

# S03E012 Foster Care

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## SPEAKERS

Ray Abel, Renee Williams, Jennifer Jacobs


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Ray Abel 00:00

Hello, and welcome to research the news. Today we're going to be exploring the foster care system. Now, as some background, this system does have noble intentions, the goal is to protect children from abuse, provide temporary homes and keep kids with their families when possible. But that last point has become a point of contention between some advocates. And we'll talk a little about that today. But currently, there are over 400,000, children in foster care in the US in kids ages one to five make up about 30%, which is the largest share. And recently I watched a documentary called Foster. And it was heartbreaking. The kids talk about abuse, about being abandoned and having no one that cared for them, and not knowing if they'd ever be loved. There were kids who had been in 15 to 20 homes and called every person they lived with mom and dad. And then they left those parents. Again, there were kids who had to sit in court and save their mom abused them in order to not return home, but who had to look their mom in the eyes while on the stand and couldn't do it out of fear. And there was even one child who watched his mother's boyfriend kill his mother. All of this leads to some of the outcomes we see after a child leaves foster care. One in four experienced homelessness from ages 19 to 21, and one in five are incarcerated, and that same age bracket. But to me, the worst part of the documentary was that these are the stories that are able to be told in public. So what does it look like off camera? And how can this system be improved. And that's what we're going to talk about today. As always, there'll be no edits to the podcast, we're just going to have some conversation and see where it takes us. And with that, let's start the show. Alright, so today, we actually have two guests on the show. And I'm going to do a little introduction for them. Now. First up, we have Dr. Jennifer Jacobs, who has served in the Army as a West Point graduate. And as a former White House fellow, she studied physics and nuclear engineering, and then decided to use knowledge she gained there to launch a family connection software tool to help change the way foster children find a home. And we also have Renee Williams, who's the executive director of the National Center for victims of crime. And she stepped into the role after serving as the Director of the National Crime Victim Bar Association. And she mentors, their Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and in her free time advocates for children as a court appointed special advocate. And remember, if you dislike what any of us say here today, just keep on listening, because hopefully, you understand what we're trying to say. So first off, I want to talk a little

about interesting career transitions. Both of you come from college backgrounds that don't seem to relate fully to what you're doing now. And Jennifer, can you tell us a bit about switching from physics and nuclear engineering, to family connection software?

 Jennifer Jacobs 02:39

Sure, it really makes more sense than you think. So I did spend quite a few years using my physics and nuclear engineering background. After the army, I spent most of my adult career in nuclear Non Proliferation and counterterrorism. And in that field I intersected with the intelligence community, they do what turns out to be a very similar process steps to mapping out family connections around a foster child. They're doing it around terrorists and terrorist networks. And it grabs data and sucks it in organizes that data, massive amounts of information that need to be visualized, and managed, and they have some really cool software to help them do it. So about 12 years ago, I was reading an article about foster care, kind of like you were watching that documentary the other day. And that was my entry into this transition. And in the article I was reading, it talked about how specialists in the foster care space, look to build networks around the child, find all the people that they're connected to, in one way or another. And as I was reading it, in my mind, I was visualizing this intelligence software I was familiar with. And I thought, well, it's the same thing. And so then I started to research more, they must have some software to help them do a really hard problem. And I found out they didn't. And over time, I met a woman who became my co founder, she herself spent time in foster care. And we just decided it was, it was important that people doing this work, who are who are serving our most vulnerable children should be supported with the best resources we can find. So we decided to make that pivot. She also was not a social worker, she was communications person and launch that and the other key decision we made was that the software would be free, so that we could remove the obstacle of money and contracts for users. And we could just put these resources out there.

 Ray Abel 04:21

I love it. And Renee, tell me about switching from theater arts to law school and now working with victims of crime and kids who are going through the system.

 Renee Williams 04:29

Well, I'm in the same camp as Jennifer, it really makes more sense than than it appears to on the surface. And I'll just I'll give a little shout out for theater majors first, theater majors when you're a serious theater major as of course I was. It's not just kind of getting in front of a camera. You really research how people were how people think what they thought and that allows you to become a character. So it's much more than just reading a script and it's really reading constantly and it's almost a study in history, especially if you want to become a drama tourgis which I I was interested in doing so it's understanding the past. It's understanding why people make the decisions they did and why they would say the things they did. So it's almost looking into psychology though definitely not anywhere near a psychology degree. Anyway, there was always part of me in the background that wanted to go into law school, there was

quite a bit of trauma in my family in childhood. And so I started looking to that. And in order to make my parents happy, and not become a waitress, I went to law school. And, you know, everything just kind of snowballed. From there.



Ray Abel 05:33

Well see, I feel like I have the opposite career track. As you know, I wanted to be a lawyer. And I really wanted to be a lawyer strictly because of the fact that I wanted to be the lawyer you saw on TV. And then when I realized you had to do all of that writing and the background work, it made me much less interested in being a lawyer. So that was the quick end to my dreams of being a lawyer. So I would have only liked to do the acting part of it, where you're yelling in the courtroom and something like you'd see on SVU. So but yeah, thank you for those backgrounds here. And I want to kind of start out a little bit talking about the problem. And I think the introduction I did paints a really negative picture. And I don't want to focus on just that. Today, I want to talk about some of the positive things that you see that documentary as a person, and she's done foster care for 20 years, and the kids love her. And they did a little interview at the end. And some of the kids that they want to, when they get old, and they have this giant house, they want to move her in and get her vacations. And she really clearly cares about these kids. And so there's a lot of good that happened. But I also want to talk about some of the problems and what situations put kids in foster homes. And what are some of the big issues you see right now. And I'm gonna start this one off with Jennifer, if you talk a little bit more about the problem with connecting families and what your software does to help and overcome that.



