

# Reunification Heroes

## Lynn Price

Lynn grew up in the foster care system. She was placed when she was just eight months old and remained through college. However, Lynn's experience was not the typical experience. Not only was she fortunate enough to have been placed in only one home with foster parents she called mom and dad, but she was also lucky enough to have been surrounded by people who loved and supported her. Lynn was eight when she discovered that she had a biological sibling also in foster care. She was saddened that she was unable to fully connect with her biological sister until her late teens and adulthood. As a result of her childhood, Lynn founded Camp To Belong in 1995. The camp is constantly working toward its trademarked slogan to "Give Siblings Their Right to Reunite." Camp To Belong is a unique social program that reunites brothers and sisters who live separately from each other in foster care, adoption, and other out-of-home care for a week at Camp To Belong sites around the United States and Australia. Every summer, hundreds of siblings are reunited at 11 member camps and year-round sibling connection programs because of Lynn and her vision.

To get a better idea why Lynn was nominated as a Hero of Reunification please read her inspiring interview below, and visit her website at [www.lynnprice.com](http://www.lynnprice.com)

*By Kathryn Byers, J.D. Candidate 2016*



### ***Tell me something interesting about yourself.***

I find the greatest adventures come from interactions I have with the campers at Camp To Belong. Children are not afraid and that makes me a little more fearless. For example, I have had campers convince me to zip line with them. I don't know if I would have experienced that without the encouragement of my campers. Children are often wiser than us because they speak without filters.

### ***What made you interested in child welfare?***

I grew up in the system from the time I was 8 months old through college. This enabled me to take advantage of a full university scholarship. I unlike many others had a great experience. I was surrounded by people who loved me, supported me, and accepted me. I attended and graduated from a top ten college, had a family, and a career. It was not until I was 40 and volunteering at Child Haven, a Las Vegas children's shelter, that I realized many of the children that experience the foster care system had not been able to be as successful in life after foster care. A main reason for this is that they are missing out on normalcy.

***How long have you worked in child welfare?***

In 1995 I began working as a court-appointed special advocate. It has been 20 years since then.

***What types of positions or roles have you had during that time?***

I began my advocacy work by volunteering at children's shelters, working as a court-appointed special advocate, being a foster parent, and an adoptive parent. I founded Camp To Belong. I am also a co-founder of FACTS or Fostering Action, Challenging the System, which is a Denver based collaborative of foster care service providers. Additionally, I am on the Advisory Board of SOAR! Adult and Youth Choir. Overall, I love to share my keynote speeches about social responsibility, celebrating those who serve the foster care system, sibling connection, and being a role model for the kids.

***What was one experience that had a big impact on the way you think about reunification?***

The relationship between brothers and sisters is common sense. So much so that people often don't even think about the impact that relationship will have on their lives. The sibling relationship is so important because it is often the longest relationship in your life and can even assume the role of a parent. The consistency of that relationship is very important. We all want to know that our sibling can always be relied upon when we are in need.

***What are some of the strengths of the child welfare system in your area?***

Compassion is a strength. Often you only hear the tragic stories or about the policies that were undermined. However, there are wonderful people out there working hard so that the system can function. The story of their work on projects such as the sibling bill of rights needs to be told.

***What are some of the weaknesses?***

A weakness is allowing the dotting of the i's and the crossing of the t's to take precedence over evaluating each child and sibling relationship as they are. These young people experiencing the child welfare system often feel that the many people within the system who look out for them are strangers. They feel that these are people who don't have enough time to really connect with them, or analyze and understand every case that comes across their desks. I would argue that every relationship is worthwhile.

***Describe some efforts you have made to improve child welfare practice in your area?***

We have expanded our Camp To Belong and now have camps in ten states and Australia. The program can be and has been replicated. A sibling bill of rights has been realized in several states. This bill of rights addresses among other things the importance of sibling relationships, and the right to visitation as a method of creating memories and normalcy in the sibling relationship. We have been able to give a voice to siblings. They have even spoken with government officials. Establishing a sibling connection is key to their future character, belief, and culture.

***What is one thing you recommend in working with parents or siblings to increase the likelihood of reunification?***

Most often, while separated, siblings know where each other are and have minimal interactions. Expanding those interactions and making them meaningful will encourage a smoother and healthier transition to full reunification at a later time in life.

***What advice would you give to other professionals who work in child welfare? Or to individuals considering working in child welfare?***

Change can happen! We remember those moments that define us in the future. Often they can be as simple as the advice we were given or a look that we shared. Simply having moments of normalcy can make all the difference for the course of a child's life. I hope that people fight for these moments and fight for those children in the foster care system to have these normal experiences by looking beyond the boundaries. When I first started Camp To Belong I was told it was not possible to bring children across state lines, but we found a way for these siblings to be together. The best advice I can give is do not stop at "No."

***What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, governors or the president about how to improve the system?***

I would reiterate what I said before because it is still applicable to those running the system. I have spoken at several hearings on these issues and the most important thing I can do is ask the legislator to stop and think about their family. If you pause and think about it, it becomes much easier to relate to a situation you have not experienced yourself. I ask them to think about what they would want the outcome to be if this were their own family. There are often people making decisions on the child's behalf but they forget to ask the child how they feel about the situation. Another unfortunate situation is that the child is asked their opinion in a supervised situation and they feel unable to give a truthful answer for fear of causing trouble. I was even told about a situation where the visitation between the siblings only occurred for an hour once a month. True bonding cannot happen under those circumstances, and when you ask people to stop and think about their family in a situation like this it can make all the difference.

***What programs/practices are most effective in helping parents or siblings reunify?***

Sibling preservation programs are popping up due to the recognition of sibling significance. The bonds forged and memories made during the difficult times will assist the child in knowing how to handle future difficulties and celebratory occasions. These kinds of programs exist around the country. Camp To Belong is able to do this kind of work over a week in the summers, but other organizations have daily and monthly programs as well. We celebrate birthdays at Camp, but many programs encourage celebrating birthdays between siblings on their given date. Also, many of our Member Camp partners have additional programs supporting our campers as individuals and siblings. Several examples include the Eddie Nash Foundation in Orange County, which holds life skills workshops; Sibling Connections in Massachusetts holds Sibling Sundays; and with our partners at The Oregon Foster Parent Association started a Camp To Belong Family Camp.

***Are there programs/practices that are not effective and need to be changed? If so why?***

Programs are often not effective because they are focused on crisis management. Instead, the focus should be on the successes.

***What preventative actions do you think would be most effective in avoiding the conditions that may lead to foster care?***

Again, if the focus were not on crisis management we might be able to address the underlying situations that lead to the need for assistance from the foster care system to begin with.

***Do you think there are any public misconceptions about the child welfare system? If so what are they?***

Many people believe that the system is completely broken. The only stories we hear are tragic and we go into a reactive mode. Having things like foster care be a “calendered” event is not the answer. I can understand the importance of raising awareness and educating people by designating certain months for example foster care month, but too often these “calendered” events become redundant. We need to be discussing foster care and its success stories year round in order to bring normalcy to being in foster care. It is frustrating when people only want to give gifts to the children during the holidays. I often think ‘why can’t people be thinking about giving in February when the children need winter jackets’. We need to take down the barriers of foster care so that donating jackets in February is the norm. Above all, we need to remember that the sibling connection matters.



*Artwork by Shante Bullock*