

FALL 2020

Beech Leaves

Foster parenting in the pandemic

As COVID-19 rages across our country, Beech Brook foster parents continue to offer a safe harbor from the storm.

Living with the fears and restrictions of COVID-19 has pushed even the healthiest parents to the edge at times.

But for foster families, who already deal with challenges most of us can't imagine, the pandemic has been especially difficult.

For the kids in foster care, who have already experienced far too much disruption in their lives, changes such as school closings, lack of face-to-face interaction with trusted case managers and other workers has taken a toll. Visits with biological family members have been canceled or

postponed. Little ones, especially, have found it hard to understand why they can't always see their families or go places with their wraparound workers.

And when the court system ground to a halt this past spring,

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Beech Brook
HELPING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THRIVE

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A Message from Tom Royer, President/CEO



There are almost half a million children in foster care in the United States. Of those, nearly half are in non-relative homes. In Cuyahoga County alone, there are about 2,300 children in foster

care. The need for foster homes continues to grow, and we expect that once the pandemic is over, the number of children who need this care may grow even more quickly due to the stress families have been experiencing with job loss, lack of resources, including school support, and general isolation.

Foster care has evolved significantly over the last 30 years. Children who once would have been placed in a residential facility now reside in foster homes. We have developed the ability to foster these more challenging children and youth because we know that a home-like environment, versus congregate care in a residential facility, is usually better for children. But the pandemic has been especially hard on these children and on our foster families.

Children in foster care have often survived a lifetime of uncertainty and change before entering the system. They've been uprooted from their homes and have suffered abuse and/or neglect. Often, their homes were chaotic. Beech Brook foster parents teach children what a family looks like. They provide the individual attention and guidance these children need for healthy development. And they do a fantastic job teaching what many of us take for granted: what's it like to get up and go to school every day, eat regular meals, and have predictable schedules. Just knowing what is going to happen every day gives these children a sense of stability that had previously been lacking in their lives.

So, when the pandemic struck, changing the way all of us live, it impacted foster children in ways most of us can't understand. For these children, changes like social distancing, school closings and wearing masks during COVID-19 triggered traumatic memories. Many also experienced a great sense of loss because visits with their biological parents and families were suddenly restricted.

Our foster parents have been bearing much of the burden, bringing more challenges than ever to their already difficult jobs. They, too, are dealing with changes in routine, job loss, school closings and the accompanying childcare issues. And we have not been able to support them in the same manner as before the pandemic...in their homes, face-to-face.

More than ever, as they are dealing with a greater level of stress themselves, they're seeing signs of greater stress in our children, such as frequent crying, behavior problems, nightmares, social withdrawal, problems with friends and with their foster family. And yet, through it all, our foster parents continue to ensure safety and security while they also try to take care of themselves and their other loved ones. They are busy replacing activities they have lost with new ones and are celebrating even small successes each day.

Our foster parents are heroes under normal circumstances, but during the pandemic they have been superheroes! The care they are providing each day will last our foster children a lifetime.

In this issue of *Beech Leaves*, you will read more about some of the challenges our foster families have faced - and overcome - in recent months. I hope you'll enjoy learning more about this incredibly important part of our Beech Brook mission.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas P. Royer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

FOSTER PARENTING IN THE PANDEMIC *continued from cover*

kids who had been counting the days until their adoptions were finalized or they were reunified with their families experienced a whole new layer of trauma and anxiety. Already struggling with issues around abandonment, trust and loss, they had a hard time believing that the day they had been waiting for would ever come.

As one staff member noted, however, these kids are survivors. “They’re handling this better than I expected,” she said. “But maybe I should have expected that. They’re very resilient because they’ve had to be. They’ve had periods of uncertainty before, and they know how to cope.”

It hasn’t been easy on the foster parents either. Being with children and teens who are struggling with mental and behavioral health issues 24/7, with no school, respite care or interaction with others, has been no picnic. And for those who are employed, many as essential workers with no option to work from home, the lack of child care appropriate for the needs of troubled children has stretched their resources to the limit.

