



ACT
Government



A Step Up for Our Kids

One Step Can Make a Lifetime of Difference

STEPPING UP FOR OUR KIDS:
REAL STORIES OF KEEPING
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
STRONG, SAFE AND
CONNECTED



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The ACT Government acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the Canberra region and that the region is also an important meeting place and significant to other Aboriginal groups. The ACT Government respects the continuing culture and the contribution that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples make to the life of this city and surrounding region.

SUPPORT AND FURTHER INFORMATION

To inquire about becoming a foster carer please contact ACT Together on 1300 93 367 837 (1300 WE FOSTER).

If this publication has raised issues for you, the following services can assist:

Carers ACT 1800 052 222

Lifeline 13 11 14

Beyondblue 1300 22 4636

Kids' Helpline 1800 55 1800

Australian Red Cross Birth Family Advocacy Support Service (02) 6234 7600

CREATE Foundation (ACT Branch) (02) 6232 2409



CONTENTS

Minister’s Foreword	4
Introduction.....	5
A Step Up for Our Kids	6
Who Does What In The Child Protection System?	7
A Long and Difficult Road	8
Reflection	12
A Wondrous Thing	14
Reflection	17
Putting Your Heart and Mind into it	18
Reflection	21
Thinking Outside the Box	22
Reflection	25
Thriving, Not Just Surviving	26
Reflection	29
The Deadly All-Stars	30
Reflection	33
Keeping the Door Open	34
Reflection	37

MINISTER'S FOREWORD



One of the great privileges of my role as Minister for Children, Youth and Families is to hear about the successes of children and young people supported by families, carers and practitioners in our child protection system.

The studies in this publication demonstrate that we can achieve life-changing outcomes by working together in the best interests of children and young people.

The success of *A Step Up for Our Kids* relies on an ongoing commitment to collaboration between the ACT Government and our partner agencies. The Strategy has challenged us to develop common understandings and shared goals. The reforms established under the Strategy are designed to create generational change to improve the life outcomes of the next generation of care leavers.

In this publication you will read inspiring stories of the resilience of birth parents, carers and young people who have overcome hardship and difficult personal circumstances.

In all our work, the safety and wellbeing of the child is paramount. It is crucial the voices of children and young people in care are heard throughout our practice, and that we are flexible and creative in planning and delivering care arrangements that are appropriate for each situation.

Maintaining cultural identity, connection and development is fundamental for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people in out of home care. The Deadly All-Stars program, run by ACT Together, is one example of how this can be achieved. The Deadly All-Stars program connects kids to community leaders, supports carers to nourish children's cultural identities, and creates a support network for children and young people in care.

Thank you to everyone who contributes to protecting and supporting some of the ACT's most vulnerable children and young people, working to ensure that children and young people in the ACT grow up **strong, safe and connected**.

I'm grateful to those who have shared their stories for this publication and hope they continue to inspire life-changing practice. I would also like to thank our partners in *A Step Up for Our Kids* for their commitment to deliver the best care possible for children and young people in out of home care in the ACT.

Rachel Stephen-Smith

Minister for Children, Youth and Families

November 2018

INTRODUCTION

This publication showcases the positive outcomes achieved under the ACT's five year out of home care strategy ***A Step Up for Our Kids*** – One Step Can Make a Lifetime of Difference.

It recognises the work of many practitioners and service providers from across the government and non-government sector who are delivering services under ***A Step Up for Our Kids***, including:

- > ACT Together - a consortium of organisations, led by Barnardos Australia and includes the Australian Childhood Foundation, OzChild and Premier Youthworks.
- > Australian Red Cross Birth Family Advocacy Support Service
- > Carers ACT Foster and Kinship Carer Advocacy Service
- > Child and Youth Protection Services, ACT Community Services Directorate
- > CREATE – Children and Young People Engagement Support Service
- > Uniting Children and Families ACT

The project team gratefully acknowledges the wonderful children, young people, parents, carers and practitioners who courageously shared their stories for this publication.

The priority in writing these stories was to privilege the voice of community members who have had experience with the child protection system. We made sure that participants consented to taking part, we spent time with them to listen and draft their stories to ensure the stories reflected their journeys as they saw them. All the stories are real, however the names of participants, including practitioners, have been changed to protect their identities.

Some families have contributed drawings or photographs of things that are meaningful to them. We want to thank them for taking the time to share them with us. We have also used some artwork in this publication that was created by children in out of home care as part of a broader art project. We want to thank all of these inspiring artists.

Thank you to the representatives from our partner agencies who wrote and shared their reflections for each of the stories. Thanks also to the staff within the Office of the Senior Practitioner of NSW Family and Community Services for their assistance in this project.

A STEP UP FOR OUR KIDS

Children and young people in care – growing up strong, safe and connected

This statement expresses our commitment to maximising the mental and physical health of children and young people in care, and their connection to family, community, culture, education and employment. It also reflects our wish to create a care system based upon safe, healing relationships and practices informed by a sound understanding of trauma, attachment, cultural sensitivities and child development.

A Step Up for Our Kids - Out of Home Care Strategy 2015-2020 is designed to create generational change. To achieve this, we have reaffirmed the need for our practice to be child-focused. This means placing the child or young person at the centre of the care system. Practitioners and carers approach children and young people's needs flexibly, therapeutically, and with a trauma-informed lens.

We know that children and young people involved in the child protection system are exposed to a number of situations that increase their risk of experiencing trauma. The presence of caring and supportive adults is integral to a child or young person's sense of stability and safety as well as their ability to understand and recover from a traumatic experience.

The first priority under the Strategy is to keep children and young people at home with their birth parents wherever possible. If they need to come into care for the short term, the aim is to reunify them with their parents as quickly as possible.

Sadly, there are children and young people who cannot safely go home to their birth parents. Our priority is then to ensure they grow up in a secure and loving environment with another family.

If children and young people are not living at home with their parents they usually live with a carer. If the carer is a relative they are known as a kinship carer. If the child is not related to the carer, they are known as a foster carer. Some children and young people might need to live in residential care, a house where a few young people from different families are supported by professional youth workers.

WHO DOES WHAT IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM?

Child and Youth Protection Services (CYPS) is a division of the Community Services Directorate and has the statutory responsibility to support children, young people and families who require care and protection. CYPS carries out many functions in exercising this responsibility, including conducting risk assessments of children and young people's family and home environments, and helping to restore children home to their birth families.

ACT Together is a consortium of non-government organisations. It is led by Barnardos Australia in association with the Australian Childhood Foundation, OzChild and Premier Youthworks. ACT Together has responsibility for providing case management and support services to children and young people on long term orders and foster carers.