Jennifer Jacobs 06:43

So when kids are in foster care, the goal can be various different paths. And, and that's something that we're not involved with. But what we do try to do is make sure that when a child goes into foster care, their connections are either maintained as much as possible or built out if they're not there. For example, in one case that I had been part of my learning, before we launched our software, three girls in a major metropolitan area were taken into foster care, those three girls thought they had two people in the world, their mother and their grandmother. And those two women, were not able to care for them. And so they've gone into foster care, when their case got to a specialist who was doing this work manually, that specialists dove in and found that they had over I think it was 100 relatives in the greater metropolitan area. None of them knew these three girls existed. And they were there to reach out to them and take them in. And I think it was a third cousin that ended up adopting them. So that was one of the stories that I came across when I was learning about this. And I thought, Well, that should happen. For every child in foster care whether the need in the end to be adopted or not, or whether they're going to go back home or whatever is going to happen. They should have that network. And if you're living in a metropolitan area, and only think you have two relatives, but you have 100 or more, something has gone awry. And so we have, as you mentioned, over 400,000 kids in foster care in this country at any given time, and 100,000 of those are available and waiting for adoption. And every year 20,000 turn either 18 or 21, depending on the state what age it is, but 20,000 Leave foster care as legal adults with No, we've never given them that forever family, they were promised, we've not provided what was promised when they were taken by the state. And so welcome to adulthood. Good luck with that. And as you pointed out, this fails miserably. And most of the public that includes myself, before I started learning about this have this idea, even though we know better from our own lives, that once you turn

18, you're kind of good to go, oh, there's no reason to worry about adopting a 17 and a half year old, he's almost done, you know, it's almost clear, we will need parents, so don't worry about it. And that of course, if a person reflects on it a bit is as far from the truth as you can get. We need that kind of support, whether it comes from biological parents or other types of parent figures. And we all need that kind of support long into our adulthood. And kids in foster care, don't get it. And if you think about turning out 20,000 young adults a year who not only don't have that kind of support, but also had a childhood that didn't even give them a basic level of preparation. It's a recipe for disaster both for them personally as well as for our communities. So it's just a lose, lose in many ways. So that's where we're going. We are not social workers that connect our kids, my organization. We don't pretend to know the right answer. For any given case. What we're doing is saying there's everything good about building out connections around a child, even about knowing which connections are not safe. That's important to know. And there's many cases where our users maybe maybe dad's in prison, and he's he's not available and maybe he's also not safe or maybe he's in prison on nonviolent reasons but he's not available, of course to care for the child, but he's still the child's dad. And whether or not he can or should play an active role, whether he should even have contact with that child, he's still the child's dad. And that can never change, even if he's legally adopted. And it hasn't an adoptive dad who's wonderful. We currently cannot extract DNA from from ourselves. And so our perspective is, this work that these specialists are doing for a tiny fraction of 1% of children in foster care ought to be available to every child in care that needs it. And so we're just trying to say this is a good thing to have available for social workers to have in their toolkit to use whenever needed, which we think would be much of the time, and let's make it available. And that hopefully will bring down the water level on our social workers who are generally drowning. And so they are struggling to do a good job at a very, very hard task they've been asked to do. And if we can give them the time to breathe the time to recover the time to think they can make good decisions, caring decisions, helpful decisions. But if we're having them running from court to home checks, to paperwork, to supervise our check ins, constantly, they don't have time to think much less weigh risks and make good choices for the family and the child. And so the idea is if we support them with better tools, they're not spending their day clicking around the web, trying to find a phone number for this uncle that we heard of. They're just the phone number should appear. They call it and then move forward. So that's already



Ray Abel 11:32

Love it And I think it's so important to have people who maybe didn't start out in nonprofits or NGOs, have an outside perspective, come in and help out with technology. Because I think that's something I spent a lot of years in nonprofits. And from my experience, it's often lacking in tech. So hearing someone come in and do some technology, it's going to help I think, is really encouraging. And I think also, when you talk about connecting these kids back to their families, that's something that I learned over the past week. And I think this is from someone who grew up in and out of different homes, I lived with different family members, it was not a standard childhood. And I've also worked in inner city nonprofits for seven, eight years and worked with families. And I still learned a lot this week, when I started looking into the foster care system and learned both number one, how difficult it can be to add that whole layer on top of everything else you're going through, you're growing up in a low income part of the town, you have schools that might not be at the same level, and you don't know who to call mom or dad, that's just a whole nother level. No matter what I went through as a kid, I knew who my mom and dad were. And I also think that being able to connect those kids back to their families is important. But I think it's also depends on what kind of situations they came from. And that's

what I want to talk to you about a little bit Renee as being in these court systems here. Some of these kids, it's pretty clear when you see their your mother murdered by someone else, that was a pretty clear indication of how they get there. But I think there's a lot of situations where there's, I saw some issues of drug abuse from the parents, I saw some issues of mistreatment on smaller levels. So how do you actually decide from a legal perspective? Not you personally, but the court systems? How do you decide who gets removed from those homes? And what's the process to get kids back into a setting, whether it's with their families or with a foster family.

