

AGENDA

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VOCABULARY

Bonding – the process of building a trusting relationship between two individuals.

Connectedness – the relative strength or cohesiveness of a given relationship, as in the case of two individuals, or sets of relationships, as in a family. Connections last over a period of time.

Family reunification – family reunification is the planned process of reconnecting children in out-of-home care with their families by means of a variety of services and supports to the children, their families, and their resource parents or other service providers. It aims to help each child and family to achieve and maintain, at any given time, their highest level of reconnection-from full reentry of the child into the family system to other forms of contact, such as visiting, that affirm the child's membership in the family.

Modeling – the act of demonstrating effective and acceptable parenting behaviors by the foster parent for the benefit of the natural parent.

Primary or Birth Family – the family of primary identification for the child in care, also known as the Family of Origin or Birth Family and may include parents, stepparents siblings, cousins, and other related and non-related people.

Sibling Visitation – interactions occurring between brothers and sisters outside the Parent/child visitation.

Supervised Visits – interactions between the child in care and the primary family that are monitored by a third party for safety reasons.

Unsupervised Visits – interactions between the child in care and the primary family that need not be monitored by a third party.

Stories From the Heart: Donna

The day was warm and spring-like as I traveled up and down the long hill leading to Donna's country town. The trees along the way were clothed in an array of blooms and buds, some with leaves about to emerge, some with buds almost ready to burst into bloom, but seeming to hold back, as if fearing a weather change. The lush green of the new grass and the vivid spring green of the leaves were intensified as the sun passed behind a cloud. Donna's house appeared on the right, an historic old colonial style home, surrounded by a traditional white picket fence. To the left of the house, a fenced play yard stood out with its brightly colored toys and swing set. Currently, Donna and Paul share their home with four foster children. Although this particular story is Donna's, it is important to note that Paul plays a continuing supportive role as a foster father to these children. Foster fathers are valuable members of the DFCS/resource parent team.

Donna appeared at the door. "Come on in," she said, "the kids are napping. Coffee?" I declined, fearing afternoon jitters. The house is the kind of place where you immediately feel comfortable and safe. As I took my place at the lovingly well-worn dining room table, my attention was drawn to an antique wood cook stove located in the nearby kitchen. Donna tells me that it really works. A pair of lovely country craft rabbit dolls, the kind with ribbons, lace, fancy clothes and pink cheeks, smile down at me from their perch on the sideboard across from where I am seated. Donna introduces me to her grandchild, lovingly snuggled in her arms. She looks too young to be a grandmother.

She says that she married young and had her children early in the marriage. They are all grown and on their own, but retain a loving relationship with their mother. The grandchild is carefully laid down in the playpen where he snuggles down in the covers and is soon fast asleep.

Our interview begins as Donna begins to tell me her story of the heart.

Donna and first husband began fostering in Florida in 1984. They fostered a Jamaican sibling group of three children who eventually returned to relatives in Jamaica. They continued to foster after their move to Georgia. When their marriage dissolved, Donna continued fostering the child who had been placed with them prior to the divorce. This current foster child, Helen, will remain with her on a long term basis. Donna has been very involved with Helen's mom, Carol. In fact, Donna, Helen and Carol were all involved in therapy together. This was very important and done at Helen's request, so that she could feel safe and protected. It was an emotional time for both Carol and Donna. Helen saw both Donna and her mom cry together as Carol signed papers agreeing to allow Donna to raise her

Stories From the Heart: Donna

daughter. Helen signed papers, too, saying that she chose to remain with Donna. Helen, Donna and Carol maintain as much of a co-parenting relationship as is possible, even though Helen remains with Donna. “Unconditional love has to extend to the children’s parent,” Donna says. She tells me about a Christmas letter she received from the mother of one of the children she fostered, telling her how glad she was that Donna was caring for her child as she knew that her child was safe and loved.

Donna becomes animated as she tells me of her most memorable foster parenting experience which occurred one Halloween. “Holidays are big celebrations for kids under age ten,” she said, “and I had three foster children at the time, Helen and two boys, Stan and Mike” Helen and Stan’s mothers were involved with their children, Mike’s mother was not able to be involved and he missed her. Money was in short supply for Helen and Stan’s mothers and they apologized for not being able to help out with Halloween as they had done in the past. “I sensed the discouragement in the mothers’ voices,” Donna said, “So I arranged a ‘cooperative Halloween.’ Helen’s mother, Carol, contributed a pattern for Halloween costumes that she had bought the year before. Stan’s mother, Amy, brought face painting. I made all three costumes for the kids.”

The three women were excited about the coming holiday and the fun it would be for the children. Carol and Amy arrived at Donna’s house in good spirits, ready to get their children costumed for a big night of trick or treating. Donna took charge of Mike, giving him extra attention in his mother’s absence. The three children looked great and were excited and begging to get started. “I noticed how close in age we three mothers were,” Donna said, as they all left together for an evening of trick or treating fun. “We were like three girlfriends, out with our kids on Halloween. No one knew that we were ‘Foster parent and “real” parents.’ It was great, so much like a normal situation. We were all laughing, squabbling and cuddling, and there were treats to spare.”

Donna cautions that we not think that birth parents do not love their children, even if they can't live with them. This Halloween story demonstrated, for me, that fostering with unconditional love, whether the child is eventually reunited with his or her family or not, can make a difference in the life of the child and the parent(s). Donna's ability to give unconditional love was evident throughout our interview and I had to fight to keep my own emotions under control as this story from her heart unfolded.