MPR News | Minnesota Now 18 years on, MN adoption agency finds new ways to support older youth in foster care 01M64D1E6771C7Y4FTQB0RZDX6

NINA MOINI: We're going to jump back in time now to 2007-- get your low-rise jeans-- when a documentary team at MPR told the story of two Minnesota teenagers who were looking for adoptive parents. It also followed an adoption recruiter who was trying to help them. Here's a clip with producer Katherine Winter.

CATHERINE WINTER: Jen Braun is constantly looking for more families.

JEN BRAUN: I asked my dentist. I ask people at the checkout line. Almost everyone I meet, I'm asking them, might you be interested in adopting a teenager.

CATHERINE WINTER: Jen Braun has to sell the idea of adopting teenagers to social workers, too. Until quite recently, kids over 12 were largely assumed to be unadoptable. Jen Braun says she recently went to talk to a teenager in a group home about adoption. One of the workers there said to her, he's 17. Why bother?

JEN BRAUN: That makes me so angry. And I said to her, well, let me ask you something. Do you still have family that you talk to and see, even if it's not regularly, several times a year? Is there someone that you can call in your family if you have a problem or someone that you need to bounce an idea off of? Well, sure. Yeah. So you say to me, he's 17. Why bother? And I say to you, because he is only 17. He's got a lot of life left.

NINA MOINI: Wow, that was Jen Braun in the 2007 MPR documentary, *Wanted Parents.* She worked on a pilot program called The Homecoming Project. It aimed to prove it was possible to find homes for people who were willing to adopt teens rather than leaving them to age out of foster care and begin adult life on their own.

Shortly after the documentary, Braun co-founded an adoption agency called Ampersand Families, which turns 18 this month. And Executive Director Christina Zeise joins me now. Thanks for being with us, Christina.

CHRISTINA ZEISE: Yeah, thanks for having me, Nina.

NINA MOINI: Hearing what we just heard from Jen Braun in that conversation and thinking about why bother and thinking about folks being-- thinking of children really as unadoptable after a certain age, I mean, how do you feel listening back to that?

CHRISTINA ZEISE: I feel the same way that she did. It makes me very angry. I happen to have an 18-year-old at home who just the other day had to navigate urgent care by himself, and it was a constant amount of text back and forth.

So thinking about the youth that we serve having to be out on their own, I mean, that's just one tiny example of the things that you don't automatically learn just because you turn 18. And you really need the support of a family to help you through that.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, so tell us a little bit more about how you became involved with The Homecoming Project pilot program and you took it from there.

CHRISTINA ZEISE: So that wasn't actually me. That would have been Jen, who was on the call, and also the other co-founder of the organization. But I started--

NINA MOINI: You took it from them, I should say.

CHRISTINA ZEISE: Yep, yep, exactly. So I started with the organization a little less than five years ago. But we have definitely continued the work of trying to find adoptive homes for older youth in foster care.

It does look a little bit different than it did after The Homecoming Project, because after 18 years, you learn a little bit more about what you're doing well and where there's areas for improvement. And even though older youth are still very adaptable through the techniques that were developed through The Homecoming Project, we've also learned that there just still aren't enough families who are interested in adopting through foster care for the older teenagers.

So we also do a lot more work now with relative kin families and trying to see if there are options there where youth can stay connected to relative kin family members that they currently have.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, tell me more about that. Was that not always a practice in the past? Does it take more resources to go that route? Because you would think that you would be looking for family members first.

CHRISTINA ZEISE: Right. I think back in the day, there was maybe an assumption that if mom or dad were not able to support a youth, then why would their family members be able to do that. And I think that line of thinking has really changed now.

So one of the programs that we have at ampersand that helps us keep kids connected to relative kin is when they first get into care, we are trying to do relative search and engagement, which is really just looking at doing a deep dive into us almost being like investigators and figuring out what family members are out there, and could they potentially be a permanency resource for that youth?

We also work to license families for adoption through foster care. So that could be the nonrelatives, like Jen talked about in the video. We also are doing a lot of work with family members too, who are interested in adoption, whether that be an auntie, an uncle, a grandparent. And the process looks a little bit different because when you're a nonrelative, you've thought about whether this is something you want to do, you're usually ready to go and work through the hoops.

