

ADOPTION EXCELLENCE AWARDS

2021

Category 1: Family Contributions

Liz Benstead and Ashley Garcia

Southwest Concord, NC

Ms. Liz Benstead and her daughter, Ms. Ashley Garcia, have been vital members of the AdoptUSKids speakers bureau since 2016 and have participated in a plethora of unique media opportunities that have contributed to the goal of finding permanency for youth. Liz, as a Middle School/Service-Learning Teacher has been able to utilize both her professional and personal knowledge to contribute to key efforts supporting adoption from foster care. Ashley has bravely and proudly stepped forward to share her personal adoption from foster care story across multiple innovative media and other unique platforms also with the goal of inspiring and encouraging prospective adoptive parents to consider adopting youth, especially teens, from foster care. Ashley participated with the Ad Council's Annual Fundraising Dinner and shared her story with an audience of 1,000+ advertising and media professionals. She also spoke at the Ad Council's Annual Board Meeting with a room of 50+ corporate level executives. This inspired additional unique opportunities to share her message as Ashley was invited by multiple Board members to speak at their corporate events, such as Land-O-Lakes and Unilever Corporation. She accomplished all of this at the age of 16 years.

Liz and Ashley share a love of service to others and, using their leadership skills, they implemented and launched the "Suitcases of Hope" program which is dedicated to giving large duffle bags to children/youth entering the foster care system. These bags are full of needed items such as a stuffed animal, twin sheet set, personal care items and most importantly the novel, *The Suitcases*, by Anne Hall Whitt along with a personal note of encouragement from Ashley. Since 2013, their program has donated more than 2,500 duffle bags and Ashley has been

recognized by Youth Service America (YSA) for her leadership and efforts with the program.

Category 2: Individuals/Professionals

April Dinwoodie

New York, NY

April Dinwoodie has taken her knowledge of marketing and communications and interweaved them with her knowledge and experience of adoption to create a powerful dialogue that is moving the field forward toward healthier outcomes. She is active in outreach both locally and nationally. She founded a mentoring organization in 2005 where adults who have been adopted or have lived experience mentor young people who have been adopted or are currently in foster care. She has served as the CEO of the Donaldson Adoption Institute, since 2018 has been hosting monthly podcasts on adoption, leads *Transracial Journeys*, an organization that brings practical tools, support and services for families experiencing transracial adoption, and assisted in elevating the voices of youth in panels, social media events, conferences and via her podcasts. She has worked with multiple organizations in developing training, expanding their outreach.

Dr. Sharonlyn Harrison

Novi, MI

Since 2005 Dr. Sharonlyn Harrison has been coaching and mentoring emerging leaders across the nation with a hope of increasing the numbers of minority leaders in child welfare, with a particular emphasis on adoption. She has been involved with the design and launch of the Minority Adoption Leadership Institute (MALDI), at Spaulding and now with the Minority Professional Leadership Development Program (MPLD) at AdoptUSKids, impacting more than 100 mid-level managers in leading change in states across the nation. She utilizes her large network to identify national leaders to speak to the MPLD fellows. In addition, she has made an important impact on bringing evaluation into the work of Spaulding as

she assisted with keeping programs on track and keeping Spaulding on the leading edge of innovation.

Maci Kean

Lauderhill, FL

Maci Kean has been a powerful voice for the AdoptUSKids speakers bureau since 2018 as well as an asset in her community, and a resource for ChildNet, the Dave Thomas Foundation and Forever Families Florida. She regularly speaks at MAPP classes. Maci has been involved in multiple events to showcase her adoption story including the 2019 National Adoption Month event in Washington, DC, the 2018 PSA with AUSK and the Ad Council, and the Dave Thomas Foundation video and PSA as well as local media in Florida and the AUSK podcast. The Judge who presided over her final adoption noted that by talking about her experiences, Maci has made a difference in the lives of others. She volunteers for the Heart Gallery in Broward County Florida. Her commitment to pursuing excellence on behalf of adoption, permanency, family and youth waiting in foster care is described as impressive. This is evidenced by multiple letters of support for her nomination for the Adoption Excellence Award.

Melissa Otero

Lincoln, NB

Melissa Otero has been described by a family involved in the AdoptUSKids speaker's bureau as "a hidden hero". For more than 18 years she has taken a leadership role nationally to raise public awareness of the need for more foster and adoptive families. She has had a leadership role with the National Adoption Recruitment Campaign since it began in 2003, first with the Ad Council as the Campaign Manager and Director, and since 2013 as the Campaign Director at AdoptUSKids. She led the development of a speaker's bureau with trained adoptive families and youth with lived experience in 2013, providing media training and becoming a support for these individual youth and families. In 2008 she led efforts to expand the reach of social media in the national campaign, resulting in the engagement of a much larger audience for the campaign messages. All of her efforts can be directly linked to measurable improved outcomes.