Uniting Children and Families ACT provides services designed to keep children and young people with their birth parents. This includes programs such as intensive family support, family preservation and the New Parent and Infant Network, known as Newpin, to help keep children with their birth parents. Uniting works with families in their homes or at an alternative home-like environment for 12 to 18 months to identify their needs and tailor supports which can include managing the home and family; building relationships; parent and child interactions; setting boundaries; and addressing mental health, drug, alcohol and domestic violence concerns.

The Birth Family Advocacy Service operated by the Australian Red Cross is a free service for all families who have involvement with the child protection system. The Service provides support and information to birth families to assist them to engage with the child protection process.

The CREATE Foundation, engages with children and young people who are in care or who have experienced the out of home care system. They provide information and a support network, and seek to empower children and young people to have a voice in their care settings.

Carers ACT supports kinship carers and foster carers experiencing difficulties in their caring roles, and also provides a mechanism to assist carers to resolve issues with service providers. Often meeting the needs of children in care is not straightforward and having the right supports for carers is critical.

A LONG AND DIFFICULT ROAD

CLAIRE'S JOURNEY BACK TO WELLNESS

It is an under-statement to say things were not going well for Claire when CYPS came into the lives of her and her children. As her caseworker Kate will tell you, Claire is a very impressive woman, incredibly strong and resilient. However, many years of unimaginable childhood trauma, domestic violence and untreated mental health issues were taking a toll. On top of this, Claire had been dealing with unstable accommodation, as a result of having to move house frequently for safety issues. After a prolonged period of being very unwell, Claire had also come to believe that substance use was a way to treat her illness.

Claire knew she needed support to address her mental health and come to terms with the trauma that she had experienced, so when she put her hand up to spend some time in hospital to get the help she needed, CYPS stepped in to provide care for her three daughters temporarily. Claire was experiencing severe psychotic episodes and using drugs to self-medicate. Things became a bit more complex when it became clear that Claire's recovery was going to be a long and difficult road.



*Claire's daughter
drew this beautiful picture.*

Initially, Claire's younger children went into the care of a family member. This was a defining moment for Claire. Alone in a hotel room without her three daughters, it crossed Claire's mind that it would be easiest to up and move interstate.

But ultimately this is not who Claire is. In that moment, Claire also recognised that if she was going to get her kids back she needed to make some tough decisions. While returning children to their birth parents is the first priority for CYPS, no one except Claire could take responsibility for overcoming her problems.

Facing this reality, Claire booked herself in to a range of support services to address her mental health and substance use. She particularly benefitted from the programs at Toora such as Marzena House and their Day Program. It wasn't always straightforward, and there were some difficult periods in which Claire sometimes felt she was going backwards rather than forwards. It is always important to remember, however, that recovery is rarely linear, and most people experience relapses along the way. Even through the tough times, Claire remained focused on the goal of getting her kids back and stuck with it.

Something that Claire would like to impart to other parents who have contact with the child protection system is the importance of open communication with caseworkers. While the safety of children has to be everyone's priority, sometimes this can lead to birth parents feeling out of the loop. Claire was very proactive and established strong lines of communication with her CYPs caseworker, keeping her informed of her progress. In their conversations, Claire made sure to detail the range of supports she had organised for herself, and how focused she was on recovery.

The open and trusting relationship between Kate and Claire came in handy when challenges cropped up. For example, in a tough period Claire experienced a relapse, but Kate was able to reassure her that this was not the end of the road. Rather, it was just an obstacle that they had to work through together. Claire was also incredibly proactive, and when she came to Kate with a problem she also brought a solution, leaving Kate to remark there was nothing left she could suggest. Kate was also able to assist Claire in meeting her obligations, such as drug testing, by finding a pathology collection centre where the workers were female, which made the experience less anxiety-provoking.

“A major aspect of Claire’s recovery was learning to recognise the signs of illness, and be able to identify supports to call on if an episode of illness were to occur in the future.”

To assist Claire to prepare for regaining the care of her children, CYPS linked Claire up with Uniting Children and Families ACT. Claire attended both their intensive family support program and Newpin program.

In January 2018, Claire's children returned to her care. Due to circumstances beyond everybody's control, this happened a bit sooner than expected, but Claire took it in her stride. In the week leading up to the kids arriving home, she was a bit like an air traffic controller, busy arranging for furniture to be delivered to their new house, getting a fridge and food to fill it, and getting everything ready for the new school year. This was another significant milestone for Claire, as it demonstrated the safety net that she had established around her, and that she could coordinate her support network when she needed to.

Today, Claire's life is on a more even keel. She is now studying for a Certificate in Business Administration. She enjoys spending time one-on-one with each of her daughters, but the most important thing of all is seeing the impact that being a healthy and well mum has on her children. Claire recognises that she is a much better parent now that she is getting the help she needs.

The girls are loving their new home environment and being back with their mum, and are no longer displaying signs of stress. Instead, they enjoy being able to play outside together, relaxing at home after school and forming new traditions as a family. Claire is proud of achieving this for her children, as it had been one of her goals for a very long time. At the end of 2017, Claire's eldest daughter looked her in the eye and said, "the most important thing you've done this year is repair your relationship with me."

In addition to her personal achievements and recovery, Claire was also asked by the programs she attended to be a peer support worker. While Claire has not yet taken this step, she has spoken to many other mothers who are experiencing involvement with CYPS and has shared the lessons she has learnt. Looking back, Claire remembers the shock of realising how difficult things had gotten for her family and that CYPS did need to step into the picture, and is grateful for the support and linkages to services that came out of it.

One of the most important messages Claire has taken out of her experience is that CYPS understands that parents who experience mental illness can still be great parents, as long as they have supports in place for their health. A major aspect of Claire's recovery was learning to recognise the signs of illness, and be able to identify supports to call on if an episode of illness were to occur in the future.

Claire's caseworker Kate seconds this view, and says the most amazing thing from her perspective as a practitioner is how drastically circumstances can change for a family when they get the right help and services. At the start of CYPS' work with Claire, the thought of returning the children to her care was almost unimaginable, but it just goes to show what can be achieved when everyone takes the long and difficult road together.



