
(Category #4 Media/Social Media/Public Awareness)

ADDRESS: Los Angeles, CA & Columbus, OH

A Home for the Holidays is a nationally televised primetime program that raises awareness about adoption from foster care and encourages potential adoptive parents to get more information about youth in foster care who are waiting for a family of their own. Since the partnership started 15 years ago between CBS, Children’s Action Network, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Triage Entertainment and The Wendy’s Company (until 2013), *A Home for the Holidays* has highlighted more than 60 foster care adoption families, focusing on sibling groups, single parents, and families of diversity. It has also proven unique in a line of network television programs because it has an exclusive focus on domestic foster care adoption and has featured top of the charts celebrities, performers, and presenters to drive the message that foster care adoption is a priority that can be addressed by all Americans. *A Home for the Holidays* has had a tremendous impact, reaching the hearts of over 50 million viewers since the show began airing. Through the partnership with Wendy’s, the program has been featured on nearly two million trayliners at Wendy’s restaurants and in more than 100,000 posters promoting the event; the Company also committed more than \$15 million of ad time for Public Service Announcements with a call to action about foster care adoption. Every year after *A Home for the Holidays* airs, the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption has received approximately 1,500 general information inquiries and receives up to 500 child specific inquiries. Over the past 15 years, ninety percent of the children who have been featured in the program have been placed in permanent homes. The *A Home for the Holidays* partnership also created the Fostering a Future Scholarship Fund designed to provide youth who were adopted from foster care at or after the age of 13 with financial assistance in pursuing a college, vocational, or technical education. Most notably, the efforts of the partnership and *A Home for the Holidays* have helped thousands of prospective adoptive families to see the children featured on the program as a representation of all the children who are waiting in foster care in their own community and across the country.

AWARDEE: **Pennsylvania Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN)**
(Category #4 Media/Social Media/Public Awareness)

ADDRESS: Harrisburg, PA

The Statewide Adoption and Permanency Network (SWAN) was developed by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare in 1992. The Network is a public/private partnership that subcontracts with more than eighty private, non-profit agencies to provide a variety of services leading to the development of permanent homes for children in foster care in Pennsylvania. While the overall number of children in Pennsylvania’s foster care system has declined, the number of children adopted has remained steady or increased, especially for older youth who remain in care without an identified permanent resource. Over the years, SWAN has tried

numerous recruitment initiatives to find families for older youth in care. In 2013, SWAN launched a new type of media campaign to recruit foster and adoptive families called #MeetTheKids. This effort features 12 Pennsylvania youth in foster care who used iPods to film each other while discussing foster care and their wishes for a permanent family. A production crew filmed the youth at the same time and both sources of video footage were used to create three 30-second television commercials, one radio advertisement, and print advertisements. A 13-minute documentary was also created that featured and provided more information on all twelve youth and their need for permanency. This was SWAN's first campaign to feature actual waiting youth, ages 13-20, speaking for themselves. The videos were not scripted and therefore provided the public a better understanding about youth in care while highlighting them as kids who want a family that will love and support them. While the youth were central to the campaign, Suzanne Cawley, the Lieutenant Governor's wife, served as the spokesperson, which helped gain additional media attention. As a result of SWAN's unique campaign, SWAN's Facebook page has had a 68% increase in likes from July 2013 to July 2014. Pennsylvania has also seen an increase in inquiries about adoption and visits to the website and helpline. Most notably, six of the twelve featured youth have been matched with potential families since the campaign began. Given the success of the first campaign, SWAN created a second one in 2014. The new group will include 12 youth who need families, along with a family with five adopted children. The campaign was scheduled to launch in August 2014 with a clear and direct message: Watch the film. #MeetTheKids. Change a life.

AWARDEE: **Fostering Families Today**
(Category #4 Media/Social Media/Public Awareness)

ADDRESS: Windsor, CO

Fostering Families Today is a bi-monthly magazine dedicated to providing education and resources to foster and adoptive families. Published since 2001, this subscription based publication is distributed nationally to foster and adoptive parents and child welfare workers throughout the United States. The magazine's editorial content and foundation provide ongoing continuing, child-centered educational resources in a convenient, reader friendly format. Articles are for and about the foster care community and written by professionals in social work, medicine, law and education, and experienced foster and adoptive parents. Fostering Families Today is used in agency classroom trainings and individual continuing education locations and serves as a model for low-cost, efficient delivery of continuing education for foster and adoptive parents and agency caseworkers. The publication also partners with and distributes information by other nationally recognized members of the foster and adoption community, such as Donaldson Adoption Institute, Child Welfare Information Gateway, Voice for Adoption, Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, and Foster Care Alumni of America. Fostering Families Today participates in and supports various national and regional conferences and workshops related to the child welfare community and has an active presence in various social media outlets. One of the publication's newest features is an expansion of its long-standing practice of publishing child specific recruitment photos with biographies to include a removable full color Waiting Child insert in every edition. This insert can be removed from the publication and shared with family and friends who may also be interested in foster care and adoption. Fostering Families Today also included the Waiting Child insert in its Digital Edition and when

available, video interviews of the waiting children have been imbedded with the photographs. This unique child specific recruitment strategy allows the publication's viewers to see and hear from featured children directly,

