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Fostering a Fresh Approach

Clevelander Nicole Shefrin works to raise funds, community awareness regarding the foster-child experience

by Lisa Gordon Wither

According to the Child Safety Summit*, released in December 2012, by the office of Ohio Attorney General Mike DeWine:

Data show that in Ohio in Fiscal Year 2011, there were:

- 23,169 reports of alleged child neglect in this state
- 22,993 reports of alleged child physical abuse
- 12,340 reports of alleged child sexual abuse
- 10,580 reports of multiple abuse allegations

On average, there are approximately 12,000 Ohio children in foster care during any given month.

To the uninformed, the children referenced above are simple statistics: nameless, faceless. And easy to ignore.

Some might even call foster children – and those destined for foster care – tossaways. Someone else's concern.

To Nicole Shefrin, executive director of Fostering Hope, they are her purpose.

"We established Fostering Hope to raise awareness and provide support and guidance in areas frequently lacking for children in the foster care setting," explains Nicole, about the organization she co-founded in 2013 with her husband, Jason, an executive vice president with InterDesign in Solon, Ohio, and friend and former colleague Jessica Everest. "We bring to these children the types of experiences not readily available to them and work to help them realize they are part of the larger community that exists outside the walls of their foster housing."

Fostering Hope raises financial support through multiple channels: social media, direct donation, corporate sponsorship and special events, such as wine tastings and bowling tournaments; accrued funds are then used on behalf of the residential youth at Ohio Guidestone (formerly Berea Children's Home). The fundraisers cultivate awareness and understanding, too, educating the community about the realities of the foster system and reinforcing to the children – like all children, in need of love and guidance – that they are not merely faceless statistics and that someone cares.

The organization's credo is simple: every donation, be it in dollars or of time, can change the life of foster children for the better. And, as Nicole speaks, it's evident that she knows first-hand the heartache of neglect at the hands of people whose love should be a given – and the happy outcomes that intervention can accomplish.

A violent childhood – then hope

Indeed, it is Nicole's grim youth that informs her present. Much like many of the young people with whom she works today, her world was one of abuse – emotional and physical – at the hands of her mother, a woman plagued by mental illness and severe depression. Nicole's father, an alcoholic and drug user, created additional unrest.

Her parents' eventual divorce led not to peace but more anguish: at age 11, she was targeted by her mother's boyfriend and sexually abused for several years. The chaos that was her daily reality made Nicole a prime candidate for becoming a foster care-system statistic.

And then, at age 16, life changed when Joseph Bukovan, her paternal grandfather, took custody of her.

Says Nicole, "The happy memories of my childhood revolve around my grandfather. He made me feel safe, secure and loved. He was and still is among my best fans."

Nicole also credits Marilyn Jimenez, a business-skills instructor from Brecksville-Broadview Heights High, who mentored her through some difficult times and gave her hopes of a happy future. Says Nicole, who remains in touch with her former teacher, "The world would be a better place if everyone had a Mrs. J."

An idea takes root

Nicole went on to receive an undergraduate degree in Art History from Kent State University, and raise a family with Jason, whom she married in 2002. She also spent time doing personal work to help in coming to terms with and moving forward from the abuse of her past. In 2006, Nicole began volunteering at Guidestone, where she saw that the youth in residence, many of whom came from fractured homes, were hungry for the conventional joy of a happy family experience – and how the smallest of efforts from the volunteers made a positive impact on the children.

Recalls Nicole, "I know the difference that one person can make in the life of another because I am an example of that difference."

From this, sprang Fostering Hope.

One more child reached

In today's teetering economy, some non-profits are reporting a decrease in financial support; often, even established donors withdraw, noting, "This year, someone else will have to help." For a fledgling organization such as Fostering Hope, creating awareness and building a secure support base is vital. But Clevelanders, says Nicole, have been extraordinary in reaching out and helping Fostering Hope grow.

"Cleveland is a great city in which to launch a non-profit," she notes, "and there are so many resources available and people willing to help a good cause get started. I love Cleveland even more since I've started this project."

She continues, "As for the idea that 'someone else can help', well, remember – one person not helping, means one child not reached."

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Fostering the future

Still in its inaugural year of operation, Fostering Hope has already seen success both with solidifying the services now underway and with Greater Cleveland's continued willingness to help; the organization's long-term vision, meanwhile, is still being defined. Says Nicole, "My hope is that we could develop a shared-responsibility program that would become both the heart of our organization as well as the model used across the nation to support children living in foster care."

A lofty goal, this – but as awareness of Fostering Hope's commitment grows, so does the potential to help foster children move beyond being seen as statistics, in turn bolstering both their self-esteem and their roles as welcome participants in society.

"There is a movement underway," concludes Nicole, "that revolves around the importance of engaging the community and rooting foster children to them. I think Fostering Hope could be at the forefront of that movement."

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