

## Children Awaiting Parents expands adoption services

By VELVET SPICER

Shane and Mariana Henry were in foster care 1,286 days before being adopted by Bobby and Heather Henry on Halloween 2018.

"I had to go through a lot of homes, and it was really sad when I had to leave them," said 8-year-old Shane Henry in a video testimonial. "It was really tough for me to go from home to home and I'm like 'I hope this is the one,' until I got here and then this was my home."

Shane is one of roughly 8,000 youngsters aided by Children Awaiting Parents/The Donald J. Corbett Adoption Agency through its 47-year history. The not-for-profit helps connect families with children in the foster care system, some of whom have languished there for years.

"The majority of the kids we connect with families have been in care for probably three-plus years. Some of them five, six, seven, eight years and they've never been adopted," said CAP's new Executive Director Lauri McKnight. "Some are in residential facilities or group homes. Many of our children have been institutionalized and have been in facilities for up to six or eight years."

CAP was founded in 1972 as the Council of Adoptive Parents by Peggy Soule and a group of parents seeking to break through the barriers of adoption. A brainstorming meeting sparked the idea to create and distribute a book that included pictures of adoptable children. The original CAP Book was born.

Within five years, the CAP Book Inc. had become a regional, multistate photo-listing of children who had been waiting the longest for adoptive homes, and in 1980, the *National Enquirer* magazine had begun to include a photo of a child from the CAP Book in each issue, paving the way for the organization and its book to become a national listing.

"Over the years, as technology changed, so did the CAP Book. No longer do we use books for this purpose," McKnight said. "Photo listing on websites online began and this agency continued to be, from the beginning, an advocacy organization for these children who wait long periods of time in foster care without a family or resource."

In 2017, CAP officials decided they wanted to do more for the children, that matching and searching and making connections was not enough to help children and prevent disruptions in adoptions. In addition to its other work, CAP became a licensed adoption agency.

"That meant that we could do all the things that were being done for the past 45 years for advocacy, but now we could follow the family all the way to finalization and be part of the actual service of the adoption," McKnight said.



McKnight

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CAP begins the process of adoption by training prospective parents for foster care, called the Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting, or MAPP. CAP then starts the match and search process to connect children with families. A Home Study follows, which includes a family background, financial statements, educational background, relationships and daily routines, among other things.

Most of CAP's families are in the Rochester area, although they can be matched with children around the country. CAP's adoption agency eased into the process and got its start last year. Several children have been adopted since that time, McKnight said. CAP has a social worker on staff, a trainer and family support worker to help with the adoption process and also offers post-adoption services.

"And under the umbrella of Children Awaiting Parents we can do more things so we are doing more things," McKnight said. "We're now on the cusp of growth and we are opening up our vision and horizons to offer those children who never get adopted services after they age out of the foster care system."

Often what happens when a child in foster care reaches 18 is they choose to leave the system because they haven't been adopted and they have no connection to their birth family or foster family.

"They go out there and try to make it on their own and they don't," McKnight said, noting that young adults can stay in foster care until they are 21 if they go to college. In that instance, the federal government will provide an education and

training voucher, or ETV, for up to \$5,000 per year for college studies.

"But a lot of kids don't do that, especially in communities like this, and they just want to be out of the foster care system," she said. "They want people to be off their back."

And once they leave foster care, often they fail, finding themselves couch-surfing, homeless, incarcerated or pregnant, McKnight said, because although some services do exist now, there are not enough to help all of the young adults aging out of foster care. That's where CAP's new Social Supports for Future Endeavors, or SSAFE, comes in.

"We've put some good people in place," McKnight said. "And we're going to help these kids not just figure out how to live independently, but we're going to try to connect them to some family, no matter how it turns out, as a resource, as a mentor, as a distant support, maybe even as a family to live with. That's our main goal, that of all the things we do for this kid, that we somehow connect them with somebody that's there for them."

CAP also is in the application process for foster care through the state Office of Children and Family Services. The process could take time, but if approved, CAP would be licensed to provide foster care in addition to adoption, post-adoption services and the SSAFE services, what McKnight calls a holistic approach to the foster care and adoption systems.

McKnight is passionate about CAP's work with foster children and families. For two decades she has worked with families in different capacities, most recently at Glove House Inc., a nonprofit agency that serves youth and families in crisis from 10 counties in the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes regions. She landed at CAP in October 2018.

"My history is in the field of family services forever. I have always worked with families. It's my passion and I'm driven to just do everything we can to provide services and positive experiences for kids out there," McKnight said. "And successfully grow programs. That's why I think I'm here. I always say I'm not a financial wizard and I don't have a million in my pocket, but I know how to grow a program."

She said the vision she has for CAP is to become more established and recognized nationally, and collaboration will be part of that.

"And that we will be more utilized in our own backyard and that this community and the surrounding communities will look to us for support and services," McKnight said. "Now, further down the road, do I hope that we have offices in other states? Yes, I do. Definitely my goal."

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