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Renee Williams 13:15

So there are a couple of initial points that I want to make just to get everybody on the same page. So there is a process to a removal of a child and the removal of a child does not necessarily mean they always immediately go into foster care. And I think there's some misunderstanding of that in the United States. And what the foster care system that we know of the 80s 90s, early 2000s were there the real nightmare stories, we've done a lot to change that it's still not perfect, and just the removal of a child causes trauma. But I think we're starting to hear these horror stories, because it's becoming public knowledge and kind of like policing in America. You know, for every 90 encounters that go correct, you're going to hear the 10 that are awful. So I think it's really important to start with the idea that there's obviously going to be automatic trauma on removing a child, that does not necessarily mean this system is broken. And kind of your point earlier what's going on when these don't make the cameras. It's not always necessarily bad. And we do see some very good cases. So back to your initial question, what happens? So usually there's a report made and it will go to in Virginia, in Alexandria County in Virginia, it's called DC HS. So that's what I will refer to as most of this. It's Department of Children and Family Services. Each county calls it something different. So the report goes into the department, the department sends somebody to investigate, they can make the decision to bring the case in to remove the children immediately to leave the children in the home. But to continue looking at the case if they decide to remove the children. That case goes before a judge within 24 hours to decide if removal was appropriate. There's then usually another hearing so so once that picks up we go into a series of hearings and I will tell you in my position as a court appointed special ed ticket, which is very term of art thing. We just went through a case that was in the system for three years, I can't tell you how much that sucks for the kids because that means there's no permanency. So right, this goes back to your other point, which is the presumption of whether children are better off with their families first into 1000s 17 1819. Somewhere in there, the federal government stepped in and they passed the family for services Prevention Act, something like that. Anyway, the focus is, is that children are really better off with their families, and that there's a trauma that results in removing kids in the first place. And we want children to be with their families. Because in the long run for mental health, that is better. So there's a focus now on what services can we provide to a family to keep that family intact, and even if we have to remove the child at first. So what happens now, when a child does go into foster care, the department will look and make a recommendation to a judge, they will also make a plan. And it's called a permanency plan. And that permanency plan will lay out what each parent needs to do in order to get the child back. And it will have what the child needs. So we have both kind of parts of the family working together towards a common goal. Now there are alternate realities baked into each of this where it's, Hey, we've identified this relative placement. So if this doesn't work, then this kid goes here. The last preference is usually placing the child for adoption. Now, sometimes it has to get to that. But that's usually kind of last preference for most departments.



Ray Abel 16:34

Now, you talked about the permanency there. Can you talk just a little bit more you said, once kids get to three years, they are not in permanency? I don't know what that means as an outsider. So could you explain that a little bit more that process and that meaning, so in



Renee Williams 16:47

three years isn't quite correct. There are several timeframes that a court works with as you go through each month. And there are really hard deadlines. And again, like any good lawyer, I will preface every single one of my responses, well, it depends. But this depends state to state, really. And I'm trying to remember the exact numbers for Virginia, after 18 months, if a child has been in foster care, it is no longer necessarily considered best for them to return to their home. And so then different decisions start to be made. And if you're in a courtroom, the parents attorneys will start to get very anxious about that 18 months, because assumptions change after a certain amount of time. So after three years, if the child has been out of their home, the goal is always to achieve permanency for the child. And that looks like a whole lot of different things. But after three years, there's kind of the idea that if we aren't getting this done at home, we need to get it done somewhere.



Ray Abel 17:44

Gotcha. And you said, so basically, after 18 months, I'm assuming that the assumption then at that point is, if the parents can't get it figured out within 18 months, it's not as likely to happen, is that correct?



Renee Williams 17:55

It's probably not going to happen. And we're gonna start to look at foster parents being able to step in, because a lot of times you do have foster parents who want to adopt.



Ray Abel 18:03

Jennifer, when you talk about reuniting families, both of you when we did a little bit of conversation about this, before we came on the air had talked about the I don't want to say controversy, because I'm not sure how big it actually is. But there's a disagreement about the way people should be reunited and how often they should be reunited. Can you talk a little bit, I know people hate both sides of an issue. But I'd like to hear if you could give both sides of this issue and why people think that that should be a priority, or it may not be in the best interest of the children. And I'm sure you can explain it much better than I could. So I'd love to hear your views on that. Yeah.



Jennifer Jacobs 18:33

So just to clarify, correct and kids does not do direct services. And as for a physician, death

So just to clarify, connect our kids does not do direct service. And so I as a physicist, don't serve children directly. But we do serve enormous number of social workers and some lawyers, and quite a few classes as well. The Court Appointed Special Advocates, and we hear many, many stories from them. And so it's not that there's a right answer. And the question is who's right? From my assessment is a good scientist. I will rarely if ever say always, or never. Yeah. And so what my current assessment is that if your parents can't raise you, for whatever reason, it's a difficult situation. It's rarely 100% Clear. What should happen. Those parents rarely lose all value to you. The question is, can they raise you in the time that you have to be a child or to someone else needs to start raising you because as Rene points out, permanency is important, and a childhood moves on, and children grow way faster than our courts like to move? And so it's a really hard answer. Sometimes I suspect that sometimes it's clear. But for example, we had a case recently that a user one of our users told us about in which they had a child who had been with his mother, he remembered his mother. She went to prison when he was around five for a minor drug case, and somehow she was convinced to give him a for adoption, because this would be better for him she did. Those adoptive parents moved out of state with him, ended up abusing him. And he ended up in foster care in a different state. And so eight years or so have passed, he's a young teenager, but he knows he had a mother and she loved him. And, and now he's been through eight years of people who apparently don't so much, and been disrupted adoption, he's back in foster care. And so one of our early users of our software, got his case, and just started putting in what she knew she ended up finding his biological mother back in the original state, called her up, she was out of prison, long out of prison, had told herself, she's not a good mother, she should let that boy go, he's surely in better hands. Now. Meanwhile, he is not doing well, because he knows he has a mother out there. And the folks who are raising him, you know, didn't seem to care for him. So this social worker, contacted the biological mother, she never wanted to lose him. And you know, but just made some mistakes in her life obviously wasn't perfect mother, the social worker sticks, the kid who's now a teenager in her car and drives them to this other state Thanksgiving last year. And they will spend Thanksgiving together. And so she's working through the legalities of you know how that should work out the the biological mothers no longer his legal mother, she's going to readapt him. But you can see there where you have a difficult situation, whether it's appropriate, and she's fully recovered for him to live with her or not, I don't know, we don't require any privacy details. To us. We provide software and tools and support. But that's a difficult situation. And what social workers in my perspective, just as a citizen and taxpayer and someone who's been learning a lot about this field, what I really want for social workers, is to be able to spend their time and their emotional energy. And for lawyers in the field as well in the classes, I want them to have their time and their emotional energy to figuring out how can we support this family in this child in the way that's best for them. Because a perfect arrangement where we're too stable parents have a child and are able to raise that child with all the resources they need. That's not what we're working with, in in all our most of these cases. So. So we what we need is people who can help and what we connect our kids, what we're our perspective is, we're not social workers, we can't make those decisions. What we can do is provide tools and resources to take advantage of what we do have, which is the information age, which is a technology age, where we can at least find phone numbers, we can find that biological mother, who's in another state, no idea her child's been being abused, and get them back together. And that's social workers take it from there.