Beginning in 2014, she directed a multi-year effort to integrate the national campaign products to the state level, working with 8 states and their non-profit partners, resulting in an increase of families coming forward in every state. Her ability to maintain collaborations and partnerships is evidenced by the success she has had in securing media opportunities with Hollywood. In particular, she worked closely with Sean Anders, to highlight AUSK in the movie Instant Family. She has been described by colleagues as bringing a passion for adoption to the work, and by a family in the speaker's bureau as a passionate advocate for adoption who has positively changed the trajectory of teens lives without even knowing it. There are teens out there that now have a family because of the work she is involved in. They further describe her as a friend, an advocate, a hero.

Brenda “Lynn” Bertrand

Aberdeen, MS

Brenda “Lynn” Bertrand has worked for the MS Department of Child Protection Services for over 28 years including the 5 of which have been as the Adoption Unit's Area Social Work Supervisor. She has overseen the completion of almost 300 adoption in her region in the last 3 years with 75 of them being during the middle of the COVID pandemic. During these difficult times as well as in normal times, her unit has developed new approaches to achieving permanencies in a timely manner for the children and youth that they serve. Lynn was able to lead the way in her region due to the relationships she has developed with her staff, court system, attorneys and community partners. Her staff have noted that she is always thinking outside of the box for ways to achieve permanency. She has particularly engaged youth in seeking out their past relationships to help find them permanencies.

Bonni Goodwin

Norman, OK

Dr. Bonni Goodwin is the Statewide Coordinator of Adoption Preservation Services with the OK Department of Human Services, Child Welfare Division, and a Program Manager in the Center for Child Welfare Training and Simulation at the University of OK. In these two key roles, she has been providing training and

consultation support specifically on adoption competent mental health services for child welfare workers as well as mental health practitioners across the State of OK.

In addition, Dr. Goodwin does extensive case consultation with both child welfare and mental health providers with the Post Adoption Services Unit. Recently, she has begun developing and facilitating bi-monthly trainings with the goal of incorporating adoption competency mental health material in the role of the post adoption unit. She has also conducted trainings with leaders of community mental health services with the OK Department of Mental Health about adoption competent mental health.

Ronya Faulkner

Nashville, TN

Ronya Faulkner has over 25 years of child welfare experience and has spent her entire career seeking to improve the lives of families and children whether through direct service to teens or developing skills of foster parents. As the Director of Training and Professional Development for the TN Department of Children's Services she used innovation and technology to meet the training needs of families in TN when the state served as the pilot site for the implementation of the CORE Teen Curriculum (funded by a CB grant). Ms. Faulkner let the piloting and implementation for TN and realizing that many families participating may be low-tech in their skills arranged for the development of a computer lab where families could come for technology support. She has also developed statewide training "tracts" and automated tracking of resource family training. She has successfully used data to drive change in the state and has been responsible for the inclusion of resource families in the delivery of training.

Category 5: Child Welfare/Judicial Systemic Change

Adoption Support for Kentucky Virtual Interaction Program

Lexington, KY

Adoption Support for Kentucky (ASK) is an award winning program that has been serving foster and adoptive parents for nearly two decades through adept peer-led support groups and training initiatives. These services are expressly designed to meet the needs of caregivers in an inclusive, safe, and compassionate environment. The aim of ASK is to prevent pre-adoption disruptions and post-adoption dissolutions by reducing caregiver stress and increasing parental competence through the services it provides.

Adoption Support for Kentucky Virtual Interaction Program (ASK-VIP) began in 2018 as two peer-led support groups. The positive feedback from both attendees and facilitators provided the encouragement to expand their virtual program. This proved to be a very timely and beneficial decision when the COVID-19 pandemic began. At the start of the pandemic, all trainings and support groups provided through the ASK program were offered virtually. This allowed foster and adoptive parents from all parts of the state to attend ASK-VIP trainings and support groups regardless of their location and from the comfort and safety of their own homes.

Another innovative approach to ASK-VIP was the launch of specialized support groups serving LGBTQ+, Transracial, and Single Foster and Adoptive Parents. These groups bring together parents from across the state to give and receive support from those families that most closely resemble their own.

Destination Family

Sacramento, CA

Destination Family shows a clear dedication to achieving permanency for youth and to using thorough efforts to explore permanency options for youth. The nominee's services to achieve permanency for youth are not time-limited and use a relational rather than clinical model for working with youth. The program uses multiple focused, creative strategies to work diligently to achieve permanency for youth who likely would not have other permanency efforts conducted on their behalf.

The nominee has worked with 250 youth in foster care over the past several years, with 70% of them achieving permanency through adoption or reunification. The nominee is part of Stanford Sierra Youth & Families and has strong collaboration and integration with child welfare agency partners, including using the physical

office resources of the Sacramento County CPS to co-locate with staff from the county. The nominee is an active participant in California's annual celebration of National Adoption Day which raises public awareness and uses social media posts, print materials, and e-newsletters to reach out and engage the community. The nominee is a public/private collaboration of Stanford Sierra Youth & Families, Sacramento County Child CPS, and the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. The nominee was established in 1993, showing a strong track record for sustainability.