This artwork was made for Claire by one of her daughter's

REFLECTION

By Ms Janise Mitchell,
Deputy CEO,
Australian Childhood Foundation

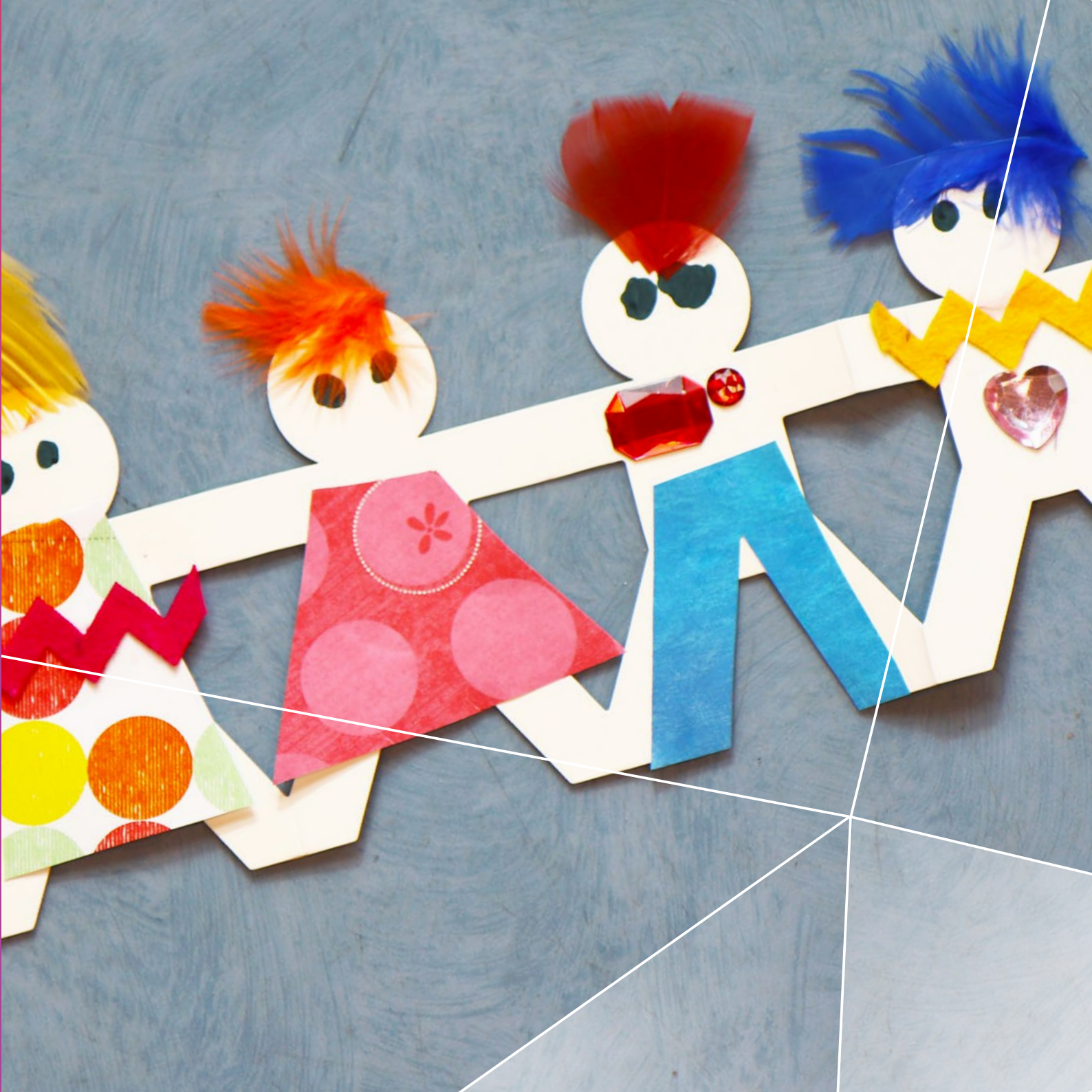
The story of Claire and her family highlights so many critical themes that are important reminders for a system that can be problem focussed and lose the ability to work in partnership with families.

Hope and courage are strong messages in this story. Despite overwhelming adversity in her own past, Claire did not give up on herself or her children, wanting better for her family than life may have dealt her during her own experience of growing up.

This story also reminds us of why the intergenerational impacts of trauma and profound disadvantage are so important for systems of support to understand when working with families. Without such meaning-making, parents and children are at risk of being defined by what they do, not what has happened to them and what they need. Clearly in this case the system was able to acknowledge this and work actively to resource and support the family in the achievement of their own hopes for themselves, providing the support that was needed and able to recognise and work with the non-linear nature of change.

Illustrated beautifully in this story is an example of the true essence of partnership between support services, statutory services and families. Despite her challenges, Claire was able to actively participate in the development of the support plan that her family needed. The relationships described in the story are characterised by honesty, respect and strength – within which they were able to have the hard conversations when required, without undermining the collective effort to support the family to achieve their goals. These relationships take time, investment and effort but are essential in the achievement of good outcomes for families and children.

Claire's sensitivity to her own and her children's needs enabled her to be a strong advocate for herself and her family. In response, the 'system' was prepared to listen to and collaborate with her in a way that was meaningful, enabling and further empowering of her. These experiences provide a strong foundation for the family to meet any challenges that may arise in the future.



A WONDEROUS THING

BARBARA AND JOHN BUILD A FAMILY WITH TILDA

In the words of Barbara and John, it was a wondrous thing for their beautiful niece Tilda to come into their home.

Barbara and John met each other later in life, and both had children from previous relationships. Taking Tilda on was a major change to their life plans, as their own children were grown-up and independent.

Tilda's mum is Barbara's sister Jane. Sadly, Jane in her own life had been experiencing tough times for a number of years. Looking after Tilda was becoming more and more difficult for Jane. When Tilda was four, things reached crisis point, and Barbara and John received a call at midnight from Jane asking if Tilda could come and live with them.



Tilda arrived the next day and they realised straight away what a beautiful child she was. Barbara and John looked after Tilda and at the same time supported Jane to get back on her feet and look after Tilda full time again. Unfortunately, Jane was only able to achieve this for a short time, before Tilda returned to Barbara and John.

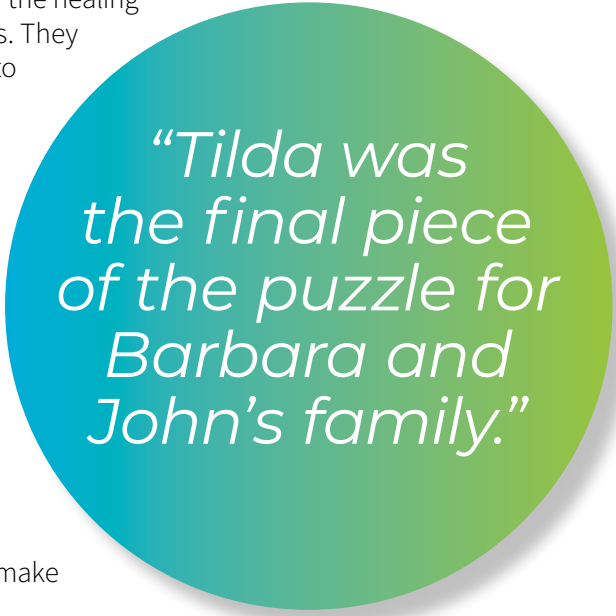
By the age of four Tilda had experienced a lot for a small child. Barbara recalls that in the early days she kept thinking that every safe day she and John created for Tilda was one less chaotic one, and that she would always make the most of her time with Tilda no matter what the future held.