R

Renee Williams 22:41


Right? If I can jump in on something, yes. Because what Jennifer said is just super important, right there is, we need to be spending more time figuring out how we can support the family. And there's been a real push for that in the look at what is in the best interests of the child and



And there's been a real push for that in the look at what is in the best interests of the child and removing the lens of what we expect culturally. So is it in the best interest of a child to have two parents who are both working or one is often taken care of, but they can afford everything? Absolutely. But that doesn't mean that that's what's always going to happen. And that doesn't mean that it's it Trump's the best interest. So I've seen many cases go through where the foster home is, to a mainstream view of better circumstance, right? You have two parents, you have both functioning, they can afford everything in the world for this child, that doesn't mean it's in the best interest of the child. So there's been a real look at a needed look at how we support families. And that blends into some of our cultural understandings. And in America, looking at what other cultures believe, and is that still in the best interest of the child instead of what we expect? A good childhood looks like.

 Jennifer Jacobs 23:50

And I can also well, I realized I didn't give the other side you were looking for kind of a two sided

 Ray Abel 23:55

thing. I was gonna bring it up, but I figured you might come back around to it. So I'm glad I didn't have to bring it up.

 Jennifer Jacobs 23:59

Yeah. So sometimes there is a perspective that the the family is bad. And so why would we try to find more of them? This family is bad family, they've done poorly. They've not taken care of this child in whatever ways got them removed and into foster care. And so sometimes when we're training potential users, they're they're presenting this you to us why would I want to Why would even want to find more of this bad family, we need to kind of remove the child from that bad soil and replant them into better soil and then they can grow and flourish. And again, caveat that I'm not a social worker. I don't work these cases directly, but one of the groups that does do this work so they think about it this way. Imagine your own family is, whoever you are all of us. Is there not that crazy uncle, that cousin that went sort of off somewhere and we're not quite sure what's going on. That's where the foster child Old is emerging. And that part of the family has been struggling and you're not even maybe aware of it. And we're trying to find you. And so whether or not we're going to use the word bad, but the part of the family, the parents, or the grandparents who who were unable to raise that child safely and successfully in the child's ended up in foster care, they've not been able to do what the foster care system was looking for them to do the child's been removed, we want to call that bad or not, is a separate argument. But it doesn't mean that 200 extended family members plus community connections, neighbors, teachers, coaches, they can't statistically all the bad, and even the ones that we might say are not safe for the child. That's still part of the child's story. And so we've started to do a lot of work around this story. And if you'll permit me, I'll have one more story that just really gets me on this. One of our earliest users, she had a, I think a 15, or six year old boy, she was getting real worried he'd been in foster care for since he was a toddler. And the his social worker was very worried he would age out with no one. His foster parents did care for him deeply and he cared for them, but they weren't going to adopt him. She was very worried he would have no one when he turned 18. So she signed up to use our software early



on to see what she could find. This boy, this teenager had a story that he told himself. And the story was that he was thrown away that he was trash. Because why else would he have been given away as he understood it by his parents, his biological family, as a toddler, he must have been so awful. Even as a toddler, they couldn't stand him. And in the 1213 years since he'd had no contact with anyone he was related to. So it's not a leap to think that a teenager will arrive at the conclusion that he was trash, that he was thrown away by his biological family. So his social workers started with the help of our software, she did amazing work and reached out and found his paternal grandmother, his paternal aunt, it turned out his grandmother still had pictures of the boy the toddler on her wall. And, and she'd loved him so much that even though she knew he was a teenager, this was what she had to hold on to. She also told the social worker that he was named for the family's hero, he was so valued when he was born, he was not trash, he was so valued, he was given the most important name in the family. Now, in that situation, he it wasn't the right thing for him to move from the foster families home, he stayed with the foster family, the grandmother and the aunt were still not able to care for him. But the connection with them and the stories that they gave him, completely changed his own internal outlook of himself, his worth his value, and why why what happened to him happened. And that's priceless.



Ray Abel 27:49

I mean, I love that I think it was tough watching these documentaries, because I think two things you said there really stuck out to me value and family. And I think as someone who grew up being passed back and forth between family members, not outside, not in the foster system, but being in different family members. It's still something I struggle with today about feeling valued, and to have your entire family whether the family chose that or whether the system shows up but not being connected to them, I can't even begin to imagine the lack of value that would feel as a child that went through that. And I think the family part of it, there was one story in the documentary about a young woman, she was 18. She wanted to be a theater major Renee, she was living with foster parents she was seemed like for what she went through, she seemed very well adjusted, very positive, very upbeat person. But she ended up at the end of the documentary living with a sister that she didn't know also got taken from her parents house and this was years after. But that connection with a sister that she hadn't seen basically your whole life became so important her because it was a connection to that family. And it just made me think how deep those connections really lie. And there's all kinds of underlying psychological reasons for that, but feeling valued, and feeling like you have a family and people can support you. I think that's the thing that really hit me the most while watching these and made me emotional watching them. But I do think on the positive side, too. And I'm, I'm opening us up for either one of you here, but I think they're I think we always hear and I think you guys are both brought this up that there's always the bad stories that make the press and it's you know, if you have one bad story out of 1000 even it's you're gonna hear about the one bad story. And so we've always heard about bad foster parents, and we've heard that people are in it for the money and all of these things. But there were some really good foster parents I saw in here. Do either of you have any experience with foster parents specifically, and again, it could be both sides of it, the bad you've seen, but I also want to hear about some of the good because the older woman in the show, she basically wanted to have children and was only able to have one so she started fostering and now people in the resource centers are trying to find her and trying to always get people coming into her house and she wants these kids and it was really encouraging to see that so Do either of you have stories about some really good foster parents and maybe some of the old experience of the good and the bad.