Unsung heroes

But as we’ve known for many years at Beech Brook, it takes a special kind of person to be a foster parent, and our foster parents proved that point once again. As we all sheltered in place, many of us not even seeing our own family members for months, our foster parents continued to rise to the challenge, working with the staff and with each other to provide child care or respite care for their fellow foster parents, figuring out which children could be together safely, and putting aside their own fears to open their homes to new children in desperate need of a place to go. In fact, since the pandemic began, ten children have found safe havens in Beech Brook foster families.

That may not seem like a lot until you look a little closer at the challenges these children can pose.

- Newly licensed foster parents Mr. and Mrs. Williams were looking forward to a quiet evening at home when they got the call that four children, ranging in age from 1-7, would be arriving for an emergency placement at 7 p.m. Even then, they were unprepared for what they saw when the children arrived. Their heads were covered with lice. Some had bruises and other injuries which would require ongoing medical treatment. They were filthy and had nothing but the clothes they were wearing.
- Tara presented a different challenge. You might expect a six-year-old to be noisy and boisterous around the house. But little Tara took that to another level. Severely traumatized by sexual abuse and other horrific experiences, she wreaked havoc on the household, tearing down blinds, damaging walls and other items.



She didn’t sleep, sometimes for up to 48 hours at a time. As her behavior grew increasingly out of control, it became clear that Tara needed more help than her foster home could provide. She was hospitalized, and it looked like her next stop would be residential treatment. But as her behavior stabilized, her foster mom rallied and agreed to give it another try. With lots of support from her case manager and wraparound workers, Tara returned home. Beech Brook’s Intensive Home-Based Treatment staff was brought in to try to stabilize the placement, along with the medical expertise and daily support of Beech Brook’s nurse practitioner.

Silver linings

There’s been good news as well during this time, however. Two brothers, 8 and 9 years old, celebrated their adoptions. Six more adoptions are currently in the pipeline for finalization.

Some of the children who normally find the structure and pressure of traditional schools hard to handle have thrived at home with the one-on-one support of their foster parents.

And while it’s been challenging at times to engage the kids by phone or teletherapy, in some cases, it proved to be a blessing in disguise.

One 16-year-old girl, who was in foster care for the second time, had simply stopped talking, at home and in school. Her behavior wasn’t an issue. She was a straight A student. She just wouldn’t speak. But gradually, over the phone and without the pressure of face-to-face contact, she was able to begin talking to her therapist...and just in time.

Her county worker was trying to decide if the girl should return home or remain in foster care. The time for the decision was near, and the girl's refusal to speak left them uncertain of her true feelings.

But thanks to the progress she'd made with her Beech Brook therapist, she was able to communicate her true feelings, choosing to remain with her foster family.

Growing concerns about what comes next

While our foster families have continued to rise to the challenge over the past months, there is mounting concern about how the pandemic has impacted the incidence of child abuse and neglect across the country. According to the National Foster Parent Association, reports to state abuse hotlines are down, in some states as much as 50%. Many places where children interact with others, like schools or childcare settings, have simply not been available as a safety net. That doesn't mean fewer kids need help; they just aren't being seen in places where adults would normally notice signs of physical or emotional abuse.

Even before the pandemic, the lack of available foster homes had already reached crisis proportions, in large part due to the opioid crisis. And the recruitment and training of new foster families - never an easy task - has been more challenging than ever in a world with no face-to-face contact.

But Beech Brook's foster care staff adapted and found new ways to connect. Since the pandemic began, 15 new foster parents have completed the extensive training required and, once their licensing process has been completed, will be ready to open their homes to care for children who desperately need the safe haven they will provide.

Meet Beech Brook's Foster Parent Trainer Tonya Reese

After raising four children and eight foster children, Tonya is a great role model for prospective foster parents.

When prospective foster parents register for an Information Meeting or begin a training class, they have the pleasure of meeting Tonya Reese, our foster care services coordinator. Tonya is not just a highly skilled professional. She's a mom, a foster mom and an adoptive mom. Tonya clearly knows what she is talking about, and she makes sure they get off to a great start as foster parents.