Barbara and John worked really hard to help Tilda feel safe and secure in her new life. This included Barbara giving up her job and establishing predictability through daily routines, such as staying with her at night as she fell asleep, to arriving at school every day on the dot to walk her home. With this consistency in place, Tilda blossomed. Her natural optimism started to shine through, and she became the little girl who would throw open the curtains and say “bootiful day.”

Barbara and John acknowledge that Tilda gives as much love and happiness to them as they have given to her, and they are thankful for the healing and sense of completeness she has brought to their lives. They are so grateful for all the love and joy Tilda has brought to their family and their relationship. They have always felt fortunate to be able to experience the momentous occasions in Tilda’s life. Some of these are big but others, such as Tilda being ready to ride her bike to and from school on her own, are more ordinary but nonetheless represent a big step for everyone in this family.

Eventually, after a number of years caring for Tilda, Barbara and John applied for, and were granted, an Enduring Parental Responsibility Order (EPR). EPR is a permanent care arrangement which allows parental responsibility to be transferred from the responsible authority, in many cases the Director-General of the Community Services Directorate, to carers, so they can make all the decisions for the child that is in their care.

EPR differs from adoption in that the child’s legal identity is not altered. In practice, this means if EPR is granted the child’s surname doesn’t change. EPR is often used by family members with caring responsibilities, commonly known as kinship carers, just like Barbara and John. Having EPR for Tilda has just meant that Barbara and John no longer need to have contact with the child protection system and can continue making decisions about their future as a family.



“Tilda was the final piece of the puzzle for Barbara and John’s family.”

One aspect of being a carer that can be very sensitive to navigate is keeping in touch with birth parents. Both Barbara and John recognise that Jane is an important person in Tilda's life, and have supported Jane to have contact with Tilda. Barbara and Jane grew up in an environment which was marked by their father's alcoholism and violence. Barbara credits her mother for being the consistent figure in her life and acknowledges she has always felt she needed to look after Jane, even from a young age.

Jane now visits once a month and stays overnight so that everyone can make the most of their time together. This is assisted by Barbara and John's focus on doing what is in the best interests of Tilda. While this arrangement works for them, contact arrangements are individual and need to be suited to each unique circumstance. Additionally, Tilda has also been able to stay in touch with her two older siblings, and has become an aunty to her sister's children.

Barbara and John are also proud grandparents, and enjoy the special times with their grandkids and Tilda hanging out together in school holidays, even if it does make for a very noisy house! They also look forward to larger gatherings with extended family, where everyone is happy to just be together. According to Barbara and John, one of the amazing things in their experience of being carers is how their extended family welcomed Tilda into the fold without blinking an eye. Tilda was the final piece of the puzzle for Barbara and John's family.



In her home with Barbara and John, Tilda has the space to be with her beloved cat and read her novels.

REFLECTION

By Magdalena Liso,
Head of Newpin (ACT and Southern Region NSW),
Uniting

“A wondrous thing” is a testimony to the benefits of children being cared for by members of their extended family when it is not possible or desirable for them to live with their birth parents.

This story highlights how important it is for children to feel safe and secure to flourish. It also demonstrates the strong need for attachment or connection with caring adults which form a collective support structure to help optimise the child’s well-being.

The collective partnership and the respectful relationship between Barbara, John and Tilda’s birth mother has clearly helped create a high-quality care environment for Tilda. It also supports Tilda’s learning and development, sense of belonging and her interaction with the world around her.

It also provides an important insight into the impact of trauma exposure on parental capacity and shed further light on the importance of trauma informed support approaches within the child protection space.

The loving sacrifice that Barbara and John had made in re-focussing their life plans and prioritising Tilda’s wellbeing has not only enriched Tilda’s life but had also enriched their own which once again helps emphasise the truth of “it is in giving that we receive.” (Francis of Assisi)

PUTTING YOUR HEART AND MIND INTO IT

DAVE'S JOURNEY TO BECOMING A FULL TIME DAD

Dave was not in a good place physically or emotionally when CYPs came into the lives of him and his son, Jamie.

As many first-time parents will tell you, looking after a newborn can be an overwhelming and stressful experience. For Dave, this was compounded by his life experiences.

Dave has been through a lot. He acknowledges that he did not have the best upbringing himself, and grew up without knowing his father, which meant he had no role model for parenthood. In addition, Dave has an intellectual disability and had some mental health concerns.

Jamie entered foster care at around four months of age. Prior to this, Dave had not been living with Jamie. He therefore had had limited opportunity to build a relationship with Jamie. Nevertheless, right from the start Dave showed enormous strength and courage as he stepped forward wanting to be Jamie's carer.

Dave made a big step to address his personal issues and began to work with Uniting's Children and Families Program to learn to be the parent he wanted to be.

A few months later Dave and Jamie started attending Newpin twice a week together. Dave needed to learn how to do all the day to day things a dad needs to do, but as his caseworker Stephen will tell you, Dave was a sponge for knowledge. Newpin's personal development programs and therapeutic support groups enabled Dave to learn about child development, attachment and parenting roles whilst



A close friend of Dave and Jamie painted this artwork of their journey together.

providing the opportunity for him to continue working on his own trauma. Newpin also acknowledged Dave's achievements in committing to regular counselling and for being proactive in looking after his mental health. Dave was considered an incredible support to other fathers in the program and often said, "if you really put your heart and mind into it, you can achieve."

A key aspect of Newpin's work with Dave was to establish daily routines. Together, Newpin and Dave discussed how raising a child can be unpredictable, and established back-up and safety plans to manage unplanned situations.

When Dave completed the 18 month Newpin program, plans were underway to bring Jamie home. To support this process, Dave and Jamie transitioned to Uniting's Family Preservation Team to receive some in-home outreach support. At first, Dave was able to look after Jamie for a few days every week at home unsupervised. This then became full time unsupervised parenting.

Today Dave and Jamie happily live together in their new home. Jamie is a bright and talkative little boy with a lot of charisma, charming everyone he meets. He loves the Wiggles and trucks. Dave is teaching him to ride a bike when they go for walks together.

For Dave, it is all about Jamie. He is focused on being the best role model he can be, and knows from his own experience the importance of a son having a relationship with his father. Dave also has a lot more support and positive relationships around him. He participates in community life, including at his Church, where everyone is also really proud of what he has achieved.

Dave also understands that Jamie's wellbeing is fundamentally tied to his own, so takes the time to keep looking after himself. With the support of Stephen, Dave organised for Jamie to attend day-care two days per week, which allows him to socialise with other children and gives Dave some time to focus on his own health. However, Dave says that by 3pm, it is time to get the team back together and brings Jamie home.

A major milestone in Dave and Jamie's journey together was when, on a really hot summer day, Jamie experienced a seizure at home. Dave handled it like a professional, staying calm the whole time and enacting a safety plan. As a result, Jamie was able to get medical help and suffered no adverse consequences of this frightening episode. Looking back on this event, Dave feels a lot of pride in how far he has come.