R**Renee Williams 30:05**

I will say that my own parents were foster parents, not to me. But there are a lot of very good people who are foster parents. And just to clear the air, because I know there are a lot of misconceptions. I think, at least in Virginia foster parents make maybe \$500 a month per child, and a child gets an additional like \$300 clothing and allowance annually, annually. Nobody's getting rich on fostering these kids in my work life. For the National Center, we take a lot of referrals, I hear a lot of horror stories from the 70s and 80s. Still, it's not as much today of kids saying I was abused by my foster father, I will say every single foster parent that I've currently met, and that's in my personal life with knowing people who have done it, or who are currently doing it. And in my professional life, and as a cost of the foster families I've seen, are truly wonderful. They're there for the kids, a lot of times, they almost get a little too involved in cases, because they care so much about what is going to happen to this child. But it's not all sunshine and roses, because kind of like back to what I said at the beginning. Even if you have a perfect foster family, there's going to be trauma because the fact that the child had to be removed in the first place means there was a failure somewhere.

J**Jennifer Jacobs 31:24**

Yeah, and I can add a story that a user recently shared with us as well was of a foster family that wanted to adopt the puppy preteen that they were fostering. And once they started moving towards that he kind of reacted negatively, not because he didn't like them, but because the idea of this becoming permanent caused him to to escalate his behavior. It's it's a, it's a big step. And he also didn't understand what love looks like. And so they started to treat him like their son for life. And so we're going to do our homework because you have a future. And it's important that you do well in school. And here's how we do well in school as we, you know, we sit down and we study and and he considered that to be a negative thing. He didn't he'd never had parents do that for him. And so he ended up causing disruptions that ended up having him be removed from the home, not what the foster family wanted. But that's what happened over the course of the next couple placements. The similar situation occurred and he started to realize he had had several good and caring foster parents and they started to do the same thing. They wanted him to do his homework they wanted him to do well. They were consistent in discipline, and those kinds of caring things that are what love looks like. And, and a therapist got involved and helped him realize that that first family that wanted to adopt him, loved him. That, that that's what that looks like. And so it took him some time to come to this realization. So his social worker, then kind of getting these pieces together said, well, that first family loved you they wanted to adopt you. Do you want to go back and kind of see where they are now they had sense taken in other foster children, they were adopting another boy. And but he didn't want to reach back out to them. And they still wanted him. And so even though he had caused such a disruption, that he had to be removed from the home, or he had asked to be removed to the home, I don't know which they still wanted him. And they they had him come back to the home. And they adopted him. And you know, those are incredible human beings.

**Ray Abel 33:35**

Yeah, I mean, I haven't seen foster care specifically other than some of the kids we worked with through the nonprofit I worked at, but I have had a lot of people who adopted children and seeing the love they have for them. It doesn't seem any different than what I see from parents

who are by blood. But I do think you're talking about that kid. And I wonder if it's because if you decide you are going to be adopted, that's still a huge change. And it's almost like saying I give up on ever getting reconnected to my birth family. And I'm not sure if that's what he went through. But um, that would be the thing that pops into my mind is what is going through your head realizing, hey, maybe you're kind of hoping it's like the end of a movie. And the parents come swooping back and say we always loved you. And we always want to be here for you. But that is a big change. And it's encouraging to see that they fought through that and still adopted the child. And one of the things that was really encouraging from that documentary I wanted to try to see follow up to see what happened with some of these families. And there was a kid Dasani. He was the one in the show that had his mother's boyfriend had seen the murderer, and I'm not real familiar with her songs, but there's a singer named Sia, and she's popular and she apparently adopted Dasani after the documentary aired. And so she hadn't talked about for many years, but there were rumors and she finally came out and said that yes, he was living with her. So I think that's great to see that this child was adopted by this famous person and probably is living a better life than he had. But at the same time, not all of us have the financial resources of Sia and the ability to do these kinds of things and not everyone can be like your parents, Renee and be able to become foster parents. But I would like to hear, is there anything that someone like me could do? I can't be a foster parent at this point. But I would love to be able to help in some way. Is there anything you guys can think of that average people who aren't doing this as a full time job and life change can do to be involved in the system and help make a change or help some of these kids.

R

Renee Williams 35:24

I know that Big Brothers Big Sisters, across America are constantly looking for volunteers, and specifically men, importantly, men, the program that I am part of court appointed special advocate, here's the magic part of that. You don't have to be an attorney. In fact, they prefer you to not be an attorney. Because whenever I step into that role, I have to take my attorney hat off, they are constantly looking for volunteers. And I will say it's maybe 10 to 20 hours a month, where you have to go visit the kid twice to make sure that everything is safe. And then you write a report to the court. So you check everything in the child's life, you check and see what's going right. They are always always always looking for volunteers to step into that role. And that's one of the most direct ways that I can think of,

