



THE FLASH

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A Foster Child's Journey: Meet Andrew Bridge

By Caitlin Giaimo, Bergen CPR Board and CPAC Secretary

On the day in February 1974 when Andrew Bridge was taken from his mother, Hope, and placed in Los Angeles County's foster care system, he began a journey that would last 11 years and change his life forever. But Bridge was not the only one profoundly affected by the event. Years later, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of children across the country would be influenced by that event. They would benefit from Bridge's advocacy for foster care reform and his determination to generate positive change from his own painful experiences.

In his 2008 memoir, "Hope's Boy," Bridge documented his childhood spent in foster care from age 7 to aging out at age 18 and embarking on an educational journey that included Wesleyan University, Harvard Law School and a Fulbright scholarship. Beginning with the intense bond he formed with his young, single mother, Bridge recounted her deterioration into mental illness, which led to him being forced to sleep in a motel closet and compete for food with a stray cat.

Witnessing his mother slitting her wrists and then writing his name across the wall in her own blood is a trauma he recounts with candor. But despite his mother's shortcomings as a caregiver, Bridge instead dwells on the deep attachment, love, and forgiveness he cannot help but feel towards her. When a young Bridge is made an accomplice in a cat burglary scheme with his mother and her friend, he nearly gets attacked by a guard dog while escaping over a chain link fence. Instead of focusing anger at his mother for placing him at risk, Bridge remembers how he "never wanted to judge her, to cast a vote of right or wrong." He writes, "Had there been a crowd of arms reaching to catch me from that fence in the back of a stranger's home, I would have still chosen to fall into hers."

Bridge was later shuffled to MacLaren Hall, a Los Angeles facility for foster children that has since been shut down. He spent time locked in dark solitary. He narrates the feelings of alienation and the lack of certainty he suffered in his subsequent foster placement. The recollection of this displacement motivates Bridge's conviction that foster children should have certain inalienable rights: the right to live with a permanent family, the right to grow up in a stable situation, and the right to a good education. It also influenced Bridge's position that adoption is a better option than foster care when reunification is not possible, if only because foster care carries incredible uncertainty in a child's life.

After graduating from law school, Bridge began working towards foster care reform. He embarked on a legal career working for the rights of children in Alabama state psychiatric hospitals and mental health facilities. Later, as executive

director of the Alliance for Children's Rights in Los Angeles, he expanded free legal services for children, worked to eliminate the red tape surrounding adoptions and finalize them with the establishment of a National Adoption Day. He also fought to improve their access to medical care and to ensure their right to meet monthly with social workers. The volume of children in the Los Angeles foster care system was a challenge, but Bridge criticized the county for not monitoring them carefully enough. As chair of the Blue Ribbon Foster Care Task Force, he investigated deaths and disappearances of children in care.

Bridge has devoted his life to publicizing the cause of foster children and working for change. His book is not filled with anger or rage but love, hope, and determination for the future. He spotlights a phenomenon that often goes ignored, "love existing alongside failure." Failure as a caretaker does not imply failure of love, and he argues for the importance of making this known to foster children. Though Bridge's journey began on an opposite coast, his message that all children have certain needs and — more strongly — rights, has no geographic boundary. His individual journey, which he narrates so poignantly, serves to illustrate this universal truth.

Volunteer View ...

SAVE THE DATE

CPAC Annual Conference

The CPR Compass:

Setting a Course for Permanency

Saturday, April 17, 2010

**Middlesex County Fire Academy
1001 Fire Academy Dr., Sayreville**

Keynote Speaker: Bill Stanton, a former foster child, foster parent and adoptive parent, who is a child welfare advocate and consultant/technical specialist with ICF/Caliber Consulting and with the U.S. Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau.

Registration materials will be mailed and e-mailed in the coming weeks. Online registration will begin in March at njcpac.org.