*"if you
really put your
heart and mind
into it, you can
achieve"*

One thing that was important in Dave's journey was how the Newpin staff were flexible and recognised that everyone learns at their own pace. Staff gave Dave the time to process information and ask questions, and supported him to understand, reflect and learn about his own trauma and the impact it had on his parenting. Newpin also maintained a predictable, safe and creative environment that allowed Dave to build his self-esteem and confidence as both a person and as a parent. Providing the space for Dave and Jamie's relationship to blossom without judgement was critical.

One of the Newpin workers, Lucy, says the moment that sticks in her mind is the farewell held for Dave and Jamie. They received a certificate and gifts, and Dave was all smiles, telling everyone how proud he was, how happy he was to have Jamie coming home, and how excited he was for their future. She says watching them leave Newpin hand-in-hand, chatting together and looking affectionately at each other will stay with her forever.



REFLECTION

By Elizabeth Cox,
Executive Manager OOHC NSW/ACT,
Barnardos Australia

I was struck by the inspiration in this story. To know that Jamie was able to safely return to his birth father's care and receive such positive and confident parenting was truly wonderful. We know the best place for children to be raised is with their birth parents however this story is a stark reminder that not everyone who becomes a parent can do this.

Dave's story demonstrated what can be achieved with the assistance of programs focused on teaching the skills needed to be a confident and capable parent; a parent who, with the right support and environment can willingly engage and learn and ultimately show that they can put the needs of their child first.

Dave is one of the fortunate ones, having the support of the staff from Newpin who believed in him and were there to lead and guide him through the necessary steps, at a pace that was right for him so he could feel confident in his parenting capacity. The benefits to Dave were clear throughout this story – from learning about child development, to building a father son relationship as well as having the opportunity and support to work through his own trauma history. In addition, he also inspired and gave hope to other fathers in the program. Dave reaped so many rewards but none so powerful as the reward of being a parent to his son, watching him grow and feeling so proud of his achievements.

The Newpin program was the right program for Dave. The relationship and trust that developed between the staff and Dave meant that he was open to learning the essential skills for parenting. It is a good reminder of the importance of believing in the capacity to change and Dave was exceptional in his determination and commitment to do whatever was necessary to achieve his goal.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX

FINDING FAMILY FOR BABY JOSEPH

Joseph was born prematurely and weighed only 1.6 kilograms. He had a lot of health problems, including Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome, was having difficulty feeding and later developed sepsis, resulting in him being transferred to the hospital's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

After 3-4 weeks, Joseph started gaining weight and became well enough to go home. However, Joseph's parents had relinquished care for him shortly after he was born. So when it came time for Joseph to leave hospital, he went to live with his crisis carer, who had visited him daily in intensive care.

Everyone in child protection works to have children who can't live with their birth parents placed with an extended family member. This way, children can maintain a connection with their family and culture. Work had to be done to map a family tree on both sides of Joseph's family.

Ashley, Joseph's caseworker from ACT Together, started the search for Joseph's family. Over a number of phone conversations, Joseph's father started to share information with Ashley about where his family lived in Queensland. Joseph's father said that he had had no contact with his family for more than ten years so he did not know if they were even still living in the same area.

Based on the names provided by Joseph's father, Ashley searched the White Pages and the electoral roll for possible relatives in Queensland. She had been able to flesh out Joseph's family tree and trace Joseph's paternal uncle, aunt and step-grandfather. Sadly, she discovered that Joseph's paternal grandmother had recently passed away.

Through this process, she discovered Joseph's paternal aunt, Kim. Kim had been trying to reach out to her brother when their mother had become unwell, and after she had passed away. The day Ashley contacted her, her world changed when she found out not only was her brother alive, he had a baby boy who needed to be looked after. Kim immediately thought, "he is mine."

Kim called Ashley and was reassured that Joseph was safe and cared for. Kim told Ashley she needed to call her husband at 4pm when he finished work to discuss caring for Joseph long-term. At 4:05pm she called back and said they wanted to be assessed as Joseph’s kinship carers, and that they would do whatever they needed to look after Joseph. She felt that Joseph coming into their lives at that moment was meant to be, as her youngest child had started school, she had recently lost her mother, and hadn’t been able to get in touch with her brother. She was feeling a bit lost but Joseph’s arrival gave a sense of completeness to their family.

Joseph will turn one in the next few months and is a happy little boy in his forever home with Kim, her husband and their four children. Joseph’s paternal uncle, aunts and grandfather also live close by.



“these are the people who made you, these are the people who cared for you, and we are the ones who are keeping you.”

Kim says that they regard themselves as Joseph’s parents, and her children as his siblings. But she also recognises the importance of talking to Joseph about the other people who brought him into the world and who nurtured him before they came along. Above Joseph’s bed, Kim has put photos of his birth parents, his crisis carer, and her family. She points them out to Joseph, saying, “these are the people who made you, these are the people who cared for you, and we are the ones who are keeping you.”

By building a relationship with Joseph's birth parents and engaging with them in the ways they felt most comfortable, Ashley was able to record more detailed information about kin and family history for Joseph's life story work. In addition, Ashley's work allowed Joseph's parents to contribute to Joseph's care planning and long-term care arrangements the best that they could.

But it still wouldn't have turned out so well if Ashley had not consulted the electoral roll and investigated possible family connections so thoroughly. Luckily, Ashley persisted, and as a result Kim and Joseph are living happily together as a family.



This picture was drawn by Joseph's sister of their whole family together.

REFLECTION

By Ms Bernadette Mitcherson,
Deputy Director-General,
Community Services Directorate

When I read this story I was struck by the persistence and determination of Ashley in finding Joseph's family. Despite having only limited information, Ashley was undeterred in finding a placement for Joseph that would give him the best possible start to life.

A Step Up for Our Kids is an unprecedented shift in how we deliver services for children and young people in out of home care. While the reforms under the Strategy are intended to create generational change, Ashley's work highlights that new approaches to practice are already underway. Placing children with suitable family members is one of the highest priorities under *A Step Up for Our Kids*, and in achieving this we can be sure that we are on our way to achieving our long term aspiration of children and young people growing up safe, strong and connected.

Creativity and innovation are hallmarks of good casework, and Ashley has clearly showed how thinking outside the box leads to positive outcomes. I want to thank everyone who is involved in delivering exceptional outcomes for children and young people in care.

THRIVING, NOT JUST SURVIVING

CASS EMBRACES INDEPENDENCE

Cass was 16 and residing in residential care when Emily commenced working with her.

Cass has several siblings who have been in out of home care, and her own mother had involvement with the child protection system as a child. During her upbringing, Cass experienced instability and other difficulties in her home life leading to trauma which needed to be addressed. She lived at different times with various family members, but unfortunately these placements broke down and Cass went to live in residential care as a teenager. At this stage, Cass had a lot of issues that needed to be worked through, and this manifested in behaviour which brought her into further conflict with those around her.