J

Jennifer Jacobs 36:11

I would echo that those are both pretty substantial commitments, and, and rightly so. So for those who can't necessarily make that commitment, or at you know, at this time, we also find that educating yourself about the foster care system, like you did, right, watching a documentary, that can be painful to really go in deep like that. So even just understanding that these children and their situations are no fault of their own. It's not that they're deficient in some way, or they're the other. These are children, just like the ones that anybody knows and loves. And their families just have had some trouble of various types. So become aware, and educate those around you just to know that what foster care is what it means for kids to be in foster care, it doesn't mean that they need to be kept separate. Of course, we are nonprofit, we always take notations. But we find that the more people know what foster cares about and and the more that they are willing to be educated and talk to their your colleagues, your co workers, your neighbors, I think helps there's a stigma to foster care. So my co founder, like I

said, spent time with a foster family as a child, when I first met her, I met her because she married a friend of mine. And, and he knew I was learning about foster care. So he said, Oh, I want you to meet Jennifer. She She wants to know about your time in foster care. And my my co founders name is Jessica. She says, Oh, we don't talk about that. That's not something that's not okay. Like, we don't want anyone to know about that. That's her story to tell. But that's part of the problem, I think, is that our, our families and their their ability to function or lack of, we carry a shame. And so shame is a big part of this issue. We've touched on trauma, but I think I think shame fits in there as well. And, and to the extent that the individuals can learn more and understand more and become more compassionate around the idea that if someone grew up, whether it formally in foster care or not in a traditional arrangement, that's not something for them to be ashamed of.



Ray Abel 38:35

Yeah, I think the stigma, that's something that even I had my eyes open to I mean, I've worked in some of these areas for a long time. And you'd like to think that I'm, I'm enlightened, I've gotten over this, I think that everyone should have the same abilities and should have the same opportunities. And I can see that people had struggles and work through it. But there was something different. I think it goes back to what you said about having value and having family and also that stigma to it because I saw even the good mother in the documentary, this foster mother, who was bringing kids to the bus, one of the kids didn't want to get on the bus and really was acting up. And I just kept thinking, Well, what is happening with that child, when she steps on the bus? Is she getting teased? I know what kids our kids are jerks. Like I was a jerk. I'm still oftentimes a jerk. But when I was a kid, I was much more often a jerk. And you say things because people are different. And there's a stigma there. And I think that's something that these kids live with. And I think that my defense mechanism throughout life has always been to say, it doesn't affect me, whatever it is that bother me, it doesn't affect me. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to mention it. I've overcome it. I'm strong enough. And these kids went through 100 times worse what I went through, and you start keeping that inside. And I think that's one thing that I think we're lacking in general in society is therapy. I finally did it two years ago for the first time in my life because I was too strong. I didn't need it. I've worked through things on my own. And it was so helpful and these kids that was one of the kids in the show, they were talking to him about going to therapy and one of the dads who had a have a girlfriend who was on drugs while she was pregnant with their baby. He didn't want to go. He was like, I'm too tough to go to therapy. And I think that's something that there's a stigma with kids who have been in the foster care system, there's a stigma around therapy, there's a stigma around the new kid comes to your school is all these stigmas. And I feel like they're all wrapped up onto these kids. And I think one of the things that can help with that, and one of the things I've seen in my life, personally, is mentorship. And I want to ask you maybe a controversial question, Renee, you mentioned that, especially men in Big Brothers and Big Sisters aren't there. So there's the big sisters seem to be showing up? Why do you think men, those big brothers aren't showing up? Do you have any thoughts on that? And I'm a guy, but I want to hear the truth. And I don't want you to sugarcoat anything.



Renee Williams 40:42

I think there are very good men out there. I think women tend to volunteer more. Actually, I know women volunteer more. So let me not say I think that women tend to women volunteer, more women show up more women get into it more. I think men just don't think about it. I don't

think it's a bad thing. I just don't think it crosses their mind. I think it's, you know, a lot of men will do anything a neighbor asks, they will do anything, but kind of a structured volunteer assignment is like, what is that? I think women are just more empathetic. I think we know that. And we just tend to show up and get things done. And it's so important to have male role models. And I genuinely believe men just don't realize that there's a lack there. Like, it's not even like, Hey, I don't want to do it. It's Is there a problem? And there's just not a realization. But in every in the CASA program, I volunteered the local children's hospital. And I did that in Pittsburgh, I do it here in DC, Big Brothers, Big Sisters. It's always 90% Women are showing up.



Ray Abel 41:52

All right, well, I just did a Google search being attacked, like you just attacked me. And it seems like an attack, right. I mean, I think there's definitely reality that because I think in the experience I had with the nonprofit's I worked out there. There was a higher percentage of women that volunteered overall, the stats seem to be from my cursory research looks like 40% of women have volunteered 35% of men, but it seems like women tend to be more active in it. So you are right. And I'm am offended. But I think this is a call to all the men listening to this episode to start volunteering. And it's, quite honestly, it's something that I haven't done in about a year and a half. It's been busy with work and other things. And I keep making these excuses. But it's also something that consistently comes back into my life of wow, like, why am I not doing this, I gained so much from it. It's about giving whatever knowledge you can to someone and also what you gain from it. And just this week, actually, there was a kid I worked with about five or six years ago, maybe longer than that now, seven or eight years ago, he was in a church that I went to, and he was we volunteered with him, we always took kids to these wing nights and brought all these guys together. And he always came out with us. And he's now in law school at the University of Pittsburgh, just like you were Renee, and he wanted to catch up, he's back in the city, and we're gonna get some dinner next week. But this is my pitch to all the men out there, it's so powerful to think, you know what, no matter what I went through, and I think that's the part that sometimes a struggle for man, I think the thing that doesn't get talked a lot about with men is the fact that we often feel like we're not good enough in general. And it feels like if we don't feel good about how we are or who we are, or how are we ever going to give that to someone else. And I think that's something that needs to be addressed. And I think that can be done through therapy and a lot of other ways. But everyone has something to give. And when you start giving you get a lot back. And like I said, those connections that I made through my nonprofit experience, are life changing for me. And hopefully, there's some good that comes to the kids as well.



Renee Williams 43:43

Let me emphasize with kids, a lot of people think I didn't go through what they went through, I have no idea I have nothing in common with them. And I will tell you, I have a 16 year old little sister who we are completely different. What kids care about is time, she will come spend weeks with me and we have nothing in common. But we still have a good time. Kids Care About time kids care about love. They remember both of those things, time and love. So just spending the time taking the time means more to a kid than what you talked about on that day. Yeah, and





Ray Abel 44:16

I think anyone thinking about volunteering, I think time can be an excuse. But it also can be a reason. I think we should use it as the reason to do this.



