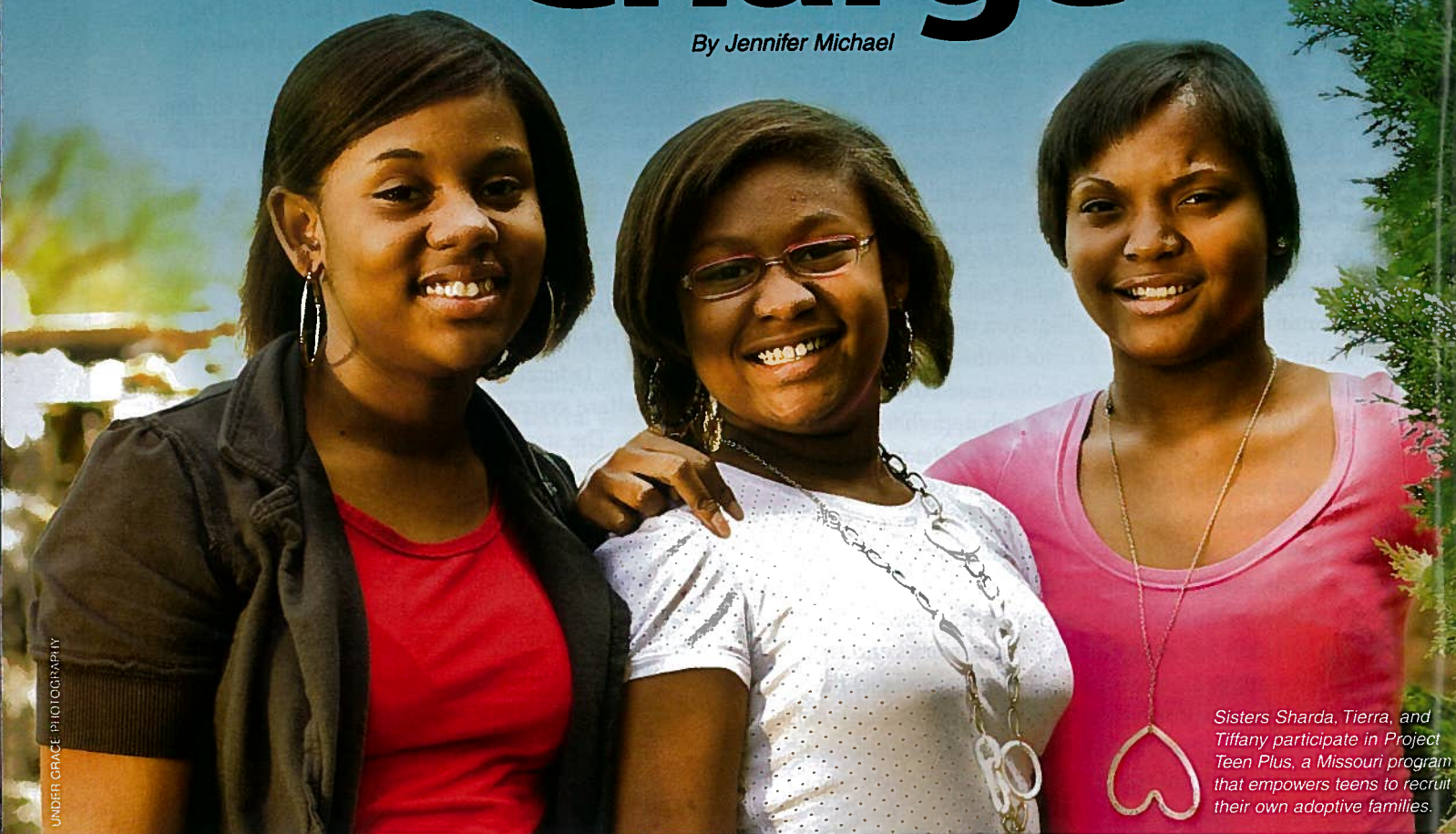


Teens Taking Charge

By Jennifer Michael



UNDER GRACE PHOTOGRAPHY

Sisters Sharda, Tierra, and Tiffany participate in Project Teen Plus, a Missouri program that empowers teens to recruit their own adoptive families.