When Cass met Emily, Cass's immediate needs as a 16 year old were assistance for overcoming drug use and getting Centrelink payments set up so she could have an income. Then there were longer term issues such as finding stable accommodation, getting an education and planning for her future.

For six to eight months Cass and Emily's relationship was tricky. Cass had reached a stage in her life where it was hard to envisage her circumstances ever getting better. As a young person, it can be difficult to feel that your voice is heard in decision-making. A fundamental tenet of casework is to facilitate the opportunity for a young person to inform decisions about what is best for them in their care plan. Navigating this terrain is often complex, and caseworkers have to invest time building rapport with the young person to get to a point where they are empowered to contribute.

Emily showed persistence and flexibility in developing a relationship with Cass. In addition to regularly initiating contact with Cass herself, Emily tried to create a more equal power relationship by saying Cass could also contact her whenever she needed to, and emphasised that they could work together to achieve Cass's goals.

“Cass says she now understands what it is like to live and not just survive.”

After a period of time, Cass decided she no longer wanted to live in residential care and she moved in with a friend. It quickly became apparent that this was not a place where Cass could thrive. Cass realised this and started to take responsibility for getting the help she needed to create a better future for herself. Luckily for her, Emily was right there, ready to embrace the opportunity to start working closely with Cass in making plans for her future. It was around this time that Emily noticed a transformation in Cass. Later, Cass said she had a light bulb moment when she realised how the lives of people she was associating with were stuck in the same gear, not going anywhere.

Since then, Cass and Emily have been in regular contact, meeting weekly or fortnightly. Emily provided support with banking and sourced food vouchers. She also blocked out whole days of her work calendar to spend with Cass at Centrelink to get all her supports set up. Together, Cass and Emily set small

achievable goals and began ticking things off the to-do list. All progress was celebrated, no matter how incremental, and gave Cass the motivation to keep going as it showed her a different future was possible, whereas she previously felt that things would never go her way.

Young people who have been in care need stability and a sense of home, so Cass and Emily also set about finding appropriate accommodation. After speaking to the Community Adolescent Programs (CAP) management, it was decided that Cass could be supported to access the CAP Housing program and be offered a Transitional Housing property. This is a property that is managed by ACT Together but which, if certain conditions are met, could be signed over to Cass in the future resulting in a public housing tenancy agreement with Housing ACT.

Cass was given a tour of an apartment and beamed from ear to ear when they talked about the possibility of her moving in. Once Cass had finalised Centrelink and banking details, Emily and Cass talked about how best to get organised, which included packing up Cass’s belongings and purchasing furniture and whitegoods for her new home.

Today it is evident that Cass has developed real pride in creating a home for herself. She loves her apartment and has found a home she can look after and feel connected to, somewhere she can be herself and be safe. Cass says she now understands what it is like to live and not just survive. Cass is also now studying a Certificate II in Disability Support with the aim of gaining employment in disability care.

As young people in care approach adulthood, it is really important that the people involved in their care ensure that they have developed the critical life skills that will enable them to live independently. This includes cooking, budgeting, banking and looking after their physical and mental wellbeing.

Cass is a highly capable person, but didn't have the opportunity to demonstrate her mastery of these life skills until she got her own place. Emily is amazed when she reflects on how transformed Cass is as a person, particularly in the way she demonstrates her independence. Cass is confident when meal planning and buying nutritious food on a budget, and can manage her finances independently. This is particularly important as Cass doesn't have many family supports to rely on. For Emily, this is testament to the importance of getting to know a young person and involving them in making the decisions that will ultimately transform their life trajectory.

Emily is still in regular contact with Cass to provide support whenever its needed. Cass will have this support until she leaves care at the age of 18. However, if she needs further support after this time, an application for Aftercare Support can be made.

On reflection, Emily understands that when Cass used to fly off the handle she was testing boundaries to see if Emily would abandon her like most people in her life had. Emily understood the value of both persistence and keeping the faith that at a certain point there would be an opening and the relationship between herself and Cass could flourish. It was also important that Emily demonstrated to Cass that she was the rock that Cass could rely on. Cass will always appreciate that Emily stuck by her.



REFLECTION

By Bronwyn Downes, Manager,
Birth Family Advocacy Support Service,
Australian Red Cross

Emily's work with Cass is a really good reminder about being available to support a young person when they reach a point of being ready to engage, that this age varies between young people and can often be prompted following a decision the young person makes that may not be in their best interests.

Our work requires flexibility to meet individuals' needs and circumstances, which can involve allowing young people to make choices which may have foreseeable undesirable outcomes. Doing so can provide valuable opportunities for learning, growth and development. By not preventing Cass from moving in with her friend, Emily enabled Cass's light bulb moment which helped her to move forward. It's also important for young people to feel they have some power and control in decision making in their lives, as well as a safe space to reflect on those choices. It seems that over time and increasingly Emily has facilitated this for Cass, which will aid Cass in managing independent living and making positive choices going forward.

Ultimately, in spite of her early childhood and care experience, Cass is well placed to transition into independent living and adulthood, and with the positive relationship built with Emily, knows that support is available if needed.

THE DEADLY ALL-STARS

PROVIDING CULTURALLY SENSITIVE SERVICES

It is well-known that a disproportionately high number of Aboriginal children and young people enter out of home care. Compounding this situation, there can be challenges identifying culturally appropriate placements for Aboriginal children and young people which ensure the continuation of cultural identity, connection and development.

A group of Aboriginal workers at Barnardos started a carer support group in 2010. This program subsequently evolved into the Deadly All-Stars program, which aims to nurture a connection to culture for Aboriginal children and young people who are in out of home care. ACT Together continued the program under *A Step Up For Our Kids* to ensure Aboriginal children and young people in care thrive in their cultural development.



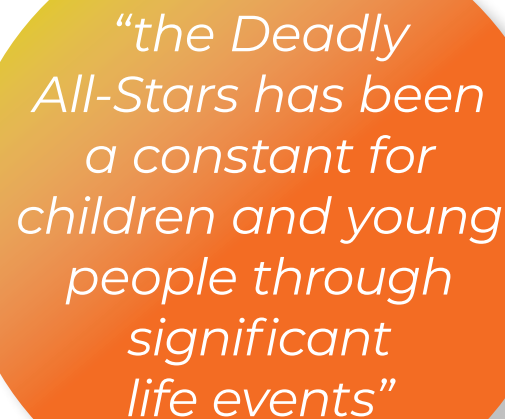
The Deadly All-Stars meet for five weeks of every school term. The group has a broad age range, from seven to 17 years of age, which has given the older young people the opportunity to take on leadership roles. For example, two of the older boys attended the national SNAICC conference and spoke about their experiences. Others, including some of the younger boys, have given Acknowledgement of Country at school and functions, which is a great confidence builder for all of them.