Renee Williams 44:24

It's never nearly as much time as you think. And it's always 10 times more rewarding. If it's two hours on a Saturday, what else are you gonna do?



Ray Abel 44:32

We did an episode about literacy. And we talked about some of the volunteers and some of the connections you see when you work here, women who are 70 years old and volunteering with kids who are 15 years old that they love. And I think I mentioned this on the last episode, they loved that they spent time with them. They'd love that they felt valued and that's really what it's all about. And so even those people who don't think they're cool, none of us really do unless you're kind of a narcissist. Everyone kind of thinks where we're worse off than what we actually are and they There's always a reason not to. And I think a lot of it comes back to not feeling good enough. But anytime you can spend anything you can give back is valuable. I want to wrap up by asking what's next. And that could either mean what can be improved in the system, it could be what I mean, we already kind of have the call to arms now for people to volunteer, and I want to stress that one more time. But what can be improved about the system? Anything else you want to kind of wrap up with? So Jennifer, we'll start with you.



Jennifer Jacobs 45:25

That's just a simple little question. Sure. I have a clear, concise answer. What can be improved about the system? Certainly many things, I guess, I, we try to stay focused in our work on how can we put easy to use useful tools in the hands of social workers, because the social workers, if a family comes into contact with child welfare, the social worker is going to be key, it's going to be either they make a good decision in the first place, about whether this case needs to even be continued. Or whether the family just needs you know, food help, it's crucial that they make a good and thoughtful decision about whether the family needs child needs to be removed or not. And all the rest that Renee walked us through. So all the tools, we have a small set of tools that we're growing, they're all aimed around, how can we give that social worker time to make good and quality decisions, to feel that they are helping children and families, which is what most of them went into social work to do. And unfortunately, that the field has this huge turnover rate. Because people you can imagine people who want to help going into a field and finding that instead of often of doing the helping they wanted to do they're spending a lot of time doing paperwork and sitting in court waiting for their turn and, and not really helping that that's a recipe for losing, losing people from the field. We're also moving into how can we trauma is a hard thing. And you talked about therapy and a crucial aspect of that. But not everyone is able to go to therapy, even if they want to not healthcare, obviously, is a huge issue. And that's a whole nother podcast, I'm sure that you have teed up. But if you can't get to therapy, for whatever reason, can we at least open the idea of trauma to to you. And so we're taking our first baby step around that with we have a video series that we're releasing should be ready in the next month or two, to open the eyes of those who've either been in foster care



or experienced it or even had secondary trauma from, from working with kids in and around foster care. And it's just simple little series of what we're calling gaming quality videos. It's not a video game, it's it's like those little videos you see in the game aimed at the youth and young adults, that says, hey, trauma is a real thing. It's not a character flaw. And you've probably experienced trauma and this what it's about. And this is what these are some steps you can start to take to think about how to heal, it's like trying to run on a broken leg, it doesn't work. And if you look around, you see all your peers running, and you're trying to run but you keep falling down. If you don't realize your leg is broken, you're going to think there's something wrong with you that you're just a bad runner, and you're just going to keep failing. Because you must be a bad runner. If you say wait, I have a broken leg, stop trying to run on that broken leg to get it healed. If you can take the steps to heal it, you can run just like everyone else. So those are some things that are next kind of more for us. I think what's next broadly in the child welfare space is that we we as a community as citizenry think we need to take that bigger look that Renee was starting to walk us through around the 70s 80s, we're evolving. I think we're still not there. One of the things that I find really frustrating is i But I do agree that you know, many things are improving. One of the things I find so frustrating is that children in foster care are the very definition of voiceless, because it's just the way we humans operate, the laws that get passed. And the money that gets distributed, is often done to people with the loudest voices, and the legal voice of a child as their parents. And if you don't have parents, and you're a child, you like you have no voice legally. And so those who speak for foster children are in an already more difficult situation. So I don't know, I don't have the answer to that. But I think a real hard look at how we how we as a citizenry, how we address this wicked problem of how to raise children whose parents can't or won't raise them. It's not it's simple, easy answer. And I don't think that we've, we've really reflected on that enough as a citizenry about how we're going to do that and how we're going to equip the people that we have this problem to. We really haven't done that well. And the software that we built just as a quick example, replaces paper and pencil for many social workers. And that's just that's just not okay.



Ray Abel 50:00

Man, well, I think you did a great job of a very open ended question summarizing it in a good way there. And I think what you said actually just really had made the legal voice of a child as a parent. And if you have no parents, you have no legal voice. I think that's powerful. So thank you for that. Renee. Same question very broad, see if you can narrow it down and give us what's going to solve all these problems. I'm gonna actually go a little bit further for you, since I've known you a little bit longer. What one thing can we do to solve all of the problems in the foster care system to return to solve this?



