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## **Duluth Advocate Earns National Recognition for Foster Care Leadership**

DULUTH, MN — The Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), a project of the Youth Law Center, has honored Duluth resident Jessica Gunnarson with the 2025 Elevate and Celebrate Award for her extraordinary leadership in ensuring children in foster care receive the excellent, loving parenting and family connections they need to thrive. Jessica is one of just six people nationwide recognized this year.

QPI is a national movement committed to making sure every child in foster care experiences developmentally supportive, nurturing parenting and remains connected to the people who love them most. Research shows that when foster parents, birth families, and agency partners form strong, trusting relationships, children experience safer reunifications, stronger attachments, and better long-term outcomes.

Earlier in her life, Jessica faced substance use struggles that led to her children being removed, and she worked hard to rebuild her life and relationships. Today, Jessica brings that experience, as a birth parent, foster parent, and QPI Champion, to advocate for practices that center children's needs, strengthen family bonds, and reduce trauma during foster care. "I remember exactly how I wished people would talk to me," Jessica said. "So now, as a foster parent, I show up that way for other parents."

Nearly a decade after turning a corner, Jessica stepped forward to foster with a deep commitment to shared caregiving, a core QPI value backed by research showing that children fare best when adults work together across roles. In just two and a half years, she and her husband have provided care to more than fifteen children, many with complex developmental or relational needs. She keeps families closely connected through regular updates, shared photos, and intentional support for children's relationships with parents, siblings, extended family, schools, and community connections that often continue long after reunification.

"When I learned about QPI, everything clicked," she said. "Kids feel safest when the adults in their lives communicate, partner, and prioritize relationships. We're not supposed to do this alone, not caregivers, not parents, not social workers."

As a trained QPI Champion, Jessica helps new caregivers across Minnesota rethink foster care through a child development lens. She has trained new resource families, presented at conferences, and worked alongside county leaders to strengthen shared-parenting practice, including implementing QPI policies like requiring “comfort calls” between birth and foster families at the time of placement. She is one of nearly 1,000 QPI Champions nationwide helping transform foster care through lived-experience leadership, a hallmark of QPI’s design.

Her advocacy mirrors emerging research demonstrating QPI’s impact. A 2022 study found that QPI improves communication, strengthens birth–foster parent relationships, and helps children experience safer and smoother transitions. And in a 2024 article evaluating QPI’s stakeholder-driven approach, Dr. Ericka Lewis noted:

*“By centering the needs of children and their birth families, QPI shifts power away from agency-based professionals toward foster parents to improve outcomes for children... The success of this approach has broad implications for child welfare reform.”*

Jessica often reminds others that every parent she supports could have been her, and that treating families with dignity, empathy, and hope is essential for children’s healing.

“If we want systems to change, we have to change how we show up for families,” she said. “Every day, I try to make this system more compassionate and more connected. That’s what QPI taught me and what every child and parent deserves.”

The Elevate and Celebrate Award will be presented during a virtual ceremony on December 18, 2025.

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**The Youth Law Center (YLC)** is a non-profit law firm that advocates to transform foster care and juvenile justice systems across the nation so that every child and youth can thrive. The Youth Law Center leads the Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), a national movement spanning more than 75 sites and nearly 1,000 QPI Champions committed to ensuring that every child in foster care receives excellent parenting and remains connected to the people who love them.. [www.YLC.org](http://www.YLC.org).

