

**ADOPTION EXCELLENCE AWARDS  
2015**

**CATEGORY #1 FAMILY CONTRIBUTIONS**

**AWARDEE:           Steven Effinger  
                          (Virginia)**

Steven Effinger is a mentor for the Boys to Men Mentoring Network of Virginia. While serving as a mentor, Mr. Effinger met two young brothers who were in need of a stable and nurturing environment. The young men, 15 and 17 years old, were living in a residential facility when they met Mr. Effinger and learned that he wanted to adopt them together. Despite learning that the adoption would likely not be finalized until after the oldest child's 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, Mr. Effinger was committed to his newly expanded family and chose to continue with the adoption. Before coming to live with him, the young men had some difficult issues but that did not deter Mr. Effinger from providing them with unconditional love and support. The boys excelled under Mr. Effinger's care and benefited from the value he placed on allowing them to stay connected with their biological family. Under his care, the boys went from attending a special day school to a mainstream school, where at least one of them graduated and plans to attend college in a few months. In addition to his involvement with their education, Mr. Effinger spends quality time with the young men, exposes them to the arts, and has supported both in obtaining their driver's license. As a single man who has served as a dedicated mentor, foster and adoptive parent raising two young men, Mr. Effinger has effectively guided his boys toward a brighter and more positive future. His support and continued effort to provide them with the most kind and loving home has allowed these young men to see their own potential and given them the drive to achieve what they want in their lives.

**AWARDEE:           Gene & Betsy Dukatz  
                          (Wisconsin)**

Gene and Betsy Dukatz have been described by many as miracle caretakers. The type of care they have provided to a number of children was demonstrated while caring for a medically fragile boy who was in foster care and hospitalized. Before even making the decision to foster this child, the Dukatz's visited the little boy in the hospital daily. They advocated on his behalf to be sure he received the best care. When the child left the hospital with the Dukatz family on his third birthday, his developmental functioning was at that of a six month old baby. The child made several positive advancements after being under the Dukatz's care for only a few short months. Shocking medical professionals, they helped the small boy close the developmental gap by two years in four months. Mr. and Mrs. Dukatz made this child a permanent member of their family. In addition to parenting, the Dukatz's serve as ambassadors to the recruitment team at Children's Hospital Community Services where they help potential foster and adoptive parents understand the important role they play after licensure. Mrs. Dukatz is also a Parenting



## **CATEGORY #2 INDIVIDUALS/PROFESSIONALS**

**AWARDEE: Kathleen Ledesma**  
**(Maryland)**

For more than 40 years, Kathleen Ledesma’s sustained focus and commitment have contributed to an extraordinary career resulting in positive permanency outcomes for children, youth, and families. Ms. Ledesma developed an interest and passion for adoption in 1973 when she was a social worker with the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. From 1997-2005, she worked for the public child welfare system in Oregon, where she served as the statewide adoption program manager. Throughout her career, she has provided direct adoption-related services including training, home studies, post-adoption services, and casework supervision. Ms. Ledesma has always been a champion for the use of data-driven practices and evidence-driven work to achieve improved results for children and families. Her career also included leadership roles as president of the National Association of State Adoption Programs (NASAP) and service as a member on the board of directors of both NASAP and the Association of Administrators of the Interstate Compact on Adoption and Medical Assistance (AAICAMA). She also provided expertise and leadership as the National Adoption Specialist for two years at the Children’s Bureau. Since 2008, Ms. Ledesma has been the national project director for AdoptUSKids, a national photo listing service for children awaiting adoption across the United States. Under her leadership, more than 25,000 children who were photolisted on adoptuskids.org were placed in safe, permanent homes. She has also played an instrumental role in the development of the Children’s Bureau’s national adoption recruitment campaign, with the consistent messaging strategy, “You don’t have to be perfect to be a perfect parent.” The campaign has received more than \$330 million in donated and earned media support and has won multiple prestigious advertising industry awards. Ms. Ledesma is also recognized for her focus and ability to leverage social media to reach families. More than 170,000 people follow and engage with AdoptUSKids on Facebook and Twitter. She is a champion of raising public awareness and reaching out to multiple communities and populations, including LGBT prospective foster and adoptive parents, Spanish-speaking families, military communities, and prospective parents with disabilities. In her role as the national project director, she has successfully led and facilitated complex collaboration across multiple organizations in a way that has motivated others to work together in the spirit of helping children and youth. Ms. Ledesma has demonstrated relentless energy, motivation, commitment, and enthusiasm for the adoption of children and youth from foster care and support of the families who adopt them.