Programs encourage youth in foster care to drive their plans to find adoptive families

At age 11, Roger* realized he wanted to be adopted. It was 2002 and the state of Minnesota had stripped his parents of their rights to raise him after years of abuse and neglect. Roger wound up in a foster home and then lived with his aunt and uncle for a time, but the arrangement didn't work out.

He went on to live in a shelter, then another foster home, then a group home. At 15, he still hadn't found a permanent home but he hadn't given up hope either, even with the odds against him. In Minnesota, teens ages 13 to 17 represent 22% of children waiting for a home, but represent only about 7% of adoptions.

Eventually, the Homecoming Project was Roger's answer to permanency. The demonstration project, funded by a federal Adoption Opportunities and Activities Grant, is working to increase adoptions of teens in Minnesota. The Minnesota Department of Human Services is contracting with the Minnesota Adoption Resource Network to coordinate the program.

The Homecoming Project is one of a growing number of foster care campaigns focusing on boosting adoption numbers by encouraging foster youth to take charge of their destinies. By participating, the youth are encouraged to gain as much public exposure as they can to increase their chances of adoption, whether that means being profiled on the nightly news or on roadside billboards or websites. With the help of their caseworkers, the teens leave no stone unturned in reviewing their current and past adult connections to develop a prospective pool of people who might be willing to adopt them.

Teens participating in the Homecoming Project create brochures about themselves, eat meals with prospective

adoptive families in their homes, and speak publicly before the state legislature and at adoption events and trainings. “The Homecoming Project is really about engaging the youth themselves in the process of thinking about the future and how adoption and having a family fits in with what they want to do,” says Chuck Johnson, Assistant Commissioner of Children and Family Services.

Without the Homecoming Project, says Roger, who is now 18, “I don’t know where I’d be. I wouldn’t have a family.” From the beginning, his caseworker Jen Braun worked with him one-on-one to explore the adoption option and strategies for marketing himself to prospective families. The *Star Tribune* newspaper took notice and ran a story about him and the Homecoming Project in January 2006. A photo with the story showed Roger and other youth in his group home alone on Christmas Eve with little to do other than lounge on couches next to a Christmas tree and watch movies.

After the story ran, more than 70 calls came in from families interested in adopting Roger, a response he calls “mind-boggling.” Roger chose one of the families and lived with them for two months, but ultimately decided they weren’t the right fit for him. Ironically, Braun and her partner ended up adopting Roger. “It just seemed like since Jen and I got along great together, why say no,” Roger says.

Braun says if she had been asked four years ago when she started working with foster youth if she would one day adopt, she would have laughed. But with Roger it seemed the natural thing to do. “It’s amazing how working with this population really opens your eyes,” says Braun, who stepped down as Roger’s caseworker after she decided to adopt him. “These are really incredible kids.”

The upside of Roger’s public exposure, Braun notes, is that many of the families who called to inquire about him after reading the *Star Tribune* story eventually went through the home study process and adopted other youth who were looking for homes.

“Empowering the Child”

In Missouri, a program similar to the Homecoming Project is also empowering teens in foster care to actively recruit for adoptive families. The Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition of Greater St. Louis created Project Teen Plus in 2002 after receiving a grant from the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption. In metro St. Louis, nearly 400 preteens and teenagers are waiting to be adopted.

Programs like Project Teen Plus are important because too many older kids in foster care get overlooked, or it is

assumed that once they hit age 14, adoption is no longer an option and they need to start preparing for living on their own once they hit age 18, explains Sheila Suderwalla, Director of Project Teen Plus. “I think it’s just an unfortunate reality of our foster care system nationally,” she says. “Every year, more and more kids are aging out of the foster care system to no one, and then their chances for success in life are just greatly diminished. They are not leaving the system supported or prepared for adulthood.”

