Ventura County, CA: Fostering Partnerships of Hope

Submitted by Elizabeth Thasiah, Foster VC Kids Recruitment, Development, Support and Placement Program Manager, County of Ventura Children and Family Services

Ventura is a remarkable county, with the City of Ventura at its center. When traveling to downtown Ventura, enjoy oysters overlooking the ocean at the Jolly Oyster Food Truck; taste some of the best California beer at Topa Topa Brewing Company; celebrate with daily fresh seafood at Lure Fish House; and sit by the outside fire taking in the Southern California atmosphere at Rum Fish. For those that just want a good beer or wine and a great slice of pizza, don’t miss Fluid State! —Not only is Ventura County a remarkable place to visit, it is a remarkable example of the transformative power of living out QPI.

Ventura County recognized that foster care, by its very nature, causes additional trauma to our children and families. They embraced the knowledge that caregivers who support both children and their parents can be incredible agents for healing and stability for the entire family. In doing so, they sought to create a system of quality partnership, engagement and support for caregivers in partnership with birth families. The QPI lens drives development of more strength based and family centered practices.

Early on, Ventura County learned that QPI cannot be treated simply as a “Caregiver Recruitment/ Retention activity”. To embed QPI practices within the agency, QPI was added as a subcommittee of their Safety Organized Practice (SOP) framework. To ensure that caregivers and families informed and guided efforts, a monthly QPI Caregiver Advisory Group, comprised of foster and relative caregivers and agency staff., was established. This committed team provides valuable input for continuous reform efforts to improve communication and support with families.

When QPI began 4 years ago, in Ventura County, there were significant complaints and frustrations from caregivers who felt disrespected, unsupported and excluded from agency decisions regarding the children in their care. In order to chart caregiver experience, an online satisfaction survey was sent to all caregivers. The results are exciting: 78% of caregiver respondents stated they had experienced strong caregiver support. One caregiver stated, “We love our RDS Caregiver Support Specialist! We truly feel like we have someone in our corner that is there to ensure successful placements and relationships. Our Peer Partner Educator is also amazing. I message her with any questions or concerns I have and she always responds within minutes. She is a wealth of knowledge and encouragement. I feel so blessed that we have these resources through FosterVCKids. I know that is not the case in all regions of the state, but I can attest that these services and personnel are incredibly effective.”

QPI workgroups have been developed to address specific QPI priorities and practice changes. These workgroups are comprised of agency staff, partners, caregivers, former foster youth and birth parents. Outcomes of these workgroups include an updated Needs and Service Plan, which ensures that caregivers receive robust information sharing about the children in their care; Ventura County’s Quality Partnership Agreement, which outlines and holds accountable expectations for information sharing, communication, partnership and teaming between caregivers and birth parents; and All About Me Ice Breakers, which facilitates communication and support between parents and caregivers as soon as a child is removed. Additionally, Ventura County utilized Florida’s QPI pre-service training to create Foster VC Kids 21st Century Quality Parenting Pre-Service training, which embeds the QPI lens throughout each step of becoming a trauma informed parent. The last session of this 24 hour training program is a panel discussion by a former foster youth, birth parent and caregiver.

Go to www.fostervckids.org to download any of materials, tools and newsletters developed and used by Ventura County. Their pre-service training can be found on the QPI website page: http://www.qpicalifornia.org/pages/21century.shtml.
Welcome to Our Newest QPI Sites

Merced and Calaveras joined California’s Quality Parenting Initiative.

Minnesota QPI officially “launched” at the end of October.


Up Close and Personal with María Ramiu

Maria F. Ramiu began her first job as an assistant in a day care center, which was operated by a foster mom who lived next door. Little did she know, that her experience in that day care and the friendships she developed with the foster youth who resided in the home of her neighbor would forever impact the trajectory of her life. Maria currently serves as a Senior Staff Attorney at the Youth Law Center, where she has worked since 1992.

In her 25 years at the Youth Law Center, Maria has litigated, trained, written and consulted on a wide range of child welfare and juvenile justice issues. She has been lead counsel on many of the Center’s cases including litigation to secure humane conditions and appropriate services for youth in foster care and juvenile justice institutions. Maria has been involved in a variety of child welfare and juvenile justice reform activities on issues ranging from permanency for foster youth to the treatment of youth in the adult criminal justice system. She has also trained and written on issues related to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability impacting youth in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems. During her tenure with the Youth Law Center, Maria has served on many local, state and national advisory boards and other panels convened to address the safety, health and welfare of youth in out-of-home care.

