

Conference Encourages More Long-Term Foster Parenting

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Pictured here (L to R): Former foster children Melissa Murray (right) and Erick Alvarez (left) and Elizabeth Clark Thasiah (middle), manager of foster parent recruitment and retention for the Ventura County Human Services Agency's Children & Family Services Department. (Photo Credit: Tim Pompey)

By Tim Pompey

Question: *What happens to kids after they age out of foster care?*

Answer: According to the Ventura County Human Services Agency (VCHSA), a large number will end up homeless. Many will land in prisons, become hospitalized, or experience serious health and emotional challenges during their lifetimes. Only a few will ever earn a college degree.

Some individuals and agencies such as the VCHSA are trying to change this picture and provide foster children with a better way to transition into adulthood. Their solution is to encourage late teen adoptions. While it may sound strange to suggest adopting a child in their late teens or early twenties, it turns out that the VCHSA, who recently sponsored a conference at Ventura Missionary Church titled, "What All Children Need: Unconditional Commitment," thinks it's a good idea.

It's one of the reasons they invited Pat O'Brien to speak. As the founder nearly twenty years ago of the adoptive agency "You Gotta Believe," he worked specifically with older teens to find them legal, adoptive, and lifetime parents.

A former case worker for adoption agencies in New York City, O'Brien knew first hand an all too common scenario. "The idea came from watching kids age out and become homeless," he said. "I realized that for every kid that we found a home, there were two or three other kids who were never freed for adoption and they needed a permanent home just as much as the kids who met all the adoption qualifications."

O'Brien felt it was critical to get kids into families before they aged out of foster care. "We even worked with the ones who were still connected to their birth families," he explained. "There's a reason why those families had the child in the kind of care where they relinquished their ability to plan for that child's future."

Elizabeth Clark Thasiah, the manager for foster parent recruitment and retention within Ventura County's Children and Family Services Department, is actively recruiting long-term foster parents for kids here in Ventura County. "We need more foster parents in Ventura County and we need a particular kind of foster parent," she stated. "We're looking for high quality foster parents who will provide an unconditional commitment to the children in their care."

Right now, there are more kids to care for than parents available to help. Thasiah estimates they have 200 active foster parents and 250 relative caregivers to look after a thousand foster children. Her hope is to recruit families who can make an extended commitment to their foster child. As she noted: "They don't give up on them, they don't send them away. They say come what may, we are committed to you for the rest of your life so that you have a family that you can always come and turn to and receive support."

Thasiah wants to assure potential foster parents that there is ample support to help them and their foster children succeed. This includes a team from her department that will regularly stay in touch and visit with them. Foster parents will also receive extensive training (this conference being one example) and ample contact and support from other foster parents.

Erick Alvarez is one of those older foster children currently transitioning out of foster care. Alvarez talked about how he pushed himself to seek out and connect with male role models. "The issues for me were not having adult mentors, not having guidance, not having adult male role models who were stable, long-term and committed," he said.

It led him on a search to find those role models and to actively inquire about important life lessons. "A 16-year-old needs to know what a 25-year-old guy does," he remarked. "What does a father do? What are the things he needs to look for? I started asking men if we could have coffee, could I get your phone number, could I text you, could I come see you?"

Alvarez now helps other transitioning teens work through similar issues. "Once I figured out how impactful that was in my life," he said, "then I said that if this is huge for me, I think every guy needs this."

For Melissa Murray, who literally grew up in foster care, her living situation as she transitioned out of foster care has been difficult. As a foster child, she lived in 10 homes, including Casa Pacifica, up to her emancipation in 2011. Now as an adult, her most pressing issue is finding stable housing. "My whole past year and a half, I've been struggling

with homelessness,” she pointed out, “bouncing from couch to couch. That impacted my schooling, too, because my first semester at community college, I was actually living out in Northridge and trying to commute. I didn’t have that place to call my home and be okay.”

For families considering foster care, Murray feels it’s important that rather than look at foster kids from a distance, people should try to understand what a foster child has been through and envision their future potential. “Why wouldn’t I deserve that opportunity to thrive in my life?” she asked. “I would like for people to really think about it. Don’t see what that child is doing. Think about what’s really going on inside of them and what they’ve gone through.”

Asked why a family should consider adopting a foster child, Alvarez answered: “You’ve got to look past the behavior and into their background. Everybody needs unconditional love. Everyone needs unconditional hope. Everyone needs unconditional support. Not everyone has it, but I think you can provide it and they deserve it.”

For more information on becoming a foster parent, contact Ventura County Children & Family Services at (805) 654-5594 or browse through their web information at www.ventura.org/human-services-agency/foster-parenting.

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