The Potters

Teresa and Todd Potter are foster parents in Maine who have reunified three children to their families permanently and kept the families of their adopted children deeply involved in their lives. Teresa is also a mentor to new foster families and ensures that they know she is always available to answer any questions or give advice. She also serves on a foster care advisory committee started by the regional office of DHHS to find out weaknesses in the system and works with foster families from different districts to come up with solutions to bring to the Director of Child Protection.

Teresa and Todd are strong advocates of keeping the biological families involved in their children’s lives. Teresa believes that children need to know their family, even if they cannot be returned outright. She has always kept the door open to family members throughout the whole process for each child that has been in her care. Teresa and Todd continue to ensure that the biological families of their adopted children remain involved with their children, including going out of state to visit them.

To get a better idea of why Teresa and Todd Potter were nominated as Reunification Heroes, please read Teresa’s inspiring interview below.

By Allison Hein, J.D. Candidate 2018

Tell me something interesting about yourselves.

Both my husband and I came from large families. Todd has seven siblings. I had one brother, six step-siblings, and two half-siblings. At one time, my parents took in a single mother and her eight children, which meant we had eighteen children living in our home at one time. My dad always welcomed anyone in the house.

What made you interested in being foster parents? How long have you been involved in foster parenting?

My husband and I were unable to have children of our own and, after hearing about a friend’s daughter who adopted, we decided to fill out paperwork with the intention to adopt one child. Twelve years later, we have adopted three girls and fostered three others, who have been reunified with family permanently.

June is National Reunification Month
For more information see www.ambar.org/nrm
Can you tell me more about those reunified families?

Two of them were young and only stayed with us for a short time. One of them was reunified with his father and the other one was reunified with his grandparents. While we had the second child, we made sure he stayed in contact with his grandparents and they were even able to pick him up to bring him home. We also had three siblings come to stay with us as an emergency placement. They were removed from their grandmother and the two older ones, aged 5 and 7, were able to keep in contact with her after we shared our number. Neither the grandmother nor the biological mother were able to take care of the children at the time, but their great-grandparents were willing and able to step in and adopt the two oldest. My husband and I ended up adopting the youngest one and we have all kept in contact with each other. It made me realize how important family is to kids because, even at that age, they knew who their family was.

Their biological mom is very much a part of my family and even calls me mom. She came and spent Mother's Day with us this year because she wasn't able to be with her oldest two, but she could spend it with her youngest. She is like my daughter.

Were there any particular families that were more challenging? Can you describe that?

We've always kept the door open to the biological families of our adopted children, but my oldest daughter's biological mother has been a challenge. She continues to make bad choices and makes promises to our daughter that she consistently breaks. We told the biological mother that when our daughter is old enough, we'll let her make the choice about how involved she wants her biological mother to be. Of our three adopted children, our oldest daughter's biological parents are the only ones not involved.

Have you been involved in any efforts to improve the child welfare practice in your area?

There was an article in the newspaper that pleaded with people to sign up to be foster parents. I reached out and asked why they were focusing on getting new foster parents and not taking care of the ones they had. This led to me meeting with the DHHS commissioner to address my concerns with the system. As a result, I was asked to join a foster care advisory committee that brings together foster families from each district to find out what weaknesses there are in the system and find solutions to bring to the Child Protection Director. I have also joined and will soon be facilitating the foster parent support group in the area.

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

My advice is to always remain calm. Even if you're angry, don't let it out until you're alone. Whether you agree or not with what you are being told, do whatever is required and work with the Department and the foster parents because you need to remember the goal: your child.

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

I would tell them to remember that these children are human beings, not a case number on a file folder. They need permanency, whether that is through reunification or adoption into another home. Bouncing these children around doesn’t help them.

It would be great if they could shorten the process. In one of my cases, both parents agreed to sign off their rights if we adopted the child. It took six months to get to court after this decision because of the time it took the caseworker to get the paperwork ready. The biological mother couldn’t stand the limbo she was in where she didn’t know what the status of her rights with her child were. This uncertainty was hurting all parties involved. In a different case, we had a child in our home for 3 or 4 months before her aunt and uncle could see her. We kept asking when they could see her, but the Department hadn’t done the background checks needed yet. By the time they were approved, she had already bonded with us. The biological family said that if they had been able to see her sooner, the outcome might have been different.

Adoptive and Foster Families of Maine are the rock for foster families. I don’t know who it is that supports the biological families, but there needs to be more.

You had mentioned that you only intended to adopt one child, but now you have adopted three and reunified three. What changed?

We’ve always tried to work toward reunification, but realize reunification doesn’t always happen. After we got close to the family of our first case, we realized that they weren’t bad people, but rather people in bad circumstances. Since then, we’ve tried to be inclusive of everyone’s extended family and tried to do everything we can to support them. I’ve put together a meal in a Crock Pot in the morning so extended relatives could come visit in the evening and eat. I’ve taken a child to the state prison to a required visit of a family member and brought them out of state to connect with family.

Since you don’t know what the outcome will be, it is important to keep that connection strong. We’ve always been open with our adopted children about their adoption and who their biological family is. We think it’s important to know their family and where they come from. Children need to know their family and that they are loved by them, no matter what.

You fall in love every time you meet a child. This is the most amazing and rewarding journey we have ever participated in.