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Enter to Win: LulyBoo

Designed by Irvine mother-of-two, Pazit Ben-Ezri, the LulyBoo combines the best of a bassinet, playpen and port-a-crib. The LulyBoo folds to a lightweight backpack, so moms and dads can take it with them wherever they go. Four outer pockets eliminate the need for an extra diaper bag, making travel with baby a breeze. Prize valued at \$109.99. www.lulyboo.com.

To enter, send an e-mail to contests@parentingoc.com. Include your name, address and phone number. Check out www.parentingoc.com for more great OC Baby Sweepstakes prizes.

www.ParentingOC.com



Jessalyn Griffiths, 6, is "full of spunk and innovative," says her parents, Celia and Brett Griffiths of Santa Ana.

FINALLY HOME

How Three OC Households Found Family Through Foster Care

BY ROSETTA RILEY | PHOTOS BY MELISSA HOCKENBERGER

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I sat on the cold bathroom floor rocking back and forth. My dad had just hit me. I hugged my knees close to my chest and prayed. That night, I was 12-years-old and didn't fully grasp the concept of religion but knew there was a God and hoped he would rescue me from my abusive home.

Enslaved by the Budweiser can, my dad often transmuted to an evil-spirited man who took out his anger on me. Throughout months of physical and mental abuse, my self-esteem was at an all-time low and my relationship with my father faded. A sequence of terrifying events took place until I finally notified the police and was placed into foster care. My dad was arrested for violating probation and would later be charged with a count of child abuse.

With a box and a black plastic bag full of my possessions, I left behind my life with the man I called daddy and entered a foreign world of foster care.

My placement in foster care is not uncommon in the U.S. In fact, nationwide, hundreds of thousands of children are placed out of their homes every year. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, there were an estimated 513,000 children in foster care in September of 2005. In California alone, there were 72,557 children (infants to age 17) in foster care in July of 2007. And startling statistics have hit Orange County—in April of 2008, there were a total of 2,813 children in out-of-home placements.

This means thousands of Orange County children are entering temporary custody in search of permanent homes. These kids have been through more than most adults and are often grossly misrepresented in society as unmanageable and misbehaved. Nevertheless, foster children and foster parents in Orange County are proving that youth living in out-of-home care are just ordinary kids, shaken by their circumstances. All they need is a loving home.

Erica Cox, 14, is reserved at first encounter, but once you get her talking, you'll learn she's a tomboy at heart. She loathes the color pink and takes pleasure in playing soccer and riding dirt bikes. She will tell you all about her friends and her text-messaging addiction, but few know about her family background. If word got out, her peers might treat her like classmate Derek, another foster kid.

"A lot of people don't like Derek because he was in foster care," Erica shares. "They pick on him and tease him."

So all is kept quiet and understandably so—at the tender age of five, Cox was placed into a foster home as a result of neglect from her birth mother and abuse from her uncle.

Erica's first foster placement in Buena Park lasted five years before she was adopted by Ruben and Nicole Cox of Laguna Niguel. The couple discovered Erica in 2007 online through the Orange County Heart Gallery, a non-profit organization that posts professional portraits of individual children eligible and waiting for adoption.

"We felt like we had more to offer," says Nicole. "We wanted a daughter and felt we could give something more to someone who didn't have much."

The Heart Gallery provides minimal information about the children but all it took was one glance at Erica's photo for the Coxes to instantly realize she was the one.

"It was something in her eyes that made me want to meet her," Nicole says. A year later, in February of 2008, Ruben, 51, and Nicole, 39, officially adopted Erica.

It hasn't been long since Erica's surname became Cox. The family has already seen tremendous growth in her. "When you look at past pictures of Erica, she's not smiling in any of them," Nicole says. "Now she smiles and now she dreams of what her future will be."

The Coxes say Erica used to handle life day by day to manage the sticky situations thrown at her. Now with more exposure to career-driven women, she envisions furthering her education after high school—a dream she's never held before.

"Erica hadn't thought about college for a long time," explains Nicole. "She thought all women grew up and worked in retail."

Erica is unsure of what she will study, but the Coxes are thrilled that college has become a foreseeable option.

For many foster youth, especially those who have been emancipated or "aged out" of foster care, college can seem unattainable. Each year, roughly 25,000 18-year-olds "age out" of the foster care system, many without family ties and economic support. Without proper preparation for adulthood, many of these youth face extreme challenges: unemployment, low-level education, health issues, incarceration and homelessness.

Afraid of failure and ending up unprosperous and miserable like my father, I had already compiled a list of universities I sought to apply to by my junior year of high school. At 18, I left behind my Midwest home filled with haunting childhood memories and flew to California to start a new life at Biola University. Even with financial hardships, I wouldn't trade my college experience. Whenever I stress over tuition or book money, I think of the other foster youth who will never set foot on a college campus, let alone attend.

For 18-year-old Rachel Phaire, college is a serious consideration. Escaping a scathing and abusive father, she heard a calling to leave her home. She recollects a religious experience one Sunday when her stepmother brought her to a Greek Orthodox Church.