CATEGORY #5 CHILD WELFARE/JUDICIAL SYSTEMIC CHANGE

AWARDEE: **Mission West Virginia, FrameWorks**
(Category #5 Child Welfare/Judicial Systemic Change)

ADDRESS: Hurricane, WV

Mission West Virginia is a nonprofit organization that collaborates with public, private, and faith groups to improve the lives and communities of West Virginia. The agency is comprised of a variety of programs and services that promote foster care and adoption information and referral services, education programs, and awareness activities. Created 13 years ago, Mission West Virginia has responded to over 3,000 individuals interested in adoption and foster care, hosted many community events, and has been responsible for nearly 80 adoptive or foster care placements. The agency operates three major programs, including FrameWorks, which is designed specifically to find families for children waiting in foster care. It serves as West Virginia's response team for AdoptUSKids and has the unique ability to track prospective foster/adoptive families' status through the certification process from initial inquiry to placement. In addition to more timely certifications, the customer service and support offered by FrameWorks has resulted in more families completing the process. Another of Mission West Virginia's successful initiatives is its statewide Carry-On Campaign which brings awareness to the general public and engages the community in volunteer efforts. Members of the community donate luggage in an attempt to eliminate garbage bags as luggage for kids in foster care. Through the program, youth in care have received over 2,500 pieces of luggage and countless personal hygiene items since its initiation in 2010. Mission West Virginia also facilitates the Recruitment and Retention Collaborative, a group made up of state and private agency providers, nonprofit child welfare agencies, and foster/adoptive parents. The Collaborative works on common goals aimed at recruiting and retaining foster/adoptive parents in West Virginia and holds yearly National Adoption and National Foster Care Month events. Mission West Virginia also established a unique partnership with the West Virginia Division of Corrections, which donates 1,000 handmade duffle bags sewn by prisoners. It will hold an auction that will feature art made by prisoners, the funds from which will be used to start a scholarship fund for youth in foster care. Frameworks has played an active role in the community and through social media, which has led to more awareness about foster care in West Virginia.

AWARDEE: **Merced County Human Services Agency Social Services Branch**
(Category #5 Child Welfare/Judicial Systemic Change)

ADDRESS: Merced, CA

Merced County is one of the poorest counties in California with nearly 30% of families with children under 18 living below the federal poverty level. The percentage of children in foster

care is higher than the California average. In an attempt to target specific areas of child welfare services that were not meeting state or federal standards in the county's operations, the Merced County Social Services Branch coordinated with the California Department of Social Services Outcomes and Accountability office to develop a three year System Improvement Plan (SIP). Over 15 local agencies participated in the development of the SIP, including other county offices, youth, universities, and parents. The first step in the SIP was to conduct a County Self-Assessment, which included an extensive self-examination; peer case review; data analysis; and input from community partners, consumers, staff, and management. Results of the SIP and Merced County's acknowledgement that it was not meeting the national goals for timeliness to adoption or number of adoptions within 24 months made its choice to focus on adoption an easy one. Without additional funds, Merced County's Social Services Branch identified strategies to reinvent adoptions based on good case work, best practices, and a focus on outcomes, including:

- Physically relocated the Adoptions Unit with the rest of the child welfare staff.
- Increased the number of social workers in the Adoption Unit to reduce caseload size.
- Assigned an adoptions worker to cases immediately when family reunification services were terminated.
- Addressed permanency and concurrent planning in every case review and every court report beginning with the initial contact with the child.
- Communicated to community partners about the agency's vision.
- Foster Family Agencies referred county foster homes for adoption study as soon as they were licensed.
- Ensured that every child under 5 was in a concurrent home by the disposition hearing.

Merced County was underperforming in several adoption outcome measures in 2010 but by the spring of 2012, it drastically turned things around, meeting and surpassing national averages. In 2010, the county's median time to adoption was 31 months; in 2013, the median dropped to 18.8 months. The 2010 percentage of adoptions within 24 months was 26.5%; in 2013, the percentage was 63.8%. The improvements in Merced County's adoption measures were a direct result of the efforts of the adoptions team to streamline the process, focus on permanency, and remove artificial barriers.