Outside of her legal career, Maria is also a sports fanatic. She especially loves softball, basketball, and football. Maria played both softball and basketball at Penn State. After 45 years of playing softball, she is contemplating retirement! Some of her favorite professional teams are the Lakers, Sparks, Dodgers, and Raiders. Her favorite college team is Cal Golden Bears. Maria considers herself an expert at Fantasy Football.

Maria also enjoys traveling. She has combined two of her favorite past times, traveling and sports, and has attended the last of the 5 of 6 Olympic Games. What an incredible experience!

Maria enjoys listening to R & B music, watching romantic comedies and loves reading non-fiction books, particularly biographies.

Maria lives in San Francisco, California with her partner of 30 years.

Thank you, Maria, for your dedication to the Youth Law Center and your unwavering commitment to serving children and youth.
YLC strives to transform the child welfare and juvenile justice systems across the country to ensure every child and youth has the opportunity to thrive. Our success is only possible in partnership with community. The Unsung Heroes Awards celebrate the everyday champions who rarely receive the public recognition they deserve, but who make a tremendous difference in the lives of children and youth in foster care and who cross paths with the juvenile justice system. We’re extraordinarily proud to announce that our 2017 Unsung Heroes are:

**Bridges to Higher Education for Youth in Juvenile Justice**
*Katie Bliss, Program Director, Project Change, College of San Mateo*
*Ron Galatolo, Chancellor, San Mateo Community College District*
*Tom Mohr, Board Member, San Mateo Community College District*

Funded by the San Mateo Community College District, Project Change invests in the futures and potential of youth involved in the juvenile justice system—both those in detention and on campus—by providing higher educational opportunities and comprehensive support. In January 2018, YLC will co-host an event with Project Change to convene higher education and probation leaders interested in sharing strategies, programming, and accelerating work that interrupts the school to prison pipeline and opens the door to a brighter future for all young people.

**The Power of Loving Parenting for Teens in Foster Care**
*Shonda and Everett Emery, Foster Parents Stanislaus County and family*

Shonda and Everett demonstrate how loving parents can transform the life of foster youth. They treat all teens who live in their home as their own, nurture their relationships with biological family, and tirelessly advocate for their education to make sure they are prepared for the future and the world. Shonda and Everett exemplify the true intervention that foster care can offer and have served as powerful role models during the launch of Calaveras County, CA’s Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), YLC’s system change strategy that re-orient the foster care system to ensure every youth receives real parenting and love.

**Bringing Multi-Disciplinary Knowledge to the Field**
*Heidi Foreman*

A marketing and strategy consultant, Heidi has been working with client teams to build consumer goods and services brands in Fortune 1000 companies for more than two decades. Since the launch of QPI in Florida 9 years ago, Heidi has donated her time and expertise to help child welfare agencies and QPI partners understand the power of their brands as a promise to children and families. With Heidi’s assistance, QPI sites across 10 states have been working towards aligning their policies and practices with their brands—the promise that every youth receives genuine parenting in a nurturing home.

Congratulations and many thanks to our Unsung Heroes and the every day heroes that make an impact in the lives of others.

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**CELEBRATE 10 YEARS OF QPI**

In 10 years, the Quality Parenting Initiative has expanded from 3 areas in one site to more than 70 sites in 10 different states! We’re still growing and our conference will focus on bringing more voices to QPI. Celebrate 10 years with us, embracing new partners, and new approaches that prioritize excellent parenting in Foster Care Systems!

There will be an opportunity to review successes, explore challenges with QPI colleagues from around the country, and share tools and solutions with one another.

Register for the Annual QPI National Conference
January 16-17, 2018
JW Marriott New Orleans
Registration Cut Off Date: December 23rd
Registration Questions?
Contact AK Consulting Group
(850) 523-4200
Annette@akconsultinggroup.org

Whatever is beautiful,
Whatever is meaningful,
Whatever brings happiness,
May it be yours this holiday season,
& throughout the coming year...

The YLC Staff