

# From Foster Kid to Caregiver



*A Kinship Story*

Photos courtesy Constance Iannetta  
Iannetta grew up in foster care herself and offers thoughts on kinship care.

In the winter of 2016 my husband Brian and I were newly married and childless when we received the call to be emergency kinship foster parents to his younger than 2-year-old relative. We knew what we had to do; the honeymoon was cancelled and we began the 60-day certification process to become foster parents. In preparation for the home-safety check, we baby-proofed and read up on caring for a small toddler and, having never received traditional parenting myself, I called upon my foster care alumni family for support and guidance.

Simply put, I was terrified. Aside from the usual frazzled excitement that comes with being a new parent, I was afraid to fail because of my own prior system involvement as a youth. Wanting to be something for a child that I had never experienced was scary, but I knew that we could do it with the right support. As soon as I shared the news about the opportunity to provide kinship care within my network, the response

from my fellow alumni was immediate and incredible. Words of encouragement flooded my phone and mailbox and they kept coming long after our little guy arrived.

A year later, Brian and I received another placement call to take the newborn sibling of our kinship child. Care packages started arriving on our doorstep sent from my alumni family throughout the country — boppies and anti-colic bottles, weighted blankets and teeny preemie clothes.

On social media there is an enormous alumni presence — private pages for former foster youth and alumni, pages for allies and supporters of child welfare, and groups for foster and kinship parents. In each of these groups the presence of former foster youth is constant — chiming in on every topic from how to decorate a room for a foster child to psychotropic meds and birth family connection. It has been my experience that the knowledge and emotional support shared throughout this com-

munity, even virtually, is special due to our shared experiences within “the system.” You can find information and parenting trainings nearly anywhere, but the most impactful empathy and experiential guidance during the sensitive process of becoming kinship parents was found in the hearts and minds of alumni with lived experience.

Something that I have found interesting — both in my full-time role at a child welfare agency working with prospective resource parents and as an active participant in many of these groups — is that many alumni become foster and adoptive parents. While it has become commonplace to see those of us with lived experience working in the field or becoming advocates, I have heard little about the prevalence of those who become foster parents. Taking into consideration the negative multi-generational cycles of families who have system involvement, it came as no surprise when I realized that many alumni I’ve met who became foster or adoptive parents often began down

this path through the need to provide kinship care to a niece, nephew or sibling.

As an alumnus myself, I believe that sometimes the reason our heart strings are pulled to take such action is the fact that we “get” what it’s like to experience the trauma of being removed from your family and want to open our homes to help care for a vulnerable child. Despite the good or bad experiences, the system is a part of our life experiences and what we know.

I personally spent nearly seven years in the foster care system prior to “aging out” at 18. Prior to entering the system, both my mother and grandmother were in foster care. Recognizing this cycle I have dedicated much of my life to preventing this cycle from continuing, both in my family and in the lives of others.

Since exiting foster care, I have been active in sharing my experiences to promote positive change for youth and alumni of the foster care system. Though I have had membership and affiliations with many groups, nothing has compared to the level of peer support and family-like community that I have found at Foster Care Alumni of America (FCAA). Still, even with this great network of support, there have been many lessons along the way. Here are a few that I feel are most important:

1. The best way to seek support during the kinship process is to find a local kinship support group, or create one of your own. It is helpful to connect, vent and have the support of those who understand the struggle of managing family dynamics and the well-being of your kin while under the scrutiny of county and agency regulations.
2. If you are a foster care alumnus looking to break cycles in your family the first step is understanding that you are in control of your own destiny and that

you are not pre-destined to repeat the same struggles that you experienced just because of where you come from. The older I get, and the more I surround myself with alum of all ages, the more I understand the trauma that flowed through my family tree. My own path to healing started with acknowledging what was unhealthy, understanding the contributing factors, then taking action to prevent myself from becoming another statistic.

3. If you have people in your life who may be considering kinship care the best way to support them is to listen without judgement, respect boundaries of the child/children, and refrain from asking intrusive questions relating to their case or birth family. Instead, offer support by providing respite or child care and building a wrap-around community for the ever-changing family dynamics that comes along with any foster or adoptive situation.

It is my hope that others are inspired to live their best lives and keep little ones in their family as much as possible. It has been life changing for myself and my husband and the moments of excitement always outweigh the struggle of doing what’s right for a child in your life.

Celebrating National Foster Care Month is a monumental experience each year now as it highlights what foster care meant for myself, and it also highlights what the system can do for empowering kinship care as our family has experienced. At the time of writing this it had been nearly three years since that first placement call. After this long journey of navigating difficult circumstances my husband Brian and I recently finalized the adoption of our two wonderfully amazing kiddos and we are so excited to not only share this story with the world, but inspire others to be aware of the great journey that is kinship care.

As mentioned earlier, one of the biggest supports for our family during this journey as an alumnus of care transitioning to an adoptive and kinship care parent was having support from those who understand my journey through shared experiences.

If you are an adult who experienced foster care I invite you to join our community at [www.FosterCareAlumni.org](http://www.FosterCareAlumni.org). If you are an individual who did not experience foster care, but your heart is called to support FCAA’s vision that all people in and from care are Connected, Empowered and Flourishing then join as an ally, also at [www.FosterCareAlumni.org](http://www.FosterCareAlumni.org). 🌟

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Constance “Connie” Iannetta spent six years in the dependency system before aging out at 18 years old. An active advocate on child welfare and mental health issues for the past 10-plus years, Iannetta has provided testimony for foster care legislation. She was one of the co-founders of the Foster Care Alumni of America - Pennsylvania Chapter (FCAA PA), a founding member of the Bucks County Youth Advisory Board (YAB) and Youth MOVE Philadelphia Chapter, has served on the Philadelphia Blue Ribbons Commission on Children’s Behavioral Health, and as a youth and community partner for the Montgomery County Pennsylvania Systems of Care Leadership Team. Her work in advocacy has been recognized with awards from the Montgomery County Board of Commissioners, the Golden Heart Group and the Pennsylvania Statewide Adoption Network (SWAN). Iannetta attended The Restaurant School at Walnut Hill College prior to earning a business degree from Gwynedd-Mercy University. Currently, she works full-time at a foster care agency and is a volunteer director for the alumni-led Foster Care Alumni of America (FCAA) Board. Iannetta resides in Pennsylvania with her husband Brian and their two children.