Project Teen Plus, on the other hand, works on “empowering the child every step of the way to write [his or her] adoption profile, to meet families, to have a say in adoption, period,” Suderwalla says. The program uses a three-tiered

recruitment model: general recruitment through the mass media by profiling waiting youth on television and in newspapers; targeted recruitment by featuring waiting youth in publications aimed at licensed foster/adoptive families; and youth-specific recruitment, which involves recruiting families from the youth’s church, neighborhood, or elsewhere within their community network.

Similar to the Homecoming Project, caseworkers for Project Teen Plus review the case files of the youth participants going back to the first day they entered foster care to fully understand their history and their needs to determine the most appropriate adoptive resource. They work individually with each youth, conducting a strengths-based interview and a genogram and ecomap. Monthly Project Teen Plus recruitment team meetings are held with the youth’s team members and usually the youth himself to make recommendations and develop an action plan for securing a permanency goal of adoption. The teens also take part in support groups with their peers where they can openly share their feelings about and experiences with the adoption process.

Results & Lessons

The Homecoming Project is now in its final year of federal funding but officials hope to continue the program. As of late last year, 17 Homecoming Project youth had been legally adopted since 2004, 11 were in preadoptive

*Roger’s full name is withheld to protect his privacy.

The Prospective Parent Pool

According to a recent poll commissioned by the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, 3 in 10 Americans have considered or are currently considering adoption, and 71% of that group considers foster care adoption above other forms of adoption, including private infant adoption and international adoption. These results translate into 48 million Americans who have considered or are currently considering adoption from foster care.



Roger, now 18, was adopted through the Homecoming Project.

Illinois Foster Kids Speak Out: "Don't Write Me Off"

How does the public view foster care? When a group of private child welfare agencies in Illinois posed this question to focus groups, the answer was disheartening, but not surprising—people were concerned about the negative news surrounding foster care. In a nutshell, they feared the system.

The agencies—65 in all under the direction of Voices for Illinois Children and with the support of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services—decided to tackle the stigma directly. In April 2006, they launched a statewide, multi-year marketing campaign aimed at encouraging Illinois residents to support youth in foster care and foster care agencies.

During its first year, the Foster Kids Are Our Kids campaign involved foster children telling the public directly through television ads and posters, "Don't write me off." WGN-TV in Chicago ran \$800,000 worth of free air space featuring commercials in which foster youth say, "Just because I'm a foster kid, doesn't mean I'm a lost cause. I have the potential for greatness ... I wish

you could see me for who I am. Don't be afraid of me, and don't feel bad for me. Just care what happens to us."

In 2007, the campaign focused on the theme, "Making foster care better," and expanded advertising to bus and subway stations, highway billboards, and college campuses. In television commercials, average citizens point out that growing up in foster care is tough but that you don't have to be a foster parent to help. They say they mentor foster children, volunteer at agencies, donate money, and take the kids next door to ball games.

A website (www.fosterkidsareourkids.org) and toll-free number (1-888-4RKIDS2) direct visitors and callers to local foster care agencies prepared to help people get involved in different ways. During the first year the website received more than 56,000 hits, and 621 inquiries were made to the toll-free number, 255 of them from out-of-state callers. Ninety-five percent of the calls were inquiries about becoming foster parents.

Federal grants are funding the Foster Kids Are Our Kids campaign

through 2008, but Jerry Stermer, President of Voices for Illinois Children, hopes more resources can be found to continue the campaign for another 5 to 10 years. "This is probably one of the most amazing efforts that I've seen in child welfare in the 35 years I've had some association with it," he says.

A statewide phone survey conducted in early 2007 as part of the campaign to evaluate public opinion about foster care found that among those familiar with the issue of foster care, 43% said things had gotten better and 15% said things had gotten worse. Ten percent clearly described the campaign's public service announcements. Of those who had seen the PSAs, 62% were more likely to strongly agree that "Foster kids are our kids" than those not exposed (51%).