**AWARDEE: Debbie Riley**  
**(Maryland)**

Years of personal commitment have motivated professionals, researchers, students, and policymakers to join Debbie Riley’s movement of assuring adoption-competent support for children, youth, and families. As co-founder and CEO of the Center for Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.), Ms. Riley has been a leader in providing pre and post-adoption counseling and educational services to families, educators, child welfare staff, and mental health providers in Maryland, Northern Virginia, and Washington, D.C. Under her leadership, C.A.S.E. has

become a nationally recognized resource for families and professionals in developing a unique perspective on how the mental health care system can better address the needs of adoptive children and families. Ms. Riley designed the Training for Adoption Competency (TAC) training program after realizing the gap in trained adoption competent mental health services workers across the country. The TAC training was created to provide licensed mental health professionals with the clinical skills needed to provide quality services to adopted persons, birth families, prospective adoptive parents, and adoptive and kinship families. With this training, Ms. Riley added critically important strategies to the field that have resulted in measurable enhancements to permanency for the most vulnerable families and youth. The TAC curriculum was developed and pilot-tested in 2009 and has been replicated 34 times in twelve states. Over 500 participants have been trained and the curriculum has been integrated into five of the national Wendy's Wonderful Kids sites. A rigorous evaluation was conducted throughout implementation of the TAC, resulting in sound evidence that it is a high quality, effective training that increases knowledge and changes clinical practices in ways associated with the ultimate goal of adoption competency. Known as a national and internationally recognized adoption expert, speaker, trainer, and child advocate, Ms. Riley is also committed to raising national awareness about the need for competent post-adoption resources. She is co-author of "Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens" and is leading the national initiative to create training standards for an adoption-competent certification for mental health providers. Ms. Riley lectures at universities, writes for national magazines, and serves on various local and international boards and committees. With the goal of reaching a broad audience, Ms. Riley has always been committed to teamwork and collaboration. Her efforts have resulted in significant partnerships with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, the Freddie Mac Foundation, Jockey International/Jockey Being Family, the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute, and several other organizations and individuals.

**AWARDEE:                    Stephanie Thompson**  
**(Ohio)**

In 2010, Stephanie Thompson created the National Down Syndrome Adoption Network website ([www.ndsan.org](http://www.ndsan.org)), which features children with Down syndrome in foster care who need a loving family to call their own. Ms. Thompson has been dedicated to connecting children with Down syndrome to families who are willing to care for them and she has great knowledge of the kinds of families needed. In addition to the photo listing website, Ms. Thompson also created a database of families who have completed a home study and are interested in adopting a child with Down syndrome. From the descriptions of the children and prospective adoptive parents, she takes the time to go through them all to create matches based on potential fit and compatibility. After doing targeted searches for children with Down syndrome who are in foster care, Ms. Thompson contacts the social worker to ask permission to advocate for the child in finding them a family. When potential matches are found, Ms. Thompson contacts the prospective parents and asks if they will consider adopting the child featured. Workers have described her as inspiring, compassionate, well-respected, and always willing to go the "extra mile." Since Ms. Thompson created the website and initiative five years ago, she has advocated for over 70 children with Down syndrome in foster care; eighteen of those children, several who were older youth, were adopted by families who were on the NDSAN registry. The remainder of the children may have been adopted by a family who had seen Ms. Thompson's social media

posts. Significant efforts have been made to reach the community and families who are interested in adopting a child with Down syndrome, including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. Her dedication and advocacy have helped many children, families, and workers who have benefited from her tireless efforts in providing a voice and finding loving homes for children with Down syndrome.