"I looked up and at the top was a dome and there was (a painting of) Jesus and I said, 'I don't know what to do,'" she remembers. "And I swear, I heard him say, 'Don't worry my child, everything will be fine.'"

Soon after, she contacted Orange County Social Services, writing them a detailed email of her perilous environment with her father. Two weeks later, the police arrived at Phaire's house ordering her to grab her valued belongings.

At age 15, Phaire took one last look at her abusive father and followed the officers trembling. "At first I was really scared that they were

"A lot of people assumed the kids would be disabled or broken and not normal. Yes, they (may) have been through abusive homes, but they are just kids who need love and care."



L to R: 10-year-old Christopher Griffiths is the compassionate, book-smart one in his family; Erica Cox, 14, was adopted by her foster family exactly one year ago; Jessalyn Griffiths' non-stop energy is infectious.

FOUR WAYS YOU CAN HELP

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Orange County is a non-profit organization that trains community volunteers to serve as powerful mentors and advocates for our community's most severely abused, abandoned and neglected children. www.casaoc.org.

Foster Care Auxiliary of Orange County. Become a foster family friend, help organize events and entertainment for children or perhaps lend a helping hand by organizing and unloading donations. To volunteer or donate call 714-778-3383 or visit www.fostercareaux.com.

Orangewood Children's Foundation's goal is to eliminate child abuse and neglect in Orange County by promoting efforts and services that encourage strong, healthy families and supportive communities. Volunteer at fundraising and youth events or by becoming a mentor. www.orangewoodfoundation.org or call 714-619-0200.

Become a Foster or/and Adoptive Parent. Give support, show compassion, provide a safe home and help children find the courage to hope for a better life. They are teachers, friends, role models and heroes. 888-871-KIDS.

Facts About Foster Care



Who are Foster Children? Dependents of the court, or foster youth, are children who have been found, by Juvenile Court action, to require protection from abuse and/or neglect. These children can be either in their own homes under Social Services Agency (SSA) supervision or in out-of-home care, such as in care of a relative, nonrelated extended family member, foster parent or group home.

What is Adoption? Adoption is a legal process that permanently gives parental rights and responsibilities to adoptive parents. The Social Services Agency (SSA) provides public adoption services to children who are dependents of the Juvenile Court and are receiving out-of-home foster care services.

"Aging Out" or Emancipated. Once young adults in the foster care system turn age 18 (or graduate from high school, whichever comes later), they are released from protective care.

coming for me," says Phaire. "I had no idea what was going to happen to me or if I would ever go back home."

Phaire was dropped off at Orangewood, a temporary transitional shelter in Orange. During her three-month stay, Phaire's aunt (her father's sister) came forth as a willing relative to care for her. Phaire refused.

"I thought she was going to be like my dad: crazy and controlling," says Phaire.

"She turned out to be the complete opposite."

The stay with her Aunt Edna strengthened her self-esteem and ability to access life as well as handle conflict more efficiently. "I learned I'm a lot stronger than I thought I was," explains Phaire. "I thought I was weak and ugly, but she brought out the good in me."

Phaire recalls Edna's motto, "Where there's a will, there's a way," whenever she is tempted to give up on something.

Even though her stay with her aunt was untroubled and safe, Phaire chose to finish her high school studies at Villa Park High School instead of relocating with her aunt out of state. At her school, she feels the brunt of being in foster care. Unlike most of the more privileged kids at her school, as a ward of the state, she is not eligible to drive.

"I am one of the only kids that takes the bus," says Phaire. "Everyone drives right by me while I'm waiting and look at me and laugh."

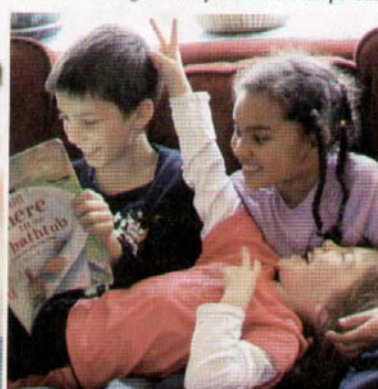
Phaire says foster youth, especially adolescents, deserve respect—regardless of their financial or family background.

"Not all foster kids have mental problems and are screwed up," she says. "They are good kids at heart who have just been put in bad situations. They shouldn't be ostracized or stigmatized."

Phaire will be emancipated out of foster care and enter college with a maturity level atop her peers in many respects: She currently lives on her own in Tustin at an apartment sponsored by state initiated Transitional Housing Placement Programs (THPP). She works a part-time job and pays her own cell phone bill. Phaire has narrowed her college search to three top schools, including Chapman University in Orange, and will study law in hopes of becoming a judge presiding over foster care cases.

Just like Phaire, Lisa Hughes, 60, had the same dreams of giving back to underprivileged youth. After suffering neglect and abuse, Hughes turned herself into foster care at age 12. Motivated by her circumstances, she was determined early on to improve the lives of other foster children. Even at a young age, Hughes was self-motivated. Despite bouncing among four foster homes, she graduated from high school at age 16 and went on to law school. She graduated top of her class at the University of Southern California (USC), became a certified CPA and ran for Congress in 1988.