Many successes have arisen out of the program's activities. The participants have participated in art workshops, resulting in four of the children having their artwork accepted into the international art exhibition, Big Ones Little Ones. Creating art is another way for children and young people to express their feelings, and all their artwork is now displayed at the ACT Together offices. They have also learnt about dreamtime stories, and have designed, made and learnt to play a yidaki (Didgeridoo).

In 2018, the group is collaborating with a design and management company to create a healing garden, which will be a place where children, young people, families, workers and local residents can sit and reflect, and also learn about local bush plants and foods that can be grown in the ACT. Some of the older boys will have various roles in the establishment of a Healing Garden, and will be making phone calls and sending emails on behalf of the group to teach them skills such as negotiation and advocacy.

The group have formed positive relationships with each other and also with strong leaders in the Aboriginal community. The group have been taught local Aboriginal history, sourced samples of bush food plants and tools and have been working to establish the healing garden. Other Aboriginal leaders have taught the children and young people to make and design their own didgeridoos and traditional dancing.

The program also aims to further educate carers so that the children and young people's cultural identity can be integrated into their everyday life. The group also works on the children and young people's Cultural Support Plans and life story books, which are a record of their journey in care. The group has also supported carers and workers to find extended family and children and young people have been reunited with family members. Placement with family is always the goal when children and young people come into care, but is especially important for Aboriginal children as it assists to maintain a connection to cultural identity. Finding family members is a great achievement for everyone.



“the Deadly All-Stars has been a constant for children and young people through significant life events”

Most children in the program come from Aboriginal nations outside the ACT, so it is important to help carers maintain the children's identity and connection to their mob. The carers in the group let the facilitators know if they need further support and the group regularly has debriefing sessions. All carers are provided with resources about services available to them as well as information about the local community. Carers are also encouraged to make contact with Aboriginal organisations like Winnunga Nimmityjah and Gugan Gulwan Youth Aboriginal Corporation for medical issues and youth-focused activities, as well as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs at the Child and Family Centres in their local area. Just by attending the program the carers, children and young people have formed very close connections and are a great support to each other.



There is also a focus on achieving reconciliation through working and walking together. The group's facilitators have had discussions with carers of children and young people about the legacy of the Stolen Generations, and provides carers with information about what is happening in the local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community such as NAIDOC week, Reconciliation week and National Aboriginal and Islander Children's Day. The Deadly All-Stars also participate in the annual Sorry Day walks and Apology Day events.

Therapeutically, the foundation of the group is culture, however the building blocks are relationship and play. With the facilitators and, for the most part, the participants remaining the same over several years, the Deadly All-Stars has been a constant for children and young people through significant life events such as birthdays, the death of family members, placement disruption, the onset of adolescence, and the birth of siblings.

Most excitingly, in October 2016, the Deadly All-Stars undertook an excursion to Alice Springs, Kings Canyon and Uluru. This trip was the collaborative effort of ACT Together, CYPS and the broader Canberra community. It was a very spiritual experience, and brought the group closer together.

REFLECTION

By Susan Pellegrino,
ACT State Coordinator,
CREATE Foundation

CREATE Foundation welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Deadly All-Stars initiative as part of this publication.

CREATE is enthusiastic about the Deadly All-Stars as a 'grass-roots' initiative, established by Aboriginal staff at Barnardos, which provides cultural and leadership opportunities for Aboriginal children and young people in out of home care. We encourage the development of initiatives which are culturally safe and support opportunities for Aboriginal programs which are responsive to the needs of Aboriginal children and young people.

We acknowledge the critical importance of ensuring Aboriginal children and young people in care have opportunities to build their connection to culture, positive identity, strength, and pride in culture – an opportunity which the Deadly All-Stars provides. Rich opportunities are provided through the program for building strong relationships with each other and leaders within the community.

We also recognise the important leadership and mentoring opportunities provided for young people through the Deadly All-Stars. We, CREATE, have had the honour of two of the young members connecting with the CREATE Foundation in leadership roles. Their sense of confidence, and pride through being part of the group is clear and an inspiration for other young people. We also value the importance of the program providing genuine opportunities for empowering Aboriginal children and young people through having their voices heard, and being provided with genuine decision-making opportunities.

Young people who are part of the Deadly All-Stars describe the group with enthusiasm, expressing their enjoyment in participating in the activities and their strong connection to each other. The young people's sense of ownership and pride in being part of the group is also directly related to the investment, support, commitment and energy of the program leaders and carers.

We are keen to watch the journey of the young leaders of the Deadly All-Stars as they continue to grow and take on other leadership opportunities in the broader community.

We hope to see this initiative continue to expand and for more support that allows Aboriginal communities to develop initiatives that reflect the diversity of children and young people in care.

KEEPING THE DOOR OPEN

ONCE A FOSTER PARENT, ALWAYS A FOSTER PARENT

Suzanne has been a foster carer for thirty years, starting with Barnardos when the agency only had a handful of foster children on their books. During that time, she and her husband Tony have provided foster and respite care to over 200 children.

Although the vast majority of Suzanne's work as a carer predates *A Step Up for Our Kids*, her successes are the kind of outcomes we aspire to under the Strategy. Suzanne demonstrates a keen awareness of the effects of trauma on children and young people's behaviour, and has a lot of insight into the effects of family and carer relationships on foster children. She also has a lot of tips for carers to manage their own wellbeing.

An important part of being a carer is acknowledging the many important relationships that children and young people have. Although developing an attachment with their current carer is crucial, this does not mean that a child cannot maintain other significant relationships where appropriate, such as with their birth parents, as we saw in the stories of David and Barbara. Suzanne also feels that it is important for carers to keep the door open to children they have previously cared for, including where placements have broken down. She believes that if a child has to change placements for whatever reason, effort should be made to help the child understand they remain important and loved, which is a valuable message for children who may already have absorbed a lot of negativity in their early years.

Suzanne lives this wisdom. Her door is always open to the children and young people she has cared for, and she has stayed in contact with many. She often speaks to them around the time of their birthday or has them over for dinner, and lets them know that they can contact her for advice or support. Several have taken up this opportunity. For example, a young man in his mid-twenties reconnected with Suzanne and Tony in the last few years. He had lived with Suzanne as a child, and had a lot of complex needs due to the abuse he had suffered when he was very young. Spending some time with Suzanne and her family on their farm helped him to get back on track after a difficult period, and reminded him of the possibilities that are open to him despite the complex feelings he struggles with from time to time.

Furthermore, after finding Suzanne on Facebook, a former foster child who now lives overseas has chatted with Suzanne about the way her care changed her life outcomes. She is now a mother and grandmother herself, having successfully avoided the intergenerational cycle of child protection involvement that some care leavers experience.