**AWARDEE: David Brodzinsky, PhD  
(California)**

For over thirty years, Dr. David Brodzinsky has been recognized as an accomplished and respected leader in the adoption field. He has made significant contributions as a researcher, scholar, clinician, consultant, policy analyst, advocate, educator, and trainer. As a professor of psychology at Rutgers University from 1974-2006, Dr. Brodzinsky was a leader in the programmatic study of the emotional, social, and psychological adjustment of adopted individuals. Prior to his groundbreaking work in the early to mid-1980s on children's understanding of and reactions to adoption, most professionals emphasized the importance of parents sharing adoption information with their children without providing guidance on how to handle the way they would understand and cope with the information. It was Dr. Brodzinsky's research that provided parents and professionals with a basis for understanding these attitudinal and emotional reactions, which suggested that as children mature, they gradually begin to understand adoption at a deeper intellectual and emotional level. While at Rutgers, Dr. Brodzinsky also developed the Adoption Competency Training program, the first of its kind. He also created the Rutgers Foster Care Counseling Project, which provided mental health services to foster children and student training in working with traumatized and special needs foster/adoptive children and their families. He and his wife, Dr. Anne Brodzinsky, contracted with the New Jersey Division of Youth and Family Services in 1986 to develop and run one of six post-adoption service programs funded by the state. From 2006-2014, Dr. Brodzinsky was a founding director and Research Director at the Donaldson Adoption Institute, a pre-eminent research, education, and advocacy organization. He has continued his work to date as Research Director at the National Center on Adoption and Permanency. His work covers an array of topics, including adoptive parent-child attachment; family lifecycle issues in parenting adopted children; transracial and transcultural issues in adoption; and adoption by LGBT individuals and couples. Dr. Brodzinsky's research and expert testimony have been influential in expanding parenting resources for foster children waiting to be adopted through his work in supporting adoption by same-sex couples. Dr. Brodzinsky has authored and edited several books, some of which are considered the best resources in the field on mental health and parenting issues associated with adoption. Since 1984, Dr. Brodzinsky has also worked as a clinical psychologist and has helped over 2,000 adoptive kinship members, adopted children, adoptive families, and adoptive and birth parents. Through his cutting-edge research, clinical work, training, consultation, and advocacy, Dr. Brodzinsky has broadened the field's knowledge, promoted more sensitive and competent child welfare and mental health practices, supported legislative and policy change, and ensured that adoptive families and their children are better understood and supported.

**AWARDEE:**           **Kathie Malzahn-Bass**  
(Nevada)

As a Court Improvement Program (CIP) Coordinator in Nevada, Kathie Malzahn-Bass had a vision of improving dependency proceedings to reduce the time to permanency for children and families involved with the courts. When she first started as the CIP Coordinator in 2010, she met and began collaborating with stakeholders to develop some of her ideas. This work led to her creation of Community Improvement Councils (CIC), which would bring judges, child welfare case workers, and other stakeholders together. Her goal was for the Council to identify issues in communities that presented barriers to permanency and work toward community-based ways to overcome them. Before long, Ms. Malzahn-Bass introduced the CIC concept to every judicial district across the state. Despite skepticism, her passionate efforts and skillful leadership convinced many stakeholders to accept the idea. For the CICs, Ms. Malzahn-Bass developed detailed information sheets that contained data elements for each judicial district which compiled both court and child welfare data. She also identified the need for mediation as a process that could enhance and expedite permanency. Ms. Malzahn-Bass made it possible to contract with mediators to assist as regular partners in the dependency process and also brought innovations to courtroom and computer tools for judges who hear dependency cases. For example, Ms. Malzahn-Bass developed and facilitated the implementation of software applications to create a ‘dashboard’ interface that permits judges to make entries directly from the bench during proceedings. This added feature allows more specific and uniform orders that can be disseminated more quickly, which makes it easier and quicker to apply a court’s decisions. Ms. Malzahn-Bass has established collaborative partnerships with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, which have convened annual dependency-focused training summits. She formed partnerships with the three child welfare agencies in Nevada and has been asked by them to participate in federal case reviews and data collection. She also works closely with the educational community to increase the educational stability and achievement of adopted children who are involved with the Courts. Ms. Malzahn-Bass has also focused on using Court Improvement Program resources to develop online attorney training that can be easily accessed and archived. All of her efforts have helped to connect members of the child welfare community with other key stakeholders to improve collaboration, which has contributed to recent statewide adoption data that show significant decreases in time to permanency.

#### **CATEGORY #5 CHILD WELFARE/JUDICIAL SYSTEMIC CHANGE**

**AWARDEE:**           **The Treehouse Foundation**  
(Massachusetts)

Established in 2002 by Judy Cockerton, the Treehouse Foundation is a nonprofit organization with a community model aimed at moving children out of public foster care and into adoptive families. Ms. Cockerton, a foster and adoptive parent, saw the need and opportunity for a model that transformed foster care in America and improved permanency outcomes for children. The Treehouse Foundation was created to prevent young people from aging out of foster care alone. One of its primary initiatives is the Treehouse Intergenerational Community, which launched in 2006. The Community is a place where fixed income elders and families adopting children from

