
FINDING *FOSTER* KIDS' FAMILIES MUST BECOME OUR MANDATE

Published: Thursday, April 14, 2005 Edition: Morning Final Section: Editorial Page: 7B
Memo: LEONARD *EDWARDS*, a Santa Clara County juvenile court judge, is the recipient of the 2004 William H. Rehnquist Award for judicial excellence. He wrote this article for the Mercury News.
RELATED STORY: page 6B.

Source: BY LEONARD *EDWARDS*

Michael has been in *foster* care for nine years. He has moved from home to home and had lost contact with any family members. Last month while in a group home, he attempted to commit suicide. Life was simply not worth living: He didn't feel he belonged anywhere and he had no connections with family. He was lost. A staff member at the group home intervened just in time and saved Michael's life.

Enter Kevin Campbell and US Search. Campbell has been a pioneer in finding families for *foster* children. Starting in the state of Washington and working with Catholic Charities, Campbell's idea of finding families for *foster* children became state law there years ago. The Washington law requires social workers, the courts and all professionals to ask about a child's family in an effort to identify and locate family members at every stage of a *foster*-care case. It also requires the state to establish a working group to identify best practices for family-finding.

The law has been successful. After two years the number of children in relative placement as opposed to *foster* care has nearly doubled (from 19 percent to 37 percent). And the results keep getting better.

Campbell went to work on Michael's case. In less than an hour, using the technology that has been developed by US Search, he had identified relatives and contacted several. One of Michael's grandmothers responded within hours and wrote him a letter that arrived a couple of days later. In her contacts she told him how much she loved and missed him and inquired how she could become a part of his life again. His other grandmother responded two days later. That same week, an aunt came to visit him. His family in the Midwest invited him to their family reunion this summer. His family wants him to rejoin them.

Michael's story is familiar. It reminded me of the movie "Antwone Fisher." The outcome of finding and reuniting families can and will be retold countless times if we get serious about family-finding. AB 880, by Assemblywoman Rebecca Cohn, D-Campbell, is pending before the Legislature. This bill would require social workers, judges and other professionals to ask about family and to utilize technology to find family for *foster* children. It would result in more significant family connections for children who cannot return to their parents. It would change the *foster*-care system.

Some counties are taking family-finding seriously even without this legislation. The Santa Clara County Department of Family and Children's Services has created a unit of social workers dedicated to finding families. For those who worry about the future of our *foster* children, family-finding provides great hope. It now becomes our task to ensure that these technological tools are utilized on behalf of *foster* children everywhere.

The San Jose Mercury News archives are stored on a SAVE (tm) newspaper library system from MediaStream Inc., a Knight Ridder company.