Today, Hughes is a founding attorney of Hughes & Sullivan, one of the largest family law firms in Orange County. She also keeps busy



L to R: Celia Griffiths reads to her youngest son, Drew, 4; 18-year-old Rachel Phaire is a senior at Villa Park High School in Orange; Christopher, Jessalyn and Leilanie Griffiths clown around during a recent Saturday afternoon.

supervising the same institution she was placed in years ago and sits on the board of directors of the Orangewood Children's Foundation, the Drug Use is Life Abuse Project, as well as the Juvenile Justice Committee.

Hughes says the top two reasons children are placed out of the home is because of parents who engage in substance abuse and/or have mental illness. Drugs and alcohol make up a large part of the cases. The other portion of birth parents may have a certain mental illness.

"Normal, healthy people don't beat, molest or neglect their children," says Hughes. "Very little cases are just neglect without cause."

Unsafe environments make outreaches for youth vital to society, says Hughes. "Foster care shelters like Orangewood are a necessity," she says. "There will always be children who need this placement."

Outside of shelters, there is also a need for individuals to contribute. Hughes exhorts Orange County residents to consider foster parenting.

"It's a necessary part of our society to care for those who are uncared for," she explains. "The foster parents will receive more than the children, if they do it with love and the right attitude."

In the comfort of their Santa Ana home, the Griffiths family is seated and gathered around the dinner table. Before eating, Brett and Celia lead their four children in prayer: "God made the sun, God made the trees, oh thank you God for making me..."

All four kids show off their vivacious personalities around the dinner table while munching on pizza. Christopher, 10, is compassionate and extremely book smart. Leilanie, 7, is the "little mother" of the bunch who helps out her siblings. Jessayln, 6, is full of spunk and is innovative. The youngest Drew, 4, is known in the family as a little science kid with an inquisitive mind. With their adorable bunch of children, the Griffiths are surprising their friends and family who presumed the children would have severe mental and social deficiencies.

"A lot of people assumed the kids would be disabled or broken and not normal," Celia explains. "Yes, they (may) have been through abusive homes, but they are just kids who need love and care."

Brett, a computer software engineer and Celia, a stay-at-home mom, knew their chances of having their own children would be slim as infertility and reproductive problems are common amongst the women in Celia's family. Not bonded to the idea that having a baby from her body was the only path to motherhood, Celia, along with Brett, whose siblings became foster parents, gave fostering a try.

Over the course of their years of fostering, the couple have had approximately 65 different children live in their home before finally adopting their four children. People marvel at how many children the Griffiths became attached to but who were returned to their birth parents. Celia tells them she and her husband have faith that all of those children will be protected.

The Griffiths would like to adopt more kids but have a full house, so instead they urge others to get involved and become foster parents. "I know people who have tried to have babies but can't and there are kids who want a home," she says. "We've got to get the two together."

Looking back on my life, I would have never guessed I'd make it this far. My life as a former foster child has been molded me in such a way that has equipped me for college, jobs, internships and relationships. I have gained a deep appreciation for family and wouldn't be the young woman I am today without the continual love and support from my foster family. Someday, I seek to provide the same guidance to foster youth because despite the success stories, the reality is too many children in foster care are falling through cracks. ●

Rosetta Riley is a junior at Biola University. Her work has appeared in The Los Angeles Watts Times, The Inside Story (La Mirada) and Biola University's publication The Chimes. She is studying print journalism and hopes to work in New York City someday.

www.ParentingOC.com

The Heart Gallery

Heart Gallery of Orange County is a unique and stirring photographic exhibit of legally adoptable children and sibling groups in state custody who dream of having a "forever family". Award-winning photographers donate their time to capture the special spirit of each child. www.heartgalleryoc.org.



ANTHONY, CHANELLE & JOSEPH

Anthony, 12, can appear shy and reserved initially, but once he warms up, he is expressive and animated. He enjoys playing baseball and skateboarding.

Chanelle, 8, is friendly and outgoing. She enjoys playing games outside as well as playing with dolls and dollhouses. Her favorite food is pizza.

Joseph, 7, loves spaghetti, pizza and anything with ketchup on it. He also enjoys playing video games.

This threesome is looking for a dedicated, loving adoptive family that can weather what will undoubtedly be a challenging, yet rewarding adjustment. Such a family can expect the happiness and joy found only in loving and caring for children.

Photo by BellAmie Studios



ASHLEY

Ashley, 17, is looking for an adoptive family to love and who will love her in return. She is interested in a family who enjoys spending time together. She needs a permanent family who will nurture and guide her as she continues to mature.

Photo by Barbara Higgins



KENESHA

Kenesha, 6, enjoys playing with dolls, playing dress up and watching cartoons. Kenesha is longing for a loving forever family to call her very own. She requires a nurturing, patient, structured and stable family in order for her to achieve her fullest potential.

Photo by Barbara Higgins



TAYLOR

Taylor, 8, enjoys reading, playing on the computer, playing sports and watching movies. She especially loves to swim and ride bikes. Taylor continues to have contact with her biological relatives who are a positive influence in her life. She wants a loving adoptive family to call her own.

Photo by Barbara Higgins