foster care live in a close-knit neighborhood consisting of elder cottages and townhouses for larger families. It is home to over 100 people, ages 2-96, with elders serving as honorary grandparents. Over half the parents are low-income single mothers and families are diverse, representing a wide range of racial and cultural heritage, economic status and sexual orientation. Treehouse Intergenerational Community neighbors support each other in many ways, including giving rides to school and medical appointments, babysitting, and exercising together. The Community programs include social/emotional support, educational advocacy, life skills, and arts integration. This innovative community and its associated activities have helped cultivate lifelong family relationships and strong community connections. In addition to the Treehouse Foundation, two other well-respected organizations partner to make the Community successful, each with their own revenue streams to cover costs, including Berkshire Children & Families and Beacon Communities. Berkshire is a child welfare organization that employs two full-time, onsite social workers to provide family support and pre and post-adoption services. Beacon Communities is an affordable housing developer that provides two full-time staff onsite to handle property management and maintenance. Of the 90 children who have lived at Treehouse over the past ten years, 60 of them have been adopted and 25 families have received pre and post-adoption support services. The model is so successful that other housing and child welfare organizations across the country are working closely with the Treehouse Foundation to develop new sites. Another significant Treehouse initiative is the Re-Envisioning Foster Care in America Movement (REFCA), which launched in 2010. REFCA is a multi-sector collaboration that engages diverse stakeholders to work together in creating better outcomes for children in care. Annual conferences aimed at sharing innovative and emerging best practices bring together groups including educators, foster and adoptive parents, foster care alumni, faith communities, legal professionals, child welfare agencies, and business leaders. The Treehouse Foundation is feverishly working toward a nation in which individuals, businesses, organizations, and communities collaborate with child welfare agencies to create new and effective solutions toward permanency for children and youth.

**AWARDEE: Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services**

In April 2013, the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) launched its Faith in Families Initiative to move children to permanency more timely and increase the opportunities for children in foster care to maintain connections and be placed with their relatives. Recognizing the need to improve on its ability to maintain familial connections, focus on older youth, and increase foster and adoptive resources, DCFS focused its Faith in Families Initiative around the following three goals:

1. Safely reduce the number of children in foster care by 25% while ensuring that 95% of those achieving permanency do not return to foster care.
2. Timely achievement of permanency with goals including 50% of adoptions achieved within 24 months and 75.2% of reunifications achieved within 12 months.
3. Addressing overall permanency needs of all children in care, especially older youth as staff work to achieve 95% of children exiting will do so to a permanent placement and 100% of children will exit with at least a permanent connection in place.

The Initiative was based on key principles that laid the groundwork for strong and consistent child welfare practice, including concurrent planning, communication, continuous quality improvement, and sharing best practices. Each region in the state used data to develop strategies based on areas identified as needing improvement, such as focus on permanent connections, recruitment strategies, and service delivery enhancements. As the Department enters the third year of the Faith in Families Initiative, it is seeing significant results in the areas of permanency. Despite a substantial increase in children entering foster care, progress has been made in the measure of reunification within 12 months, from 72.1% to 73.3% (as of June 2015). Within 2.5 years, the outcome for children exiting to adoption within two years has improved from 28.6% to an unprecedented level of 46.6%. While DCFS has experienced high staff turnover and retention issues, it has improved from 92% to 94.3% in ensuring at least 95% of children exiting foster care move to a permanent placement. Further, in 2014, over 600 children in foster care achieved permanency through adoption. The Department has also improved the overall reduction in the length of stay for children exiting to foster care. In FY2014, the average length of stay was 8.2 months, down from 10.4 months in FY2011. The Faith in Families Initiative also involved a partnership with the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption to implement Wendy's Wonderful Kids Child Focused Adoption Recruitment Model, where recruiters focus on child specific recruitment for older youth and children who have been available for adoption for more than one year. Now entering its second year, 64 children who were available for adoption for at least one year are receiving targeted child focused recruitment services; 8 of these children have had permanency finalized through adoption, guardianship, or family reunification; 14 children are currently matched; 10 children are in pre-adoptive placement; and 7 children will soon achieve adoption finalizations. The Child Welfare Training Academy was also developed under the Initiative, which is a partnership with the Pelican Center and 5 public universities. The Academy provides interdisciplinary and cross-system training and leadership for legal, judicial, foster parents, and other participants in the child welfare system. The Department's success has been made possible by the involvement of community partners, universities, and national resource experts to help promote quality practice and achieve desired outcomes.