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Stanislaus County Parent Wins National Award for Supporting Newborns in Foster Care

HUGHSON, CA — When a newborn in Stanislaus County needs urgent care, Sierra Duke is often the first person called. For her extraordinary commitment to nurturing infants and supporting their families, the Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI) has selected Sierra as one of six national honorees for the 2025 Elevate & Celebrate Award.

Across the nation, QPI works to ensure every child in foster care experiences excellent, loving, developmentally attuned parenting, beginning from the first minutes of life. Research on early childhood development is unequivocal: babies need responsive caregiving, consistent relationships, and strong connections to the adults who love them to build healthy brains and foundations for lifelong well-being. Sierra embodies these principles every day.

Known affectionately as the "Baby Whisperer," Sierra emphasizes that her work is rooted not in magic, but in child development science. "These little ones need excellent parenting from the very first minute," she said. "They need safety, love, and someone who will protect the relationships they already have, and help build the ones they'll need to succeed."

Her ability to meet an infant's developmental needs is strengthened by the community around her, neighbors who bring diapers and formula, pediatricians who help ensure continuity of care, and families she once supported who have returned to lift others up. This ecosystem of support reflects QPI's core belief that children and youth thrive when caregivers, families, and community work as a team.

During the short but critical period when a newborn may be placed with her, Sierra documents feeding cues, sleep rhythms, sensory needs, and developmental progress. She prepares receiving caregivers, whether relatives, birth parents, or foster parents, with photos, routines, medical information, and relationship-building strategies grounded in infant development, reducing the trauma of transitions. Sierra believes that these small details, rooted in child development, make reunification or placement change safer, healthier, and less traumatic.

“Babies can’t speak for themselves, so I do it for them,” Sierra said. “If the next caregiver starts from a place of confidence and connection, the baby feels that in their body.”

But Sierra’s caregiving extends beyond infants. She is committed to supporting entire families, helping parents learn infant care skills, facilitating early bonding, and ensuring birth parents feel believed in and supported during recovery or reunification efforts. When possible, she facilitates visits with birth parents so they have a chance to connect with their baby while they are going through treatment or stabilizing their lives. She has taught them how to hold their newborns, change diapers, and provide care with confidence. “I’m not here to replace anyone’s mom,” she said. “I love the whole family.”

Her work arrives at a pivotal moment in California. With the recent passage of AB 896, the state’s first QPI-aligned law requiring child-centered, relationship-preserving transition planning, Sierra is showing what these reforms look like in practice. Her careful attention to continuity, communication, and connection embodies the law’s intent: to ensure that every transition supports children’s developmental needs and strengthens the relationships that help them thrive.

Stanislaus County has been implementing the QPI approach for several years. Sierra, who has fostered both before and after QPI’s launch, has seen firsthand the difference that relationship-centered, collaborative practice makes. “Before QPI, everyone worked separately. After QPI, we communicate, we share parenting, and babies feel the difference.”

Her work aligns closely with emerging QPI research. A 2022 qualitative evaluation found that QPI significantly strengthens collaboration, improves birth–foster parent relationships, and supports safer transitions for children. And in 2024, researchers concluded that QPI’s participatory, child- and family-centered design represents a promising model for systemwide reform, stating:

“By centering the needs of children and their birth families, QPI shifts power...to improve outcomes for children. The success of this approach has broad implications for child welfare reform.”

Sierra will be honored at the national Elevate & Celebrate virtual event on December 18, where her work will be celebrated by QPI sites, child welfare leaders, and communities across the country.

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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.