When foster parents meet our Foster Parent Trainer Tonya Reese, mother of 10, they know they're getting the right information to prepare them to care for foster children.

"I met a neighbor who was fostering children, and these children were always at my house playing with my kids," Tonya recalls. "This neighbor's shift changed at work, and my husband and I became her alternate care givers. We became friends, and she suggested that my husband and I become foster parents."

Tonya's first reaction was to say no.

"I had heard horror stories about foster children; however, after getting a better understanding of foster care and taking care of her children, my heart melted. I went on to foster eight children, along with my four children, and adopted six of the eight foster children," she said.

That would be more than enough for most people, but Tonya had more to give.

"Since I was always helping others with whatever they were going through in their lives, I decided I could help in many other ways. So, I went back to school for social work. I started at Cuyahoga Community College to make sure I could balance school and raising 10 children. I received my bachelor's degree from Ursuline College and then completed my master's degree at Case Western Reserve University's Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences," she said.

"Although I have worked in several fields of social work, my passion has always been working and advocating for all children. With all this said, I did not do it alone. My husband and I worked as a team. I continue to advocate for children and try to make sure they have a good foster home match that will provide the stability and services they need while in care."

Beech Brook welcomes the Outcalts into the Jephtha Homer Wade Society

This year, we were delighted to welcome Jane and Jon Outcalt into the Jephtha Homer Wade Society, honoring lifetime giving of \$100,000!

Like many of our wonderful donors, the Outcalts were introduced to Beech Brook by Kathy and Jim Pender at one of the Heart to Heart Dinner Parties we had established to celebrate our 150th Anniversary Year in 2002.

Since that time, they have been loyal supporters of Beech Brook in many meaningful ways, supporting our mission not just through their gifts but also by their active participation.

Over the years, the Outcalts could be counted on to help with the planning of the Beech Balls and Hearts of Hope Galas, and they were always ready to host a table and bring in new friends for Beech Brook. That included bringing their own family members into the fold.

In one memorable year, the Outcalts and Penders, along with their family members, served as co-chairs of the 2011 Beech Ball. That may have been the first year that the children in our residential treatment program decorated an Adirondack chair as an auction item for the event, and to the great entertainment of the guests and a real boost to the bottom line of the event, the Outcalts and Penders found themselves bidding against each other for the chair. In the end, everybody won: the children painted another chair and Beech Brook benefited greatly! Jane reports that she still sees her chair every day in one of their guest



Lipstick tattoos were just one of the popular activities at the 2011 Beech Ball chaired by the Penders (left) and Outcalts (right) and their families.

rooms as a reminder of the event and the children we serve.

Jane also served on the Board of Directors from 2002-2011, and she continues to be an Honorary Director. In addition, she was one of the founders of the Samuel Clemens Society, honoring our major donors each year, and she served on the planning committee for many years.

Jane recently shared that she and Jon remain committed to Beech

Brook's mission of helping our community's most vulnerable families and that they admire the way that Beech Brook has been able to change with the times as needed, developing new programs to meet those changing needs.

We are so grateful for the tremendous support Jane and Jon have provided to Beech Brook, and we are honored to welcome them as members of the Jephtha Homer Wade Society.



3737 Lander Rd.
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Beech Brook's Mission

Helping children and families thrive by promoting healthy child development, strengthening the ability to overcome adversity and enhancing family health and stability.

Beech Brook is a contract agency of the Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services Board of Cuyahoga County.

Run, Walk, Ride or Roll

A Virtual and Mindful Experience to Benefit Beech Brook

#beechbrookmindfulmiles



Our annual fall event went virtual this year!

The COVID-19 pandemic may have forced us to keep our distance from each other, but that doesn't mean our friends and family members couldn't still go the distance for Beech Brook! This year we asked people to run, walk, ride or roll with a twist. As we grapple with the anxiety and uncertainty of these times, we encouraged all participants to practice moments of mindfulness as they logged in their miles...just being aware of thoughts and emotions and focusing on the world around them.

There's still time to participate! The event is open until October 18.
Visit www.beechbrook.org to sign up or learn more about how you can support Beech Brook.