Renee Williams 50:29

So here's the depressing answer. All right, we are making steps we are making huge steps. But like anything, this is a system that is reliant on individuals. And it's reliant on individuals stepping up, and whether it's volunteers, which we talked about, or the professionals that we put in place doing their jobs. And it's very hard to control or to predict how individuals are going to react as Jennifer said, Folks, burnout, they are overworked as it is. This system also is dependent on several other systems, like the mental health care system in America, like health care for mothers like supports that we put in for the welfare system for families. So until all of those things align, there's no way to just fix the foster system. Because again, like I said, very



early, the foster system only comes into play because there's been a failure everywhere else. So you're starting at failure, which is not a strong place to get started. I will say there are a lot of good people in this system who are trying social workers are one Ray, you and I talked about this, and I promised that I would explain it children actually, in the foster system do have a legal representative. It's called The Guardian Ad Litem parents get their own lawyers. And the child gets a lawyer and that lawyer is the gaol. The Guardian Ad Litem who will step in for the child, I've met several, they are wonderful. Again, we're relying on an individual there that doesn't get paid a whole lot of money by the system. They are always attorneys. And they are always attorneys who don't get paid well and have 20 cases at any given time that are open active cases. So until we figure out a way to fix everything else. God, I hate to sound so defeatist about this, but I think,



Ray Abel 52:16

this podcast, and I'm



Renee Williams 52:18

sorry, but I think that it's the rough truth is that we're making the improvements that we can for the kids that are in foster care, the best we can hope is that they're in a good, safe home, because we know they're starting with trauma, but until we can fix every other system, and America does not like to do policy, deep fixes. America loves itself a good band aid. So until we stop slapping the band aids on everything. I don't know how we fix this, the best we could do is small individual fixes and hope in the long run that turns things around.



Jennifer Jacobs 52:53

But I guess I agree with everything Rene said, But and this is not the big fix. But I do think America has a long history of community and family. And, and so that's kind of the approach we're taking. We recognize we're not solving all problems. We're not curing world hunger and all of that. But I think if we were able to better empower communities and families, recognizing we will probably never solve all of these healthcare and poverty issues and issues of unfairness and other issues. But if we can, if we can empower the communities and the families with some guidance around making sure those who are empowered are healthy and supportive. We can often let families solve their problems to a certain extent we can empower families and by family, I'm including the broader family, the the neighbors, the teachers, the coaches, let them help and let them know their help is needed. Like you were talking about with men volunteering, let them know their help is needed. The one of our users recently connected a teenage girl back to her fifth grade basketball coach because she said that fifth grade basketball coach, I really looked up to him. I really liked him. I would like to live with him and his family. And they, they had to track him down. He was in a whole different school district, called him up and said you're needed. Remember this girl, you coached her five years ago? She said, You matter? And he said, What do you imagine being a basketball coach of elementary school girls basketball team, and years later that one of those girls is a teenager and said, You mattered. You mattered so much that she wondered if she could live with you. Because she needs a place to live. Holy cow. That guy stepped up and they're adopting her now. And so these problems can't be solved wholesale with the ones and twos. But if you ask people to help

and tell them they matter, because they do because they were named because they were asked because they have a connection when people step up, but the thing is that it takes a little bit of work. So I think, and I would say that this is easier to say than to do. But the one thing I would change to fix many problems in foster care is, is it the guiding principle should be that every child in foster care should be treated like they're a child that you love. That whatever you would imagine a child that you love and care about what you would imagine you want happening for them, if somehow they ended up in foster care. That's how every child in foster care should be treated. Every decision should be made with that thought in mind. And of course, there's good people working in this space, as Renee said, they're doing their best, but we're not giving them the room to be able to think and make those decisions, we're not giving them the resources to say what is the very best thing we can do for this child who's in a difficult situation? What is the very best efforts that we can make to surround this child with all the people who might love and care for them, and then see what team we can put together as what I would want to have happen. And we're not doing it because we're not allowing our social workers and our family lawyers and our classes, we're not giving them that bandwidth and those resources. So if we can at least work towards saying, Let's empower the people who can make that difference? And then make sure that they're able to surround those children and families with teams of people who do care, and who can help them and who will step up. 95% of people, I bet, I don't have I'm just making this up. I bet 95% of Americans, if you said, you personally matter to somebody who's in trouble, Will you step up and help. And the ask is something that's possible for them to do, I bet they would do it.



Ray Abel 56:45

I love it. I think we started out with me kind of bring the mood down, Renee brought it back up. And then towards the end, I feel like Renee brought it back down. But now we're ending on a good note here. But I do think both of you are focused in on community. And I think there's a couple of things there. I agree with you, Renee about how government is always about band aids. I think ripping off the band aid would be a great podcast episode someday. And I agree 100%. With therapy, Jennifer, I think that's something that we also need to talk about in the healthcare system, it's so hard to get good care. But I do think that we've always been very good in America with community and with family and making it a broader personal interaction. And even looking back in my life, I had a grandfather who was so important to me and as a child. And as I grew, I can pull three people very specifically, that are still mentors of mine, that I don't know where I'd be without them. And then there's a whole broader level of people who helped my life. But there's four main mentors in my life, and one of them was family, and three of them were the broader family and they become family. And so I think it's so important. And I think that's a great way to wrap this up is to talk about just how we can do better as a society. And I think that really is when it comes down to what the one I didn't plan on this before. I asked you that very broad question. But I think we really just got to live up to all of our expectations of living in a society. We have so many opportunities out there to volunteer Big Brothers and Big Sisters is one, but there's so many local organizations that you can work with. Just get involved. I think that is something that when you distill all that we've talked about being involved in these kids lives makes such a huge difference. And I've seen it firsthand, you guys have seen it firsthand. And I think that's a great positive way to end it. And you've solved all the world's problems. So great job, Jennifer and Renee,



Jennifer Jacobs 58:28

you're welcome. We're available anytime,



Ray Abel 58:30

perfect. You mentioned world hunger, we'll bring you back on for that episode. And then you guys can solve that as well. But I want to thank you both for being here. Make sure you check out connect our kids check out the National Center for victims of crime. And also if you want to learn more about this, there's a great documentary Foster on HBO. There's a series called removed on YouTube. And that's more of a dramatization of journals that kids had made and that one, I made it through one episode and I couldn't watch it anymore. I think the dramatization even though I knew it was a dramatization. I saw some things in there that reminded me of some of my childhood and it was too hard to watch. And so I think, seeing that documentary in that series, we really helpful. We'll also have some other links on the website at [researchnews.com](http://researchnews.com) And make sure you share this podcast, go out there and volunteer and start helping some of these kids who are in our foster care systems. We'll be back again with a new episode soon. And we thank you for listening