Suzanne has a lot of advice for carers' wellbeing. She says it is important to recognise the limits of your influence on a child, to know where to go for support, and to utilise respite care. Although it may be instinctive to view respite care as a disruption to a child's placement, it can also allow a placement to remain stable and continue into the long term.

It is also about retaining perspective during the hard times, and carers experience some very, very hard times. Suzanne acknowledges that it is difficult to not feel personally affronted when a foster child takes out their anger on a carer, but it is important to remember that they are acting out because of the trauma they have suffered.

Furthermore, if a placement breaks down, this is not necessarily the end of the road. There may come a time when a child looks back and recognises the value of what a carer provided to them. Suzanne experienced this herself when the placement of a teenage girl with her broke down. When the young woman left, Suzanne questioned whether her actions as a carer had made any difference at all. Two years later, the girl came back and presented Suzanne a bunch of flowers and thanked her for the care and support she provided during their time together.

“Noah appreciates the way Suzanne has kept her door open to him”



Ultimately, for Suzanne, providing foster care to children is about providing a secure basis for their future decision-making. By role modelling behaviours and life choices that children have not previously been exposed to, Suzanne believes you can greatly influence the trajectory of a child's life. This is encapsulated in the story of Noah.

Noah grew up in very neglectful and abusive households and was placed in temporary foster care at the age of nine. This turned into a permanent arrangement living with Suzanne and her family. In Noah's words, Suzanne and her husband were the ultimate team, demonstrating a staggering amount of patience and resilience. He says Suzanne demanded respect, but not through intimidation or scare tactics. Rather, she demonstrated unconditional love and role-modelled the values of hard work, honesty and loyalty. What also helped him adjust to his new life with them was that extended family and friends were welcoming. Noah says "to be a successful family you really need to believe you are in fact family."

Noah has told Suzanne that growing up in her household gave him the confidence to excel in day-to-day life. He is now living in Sydney where he works as an electrician and has bought his first house. He has made great friends and met a lovely lady who is now his partner. Noah says the way his life is now would not have been possible without Suzanne and her husband, and appreciates the way their door continues to remain open to him.

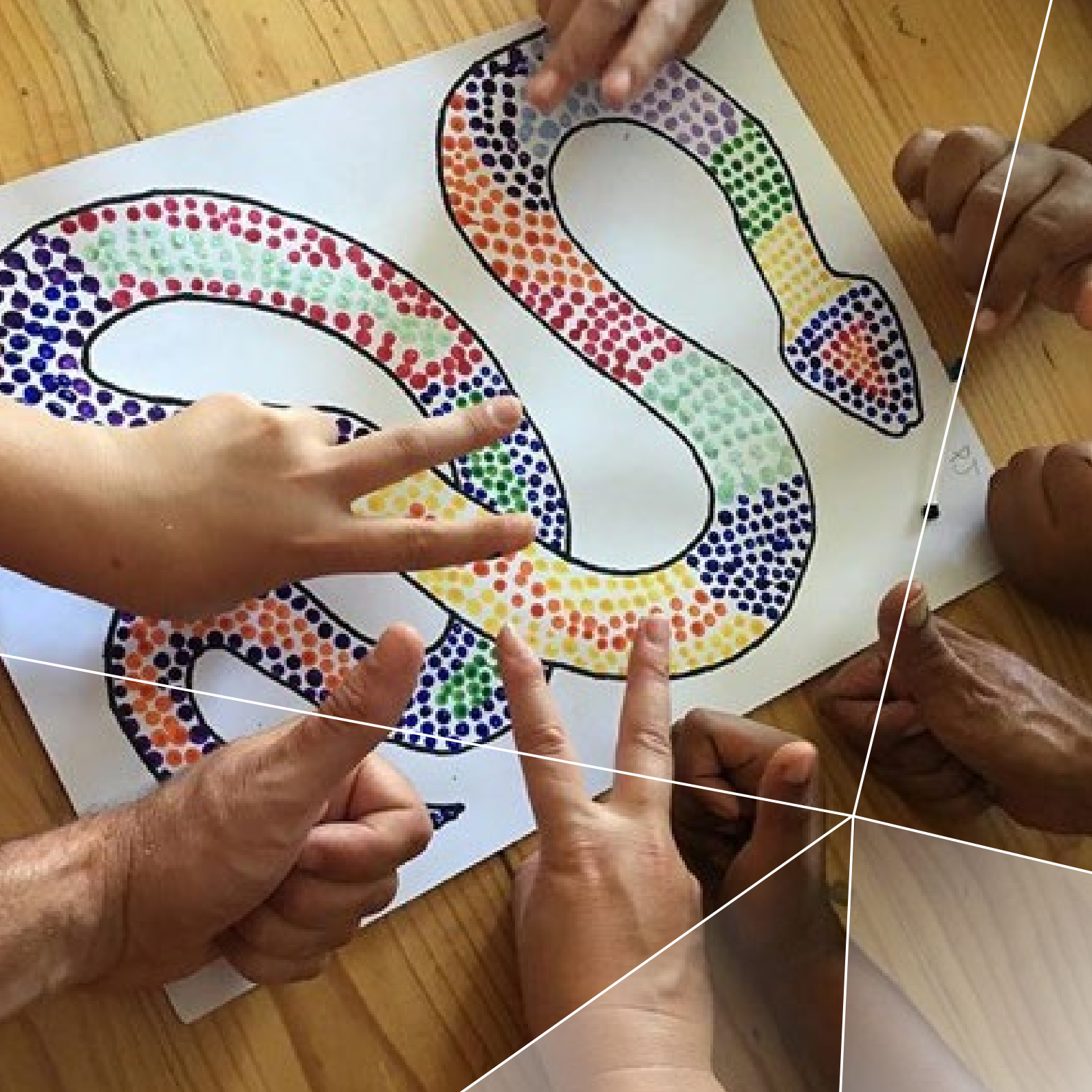
REFLECTION

By Carol Archard, Manager,
Foster and Kinship Carer Advocacy Service,
Carers ACT

This story is an example of the fantastic calibre of foster carers we are lucky to have in the ACT. It reflects to me how important it is to do all we can to support foster carers to continue in their role.

What stands out is the consistency of the foster carers in maintaining as many supporting relationships as possible and in using trauma informed practice to support their common-sense parenting. It also reflects the resilience of the foster carer to persist when sometimes placements did not go well and a self-awareness to know when to seek respite. The foster carer also showed great dedication in being committed to be a long-term foster carer for several children despite the hard times.

The story also showed the significance to the children growing up within the out of home care system of the need to belong to a family and this highlights the need to keep the best interest of the child at the forefront of all decision making. It is apparent that without these foster carers the outcomes for the children who have been in their care could have been a lot different.



*Thank you to
everyone who participated
in making this publication possible.*



A Step Up for Our Kids

One Step Can Make a Lifetime of Difference