Stermer says he would like to share the campaign's creative work with other state coalitions that have secured major media partners and have the capacity to link citizens with agencies that can guide them within their communities. Contact Stermer at jstermer@voices4kids.org.

placements, and eight had established permanent relationships with an adult who had committed to supporting them.

While grant funding from the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption covered only the first two years of Project Teen Plus, other private funding has since been secured to keep the program going. As of late 2007, 22 participants in the program had been matched with adoptive families. The teens have taught staff a great deal over the first five years of Project Teen Plus, Suderwalla says. The road to adoption,

for example, can be frightening for some youth, so staff walk the youth through each step of the adoption process. If a youth says "no" to adoption, that doesn't necessarily mean no. Some youth may simply not want to change their last name, or they fear being abused by an adoptive family, or they don't want to be disappointed if a family isn't found for them. The staff make sure to address their concerns and misperceptions.

Project Teen Plus staff have also learned that being part of a family does not always come naturally to children who have grown up in foster care. Project Teen Plus teens expressed the need for more exposure and practice with family activities

Find Out More

Jordina

For more information about becoming part of Jordina's future, please contact:

Michelle Chalmers
The Homecoming Project
612.746.5121
michellec@homecoming.org

OR:

MMAI Booth
Adoption Social Worker
763.423.2118
www.mmai.org

Prospective parents of a Minnesota Waiting Child must attend pre-adoption training classes and have a home study completed.

For families interested in adopting a child or sibling group under state guardianship, the home study and training may be available at no cost to the family.

For a list of Public Private Adoption Initiatives (PPAI) agencies see www.mnadopt.org

The Homecoming Project is a Minnesota Department of Human Services initiative to increase adoptions of teens in Minnesota.

Learn more at www.mnadopt.org.

Teens involved in the Homecoming Project take an active role in advocating for their own adoptions, including assisting with marketing tools like Jordina's, above.



Jessica, age 15, is part of Project Teen Plus.

such as eating dinner as a family. In response, Project Teen Plus developed a monthly teen support group called “Sunday Dinners” for youth to meet at the home of a licensed foster parent where they help prepare, cook, and clean up after a meal.

Finally Belonging

In April 2007, Roger reached the pinnacle of his participation in the Homecoming Project—his adoption was finalized. Follow-up stories ran in the local media, including a story by Minnesota Public Radio, and Braun wrote an essay published by American RadioWorks about her experience adopting Roger.

“Roger is something else,” Braun wrote. “You’d have to meet him. He wakes up every day full of the conviction that life is a solid, fine thing. If you look up ‘carpe diem’ in the dictionary, I’m certain his picture is there.”

This past spring, Roger graduated from high school. While many youth his age are eager to break free from mom and dad, Roger isn’t in any rush to leave his newfound home. He plans to commute to a local community college and study nursing.

When asked what he most values about his new family, he says, “A sense of belonging ... and just like all the love that is there.” ■

Jennifer Michael is the former Editor-in-Chief of Children's Voice.

Project Teen Plus Strategies for Building Youth Empowerment

- Inform youth of each program aspect and ask what they think might specifically work best for them. Be flexible in program activities and be willing to alter activities to best meet the needs of the teen.
- Complete a strengths-based interview with the youth.
- Complete an ecomap and a genogram with the youth.
- Ask the youth about their feelings regarding different adoption recruitment activities (i.e. television, newspaper).
- Include the youth in creating their adoption profile. Have professional pictures taken of the youth and have the youth pick which picture they would like used for adoption recruitment.
- Allow youth to pick topics, location, and activities of teen support groups.
- Be honest with the youth throughout the adoption process.
- Allow youth to read a potential family’s information. Allow them to submit questions to the family.
- Allow youth to choose their forever family.

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