A lot of time-- well, any one of us can imagine, if we had a phone call today asking to take two of our relatives into care, we all have full lives, and so the ability for us to do some handholding and really walking alongside of relative kin families to make sure that they have the resources they need to get successful permanency option is where we try to focus when we can.

NINA MOINI: Can you say a little bit about what it does look like when someone turns 18 and ages out, I guess, so to speak, of foster care and if they are on their own?

CHRISTINA ZEISE: Yeah. So, first of all, there's an option called extended foster care, where youth can stay supported through the foster care system until their early 20s. So that is an option that youth can take. And in those cases, they would still stay on our caseload, and we would still work with them.

And then I think when you look at aging out, youth just-- youth that age out of foster care become at risk for so many different things. Drug use. Criminal justice involvement. Homelessness is a huge issue for youth aging out of foster care. Early families. Pregnancy. All of those types of things. It feels like every risk factor out there, our youth who have been in child welfare are at about a 50% higher rate of most of those things than youth who have not been involved in child welfare.

NINA MOINI: This is interesting. In Kansas, I'm seeing here that there's this option where teenagers can establish legal relationships with a group of trusted adults, either called SOUL families. I didn't about this. That sounds neat. I mean, would you support something like that, a model like that. In Minnesota, is that something that you've looked into much?

CHRISTINA ZEISE: For sure. Ampersand is actually part of a coalition right now with other child welfare thought leaders to try to bring SOUL families to Minnesota. So we will be working on that. Foster Advocates is the lead for that. But we are hoping to have a bill introduced this next legislative session to do that.

SOUL families makes a lot of sense because when you think about it, when we all age-- or when we all turned 18, we might have called our grandma for one thing or our dad for another thing. We called our sister for something. And so that's what SOUL families is, is really thinking about how to get just a crew of people to be in your circle that you can use for supports.

NINA MOINI: And do you a little bit more about how those trusted adults are identified. Do they apply? Is it more led through community, or how does that work?

CHRISTINA ZEISE: Well, I think in Minnesota, we would still need to figure those pieces out as we continue to advocate for SOUL family. But I think when we-- so we do a little bit of this at Ampersand Families.

So when we do that relative search and we identify relatives, not everyone is going to be interested in being the one legal permanency option. So we might have a grandma who's interested in bringing their youth to church on Sundays.

We might have a football coach who is like, they can come over to my house on Wednesdays and have dinner after practice. And so that's how we try to keep families connected. And I think SOUL models would just be a more permanent option and an expansion of that type of scenario.

NINA MOINI: There's emotional support, and then there's structure, which I hear you talking about or resources. What are some of the other challenges that you face in taking a more nuanced approach beyond looking for a family, but taking into account what might work for that individual teen?

CHRISTINA ZEISE: So I think it really depends on where they're going, if they're going into the work world, if they're going into a college environment. But I think that we have seen in recent years a ton more supports for youth as they age out.

So there's organizations who are helping do that emotional piece and making sure kids are connected to folks that can support them. I think you can see some colleges who offer a really good support group to fosters so that they can be successful in their time there.

So I think it looks a little bit different for every youth. And I think as long as they have that crew of people there to support them into those next steps and help them figure out how to navigate those resources that are available, that's what's really important.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, we're talking about 18 years, which is not usually an anniversary that gets a lot of emphasis, but for your organization, it really is symbolic. What are your hopes for the next 18 years, just in terms of Minnesota's child welfare system and supporting kids?

CHRISTINA ZEISE: My biggest hope is that we continue to look at new ways to do this differently. The way that we were doing this work 18 years ago, there's still some relevance there. But there's a lot more that we know. And I think Minnesota could be moving faster in taking research and implementing it so that we can support youth.

We still have far too many older youth who age out of foster care. And to me, that is just unacceptable to be like you've turned 18 and your support is over. Most youth are not involved in child welfare because of a decision that they made. It is just circumstance, and they need to be supported as they enter into adulthood.

NINA MOINI: Christina, thanks so much for coming by the program. We really appreciate your time.

CHRISTINA ZEISE: Absolutely. Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: Christina Zeise is executive director of Roseville-based Ampersand Families, a nonprofit adoption agency focused on older kids and teenagers in foster care.