

# A Rewarding Journey

**Whether fostering a child or permanently welcoming them into your home through adoption,** the experience can be extremely fulfilling for all those involved.

by Peter Proko

**To understand the power of adoption is to know the story of one local young boy named “Jake.” After experiencing separation from his biological family at age 5, he spent time in multiple foster homes, two group homes and went through two failed adoptions before being placed in yet another foster home.**

and trusted no one. But thanks to the love, patience and dedication of his foster mother, he was finally able to break down his walls of defense built up over so many years and embrace a new chapter in his still-unfolding story.

Just before his 15th birthday arrived, Jake’s life was forever changed when he was adopted by his foster mother who opened up her home to not only the child she formed a lasting bond with, but also his biological family. The holidays, birthday celebrations and family reunions are much more festive—and larger—affairs now.

For Stacy Lewis, foster care licensing supervisor for Devereux Advanced Behavioral Health in Central Florida, witnessing Jake’s journey and having the opportunity to help him find a forever home is fulfilling validation for all the hard work the organization does.

“There is no better feeling for anyone involved, most importantly the child, than the feeling of acceptance and belonging. This is what all of us doing this work, directly or indirectly involved, search for and it is a remarkable gift for all of us when we get to see it unfold. In our work, we get to be part of their story and there is nothing more rewarding,” says Lewis.

Of course, not all foster care situations end up as positively as Jake’s story, but Lewis says a large amount of foster families who partner with Devereux do wind up welcoming children into their homes permanently through adoption. “Sometimes those bonds are unbreakable,” she says.

One group of people who have increasingly been opening up their homes and hearts to children in need of a loving family has been same-sex couples and other members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Manny Carames is the behavioral health director for 26Health, a local nonprofit that serves as a multidisciplinary health care system designed to meet the growing needs of the community and is home to Florida’s first fully focused LGBTQIA+ adoption agency. He feels with gay marriage becoming more accepted by the general population, having children—whether through artificial insemination or adoption—was a logical next step.

“Going back to my generation, we never thought about marriage and we certainly didn’t think about having children,” says Carames. “Before, we wouldn’t even hold hands walking down the street. And still at my age—I’m 50—I still have an issue with that sometimes because that is ingrained in your head. But the ability now to say ‘I want to have a child,’ that choice is now there.”

But the road to adoption can be difficult to navigate and so it’s paramount for both prospective families as well as birth mothers to rely on professional counsel in order to manage expectations and provide guidance to help sift through the complicated challenges.

“Adoption is highly technical and time consuming. That doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be pursued by any means, but it does mean that it is important for adoptive parents to surround themselves with the appropriate professionals to help them on their journey. There may be bumps or detours on the journey, but they must never lose sight of the destination,” says Karen Persis, an Orlando adoption attorney.

Persis adds that despite the legal obstacles standing in the way, she has seen far more people these days interested in and open to adopting now than ever before, citing a spike in interest by not only same-sex couples, but also single parents.

“This increases the demand and makes adoption more commonplace,” she says.

Despite adoption being embraced by more and more people and the advocacy work being done by Devereux, 26Health and countless other organizations, there still remains a social stigma.



“Families do not have to ‘appear’ as a perfect match, be of the same blood or fit into a mold. There just needs to be love,” says Lewis. “I think sometimes fear stands in the way of opening your heart.”

Carames says when he attends various events to help raise awareness, he tries to educate the folks he encounters to provide them with a deeper sense of how adoption can not only positively impact the child’s life, but theirs as well.

“At first, they think about having a child and say, ‘I could never do it.’ But I love when they say things like that because we ask, ‘How come?’ If you can’t deal with diapers, what about someone between the ages of 12 and 18?” Carames says, noting that teenagers are often not thought of as ideal adoption candidates, but that it can be extremely rewarding to embark on this journey with someone who is a little bit older.

“We start the conversation and their eyebrows go up and they want to know more about it.”

Like 26Health, Devereux is heavily engaged in community outreach, working with local agencies, churches and more to speak to anyone who may be interested in answering the call of helping a child find their forever home, whether they are just beginning their journey or remain unsure about it all.

And with November being National Adoption Month, both Lewis and Carames are eager to use the heightened awareness to continue to get their message out to the public.

“We have many foster families that are willing to be part of the team to educate others and offer support in order to grow our amazing community. Our foster and adoptive families are our biggest advocates, they are the very foundation for our program and the building blocks that help us grow,” says Lewis.

“I just want you to ask me a question and inquire about it. It’s amazing when you take that first step where it will take people,” Carames adds.

And for those who may not think they are ready to be foster or adoptive parents, there are still plenty of ways to become involved and assist these children mired in the system.

“Even if you’re not going to adopt, there are opportunities to sponsor a child. If you’re not that kind of person who can take on foster care or adopt a child and have them in your home, you can sponsor a birthday for them or help finance them in other ways,” says Carames.

Lewis says any and all efforts can help make a noticeable impact and help provide these children the opportunity to live a fulfilling and transformative life on their way to becoming productive members of society. That may include reaching out to mentor a youth, volunteering to assist with awareness efforts, or learning how to start your own foster or adoption story.

“We are just waiting to walk that journey with you,” says Lewis. 🌱