CPAC Speaks to Foster Parents Through FAFS

By Nancy Leibold, Chair, CPAC Publications Committee

Foster and Adoptive Family Services (FAFS) asked CPAC to speak to its foster parents about child placement review as part of the FAFS training program. CPAC representatives have spoken in Monmouth, Atlantic, Warren, Gloucester, Somerset, and Sussex counties. Ocean and Essex counties are scheduled in the near future.

The material presented provides a brief background of child placement review, with a focus on how it functions and the importance of foster parent participation. Speakers explain how the foster parents are notified by the court for each child placement review involving their case. Foster parents are an important source of information when evaluating a case. It is important for them to be aware of every option they have to communicate with the CPR boards. Foster parents can attend the reviews personally or by telephone. Foster parents are encouraged to complete the reports provided by the court, report on how their foster children are doing, and to bring these reports to the CPR board meeting or mail them to the CPR coordinator.

Here are some questions that CPR volunteers may want to consider:

1. Are foster parents attending your CPR board meetings? If not, why not?
2. Are foster parents being noticed of 45-day, special, and annual CPR board reviews?
3. Are foster parents receiving the Recommendation to the Judge form?

This is just one of the many ways volunteers can be involved in CPAC activity beyond the review boards. If you are interested in exploring what opportunities are available, contact Sheryl Hutchison, CPAC coordinator at 609-633-2581 or sheryl.hutchison@judiciary.state.nj.us.

Recent Postings on NJ CPAC Web Site

Two documents have recently been added to the NJ CPAC Web site, njcpac.org, that can assist volunteers in specific aspects of child placement review. The "Special Immigrant Juvenile Status Training and Information Packet" describes special immigrant juvenile status as providing "lawful permanent residency to [immigrant] children who are under the jurisdiction of a juvenile court and who will not be reunified with their parents due to abuse, neglect or abandonment." The document provides background and eligibility information. Also new on the Web site is the Child Welfare Mediation Program Procedures Manual, which describes how this program is conducted by the courts.

Minority Representation in the Child Welfare System

By Nancy Leibold, Chair, CPAC Publications Committee

The New Jersey Children-in-Court Improvement Committee presents several training events every year. These events are attended by judges and court staff. Some are open to child advocacy organizations. As a CPAC representative, I attended an event on Oct. 27 that addressed the disproportionate representation of minority children in the child welfare system. The problem of disproportionality in this context was defined as when "a particular racial or ethnic group is represented within a social system at a rate or percentage that is not proportionate to their representation in the general population."

The assertion of the disproportionate representation of minorities was supported by research. To cite just one example, in New Jersey in 2008, blacks comprised 14.5 percent of the population, but 52.2 percent of children in out-of-home care. Data was also presented from the county level. It was reported that children of color have more placements and moves, receive fewer support services, stay in the system longer, and ultimately are less likely to be adopted or reunited with their birth families. There was discussion of the Court Catalyzing Change Initiative, which was started by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges and the Casey Family Programs. These groups are setting a national agenda on this subject. The initiative includes getting the appropriate experts involved to develop and disseminate judicial tools, policy and practice guidelines for courts throughout the country to use, in order to address this problem.

The focus of the day was on how and where the court system might start to address this problem. But I wanted to share one of the ideas presented by the keynote speaker, Rita Cameron-Wedding, because it can be applied to child placement review. During her talk on the "Challenge to Colorblindness," she asked the audience to think about its own preconceptions. She emphasized that she was not speaking about overt racism, but prejudicial thinking that one might not recognize. For example, if someone is described as being "agitated," it leaves one impression. If the behavior of that person had been described as being "aggressive," a different impression might have been created. Once these impressions get into a record, it can influence those who read and react to the case and have a cumulative effect as they carry that impression forward. Cameron-Wedding asked us to consider the possibility that we might have a tendency to automatically use the stronger word when dealing with some minorities. Perhaps when we, as volunteers, interview case managers and interested parties at our CPR board reviews, we can think about how we pose our questions so that all parties are working together to get the most accurate picture of the case.

The FLASH is edited by the CPAC Publications Committee, Nancy Leibold, chair.

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