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ADOPTION

Foster Care: Extreme Edition

An innovative program in St. Louis is making big strides in matching hard-to-place kids with adoptive families, on a fast track

BY CURTIS SITTENFELD/ST. LOUIS

Well matched *Claire, right, with her adoptive mother Stephanie on their front stoop*

IN MANY WAYS, CLAIRE WAS A TYPICAL 14-year-old. Her favorite store was Forever 21, her favorite food was macaroni and cheese, and her favorite TV show was *Bad Girls Club*. As a ninth-grader living in St. Louis, she was a member of her school dance team, and she was (of course) on Facebook. A pretty and stylish girl, Claire was a strong student whose long-term goal was to become a lawyer.

In other ways, however, Claire's life was decidedly not typical, and the odds were seriously stacked against her. At age 6, she entered foster care after evidence of abuse and neglect surfaced in her home. She then lived in six different settings, including foster homes and group residences; her current home was a facility. Although she navigated those challenges with remarkable grace, her prospects were, statistically speaking, bleak. She would "age out" of the foster-care system when she turned 18, at which point she would have to fight to keep her head above water. There are nearly half a million American children in foster care; one 2007 survey found that of the young adults who age out, about half don't complete high school, about a third are arrested, and almost as many struggle with homelessness. Only 38% of those working at age 18 are employed a year after leaving foster care, and among the women, roughly half are pregnant within 12 to 18 months.

But in November 2009, Claire got a lucky break: her case was randomly selected to be part of an innovative program known as Extreme Recruitment. Pioneered by a 23-person St. Louis–based agency called the Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition, Extreme Recruitment seeks out the foster children who are the hardest to find homes for—kids older than 10, kids with special needs, sibling groups and African Americans—and not only matches them with permanent adoptive families but also does so in a fraction of the time such matches usually take. Success depends on close coordination of a professional team—one that includes detectives who track down enough potential adoptive relatives to fill a small dance hall. Although half of all foster kids wait in custody for one to five years, Extreme Recruitment aims for a match in 12 to 20 weeks; instead of finding "forever families" for 40% of the children they work with, as the agency did before 2008, Extreme Recruitment finds families for 70%.

"We think it's the best thing since sliced bread," the coalition's executive director, Melanie Scheetz, says of Extreme Recruitment. "But until we can prove it as an evidence-based practice, it's just that nice little program that people are doing out in St. Louis." In 2008 the coalition partnered with the state of Missouri on a five-year federal grant to compare Extreme Recruitment's family-matching methods with foster-care business as usual—an evaluation Scheetz welcomes. As interest in the program rises and the coalition hosts visitors from around the country eager to observe and replicate its methods, Extreme Recruitment might remain just a nice little program out in St. Louis, or it might pave the way to revolutionize the foster-care system in America.

The Need for Speed

EXTREME RECRUITMENT CAME ABOUT while its creator was waiting for *Desperate Housewives* to come on TV. That is the "very embarrassing but very true" story, as Scheetz describes it, of how she decided to dramatically shift the way her agency approached finding homes for children. She was sitting in front of the television in her family's living room on a Sunday night in March 2008, impatiently watching the last few minutes of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. "How can they build a house that fast?" she remembers wondering. "If they can do that—and they do it not because they use any new technologies or processes; they just coordinate their massive team of professionals and volunteers in a highly effective way—the question is why can't we do that too in finding homes for kids?"

Of the 424,000 American children

Photograph by Daniel Shea for TIME

Relative sleuths *Investigators Russell Smith, left, and Carlos Lopez on the trail of foster kids' family members. Extreme Recruitment relies on detectives to track down dozens of potential adoptive relatives for each child*

DANIEL SHEA FOR TIME

currently in foster care, according to the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, close to a quarter will remain in care for more than three years. At the coalition prior to Extreme Recruitment, a social worker typically checked in with a child's caseworker once a month, and the various other players—the educational advocate, the therapist, the court-appointed special advocate—were rarely in the same room.

But under the Extreme Recruitment model, team members are in constant contact, with weekly 30-minute meetings propelled by checklists of action items. Among the team members are the coalition's not-so-secret weapons: two full-time private investigators employed by the agency who track down dozens of members of a child's biological family. The old assumption was that if a child's parents couldn't care for her, everyone else in the family would have a similarly negative influence—that the apple didn't fall far from the tree. The new conventional wisdom is that having contact with family is critical to a child's identity, and if you haven't found any family members who can be a positive influence, then you haven't looked hard enough. "There are," Scheetz says, "lots of apples."

In 2008, George W. Bush signed family finding into federal law as part of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act. While different states have implemented the law at different speeds, within Extreme Recruitment, the significance of family finding can't be overestimated. "We're talking about these kids being reconnected to support systems, family, their roots," says Sheila Suderwalla, a coalition social worker. "For our kids, when they enter foster care, their primary label, their primary identity, is a foster child." But a foster child reconnected to his family becomes Aunt Rita's nephew or Johnny's cousin. "He is someone who's cared about," Suderwalla says.

On a practical level, Scheetz says, relatives are likelier than strangers to be unfazed by a kid's special needs. Say a 10-year-old foster child has been diagnosed as bipolar. It's possible that bipolar disorder runs in the family and that the great-grandmother considering adopting the child is already familiar with the condition because her niece has it too. "The family knows how to deal with it," says Scheetz.

Her claims are borne out by a recent Cornell University study showing that of people who take an adoption-preparation course, only 4% of those who do not have a prior connection to a child will ultimately go through with adoption, but a whopping 53% of people with a connection will. As foster-care consultant Kevin Campbell, who is credited with inventing the practice

of family finding, puts it, "Before giving kids to strangers, we should be making sure they don't have family members who can take care of them. Children and young people need to be afforded the dignity of knowing their family story—where they come from, the strengths and challenges in the family. For me, it's a human-rights issue."

Rather than following the steps to permanent placement sequentially—for example, identifying a family for a child and then making sure the child is mentally and physically ready to live with that family—Extreme Recruitment pursues all the preparations for adoption simultaneously. It also pursues multiple adoptive families at once instead of waiting for one not to work out before moving on. "What happens if we find more than one preadoptive family?" Scheetz asks. "Great!"

Where once social workers would locate just a handful of relatives per child, these days the social workers and private investigators working in tandem find a minimum of 40 per child, though the number is usually closer to 60. The Internet, especially public databases like publicrecordsnow.com and virtualgumshoe.com, has made the job easier, though there's no replacement for old-fashioned pavement pounding. In one extraordinary week, coalition social worker Ian Forber-Pratt and private investigator Russell Smith identified a staggering 113 family members of a child; then Forber-Pratt attended a wake where he found 15 more. For putting faces with the names on a family tree, it turns out, nothing beats a funeral.

40

Minimum number of relatives found per child

70%

Percentage of Extreme Recruitment's children matched with families

Finding the Gems

FOR EACH CHILD'S CASE, THE GOAL IS TO find the two individuals who, Scheetz swears, exist in every family: the informant, who knows who lives where, who has been married or divorced or imprisoned and what everyone's phone numbers are; and the family gem, to use Scheetz's term, the cousin or uncle or grandparent who is both emotionally and logistically prepared to open his or her home to a young relative. The sign that he's found the family gem, says Carlos Lopez, one of the coalition's investigators, is when the person opens the door, hears why he's there and immediately says, "I'm so glad you've found me. What do I need to do?"

Regularly, Lopez and Suderwalla, who work together often, must apologize to family members who feel they have been failed by the foster-care system and quite possibly believe that the child ended up in foster care against their will. In one instance, a great-aunt berated Lopez and Suderwalla for three hours before she was willing to divulge any family information. "She had to grieve," Suderwalla says.

Despite the challenges, Suderwalla and Lopez both say they love their jobs. A former juvenile detective, Lopez was accustomed to encountering kids, often the same ones over and over, when they were in trouble and being unable to truly address the underlying problems in their lives. Now, he says, he can make a difference.

It was by knocking on doors that Lopez found Stephanie, 31, whose ex-husband is Claire's cousin. When Claire's file came to the coalition, it contained the names of six relatives. Claire's Extreme Recruitment team managed to find over 80 more, one of whom was Stephanie. (Claire is still a ward of the state, and Claire and Stephanie are not their real names, though they are pseudonyms the two picked for themselves.)

A police officer who was recently promoted to detective and a divorced mother of three, Stephanie hadn't seen Claire for close to a decade but remembered her well. "She used to come around, and she was the cutest little girl," Stephanie says. "She always had these long beautiful ponytails."

When Lopez appeared out of the blue and told Stephanie the coalition was gathering information about Claire's family, Stephanie immediately wanted to know more. After a series of conversations with a coalition social worker and extensive prayer—"I'm a woman of the faith," Stephanie says—she decided she wanted to become Claire's adoptive mother. "She's family," Stephanie says. "And I feel like I have the resources. Why not?"

In early August, shortly after her 15th birthday, Claire moved into Stephanie's rental town house, sharing a room with Stephanie's 8-year-old daughter. The plan is that after the required six-month period, Stephanie will legally adopt Claire. Though Claire is related by blood to Stephanie's children, Claire and Stephanie are not biologically related. But they both say this makes no difference. Stephanie maintains a friendly relationship with her ex-husband and several of her former in-laws and is eager for Claire to see them frequently. And one of these days, Claire will get to meet Stephanie's brother, who works in New York City as a lawyer—the profession Claire hopes to pursue.

Although they reconnected less than a year ago, it's hard to pinpoint the differences between Stephanie and Claire and other mother-daughter duos. Stephanie brags about Claire's 3.875 grade-point average, chides her for something she posted on Facebook (which neither of them, despite much pleading, would divulge to a reporter) and shares Claire's fondness for reading the Bible. Claire was quiet as a little girl, Stephanie recalls, but "she's very outspoken now. I love that, though, 'cause she's just like me."

Not all Extreme Recruitment cases unfold as smoothly as Claire's: 50% of the planned first matches don't pan out, leading the team to look for a second, third or fourth match. "It's not magic," Scheetz says. "You've got to keep trying." In some cases, the team simply can't find any appropriate family members willing to consider adoption, though a nonfamily adoption isn't deemed a failure. Ideally, the child still develops relationships with family members without living with them and receives the family's blessing for a nonkinship adoption, thereby surmounting the uneasiness about disloyalty that can cause teens in particular to claim they don't want to be adopted.

Even in Claire's case, there are many unknowns. But the evidence so far suggests that Stephanie is exactly the sort of family gem whose existence Extreme Recruitment is built on and who gives credence to Scheetz's belief that many more such gems are out there waiting to be discovered by those willing to search. The program is being watched closely—and in some cases copied—by family-service professionals across the country. Using investigators is "a stroke of genius," says Rana O'Connor, who works for the Maine division of Casey Family Services, which serves 4,000 children in seven states annually. "Detectives have access to information or skills that social workers don't necessarily have." O'Connor plans to hire three full-time private investigators this year and mirror the intense focus and compressed timetable that Extreme Recruitment has developed. All of which means that this big program from a small agency could not only change the way foster care works in America but could also do so very quickly—and if it does, well, won't that be fitting? ■

Sittenfeld is the author of the novels Prep *and* American Wife *(Random House)*