



## Los Angeles Honors Foster Care “Heroes” and Success Stories

### *Mom Gives Foster Children a Safe, Permanent Home*

#### **Denise Witmeyer**



All children need the support of safe, permanent families who will love, nurture, protect, and guide them. Since Joe and Denise Witmeyer decided to take in abused and neglected children over thirty years ago, more than 250 children have passed through their home and have received this kind of support. Many were successfully reunited with their birth parents, some went to live with relatives and family friends, and some spent their entire lives with the Witmeyers. Over the years, Denise Witmeyer, who has five biological children of her own, has adopted and obtained legal guardianship of seven medically fragile children. Three handicapped adults live in a guest house on their property, because they aged out of foster care and had nowhere to go. Every one of the foster children who turned 18 under Denise’s care has graduated from high school and gone on to college or trade school. Denise will not let any of them fail. She often says, “Success is based on knowing the system and knowing how to work as a team with the County, advocating all the time for the children.” On weekends Denise gives parents of other medically fragile children some much-needed respite care. Denise is also Vice President of her local Foster Parent Association, Vice President of Community Assistance to Homeless Youngsters, a volunteer at the Blind Children’s Center in Los Angeles, helps recruit and retain foster families, and speaks at schools and community groups about child abuse. She was nominated by her foster daughter, Maureen Lightner, who says, “I do not know where I would be today if it were not for this caring, loving, compassionate, dedicated woman whom I call Mom.”

### *Public Health Nurse is Role Model, Advocate for Foster Children*

#### **Ana Marie Cinco**



The turbulence and uncertainty foster children experience can have lasting consequences, and many children in foster care struggle with depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome, and other mental health issues. Ana Marie Cinco has become a success story, not only by earning a Master’s Degree in nursing, but in giving back to the foster care system by advocating for her clients and exploring healthcare resources available to foster youth. As a spokesperson during conferences, Ana Marie puts a name and a face to foster children. Ana Marie and her sister spent much of their childhood and adolescence in foster care, from the time they were brought to America from the Philippines. As the oldest child in the family, these were difficult years for her, but she worked hard to graduate from the foster care system and realize her goals. She describes the challenges she faced in the system and fights for policy changes, so foster children receive needed mental health services. Ana Marie has a passion that is driven by her past as well as her hopes for the future of all foster youth. As an advocate, educator, and by providing community service, she is a role model for other youth who emancipate from foster care.

***Former Foster Youth, Now an Attorney, Helps Others Transition to Independence***

**Michelle McKinney**



Without a family to rely upon, many young people who age out of the foster care system at around 18 years of age face tremendous obstacles in obtaining an education, a good job, and becoming independent. Michelle (Mickey) McKinney, a former foster youth who is now a Program Coordinator and advocate for Public Counsel Law Center, works full time helping other youth in the foster care and probation systems and youth who are homeless or mentally ill with their transition to independence. Mickey has worked extensively with emancipation age youth, advocating for their education rights, helping them access Independent Living Program benefits, mentoring them, and assisting them gain supportive housing and employment opportunities and medical and mental health services. She advocates for the implementation of recently passed foster care legislation, sits on the Board of Directors of Foster Care Alumni of America, an organization that supports the connection of alumni of foster care throughout the nation, and is an adult supporter of California Youth Connection. Mickey's passion for helping provide hope and opportunity to foster youth is extraordinary. She is a tireless and inspiring advocate for at-risk youth and a living testament to the power of the human spirit to overcome adversity.

***CASA Advocates for Foster Youth, Gives Back to Community***

**David Neuman**



For the past seventeen years, David Neuman has served Los Angeles' foster children as a Court Appointed Special Advocate, working tirelessly to serve their best interests in the Dependency Court system. During those years, he has balanced a heavy work schedule as President of Walt Disney Television and Touchstone Television, Chief Programming Officer for CNN Networks, and President of Programming, Current TV – yet never missed a school meeting or IEP for any child he represented. The care, concern, and respect David demonstrates with everyone are exemplified by the assistance he provided one youth who was dealing with the grief and trauma of witnessing his mother overdose and succumb. With David's kindness and support, the child was placed with his maternal grandmother and aunt. David continued to provide encouragement, and the child became the first member of his family ever to graduate from high school. In fact, the child's aunt was so hopeful as a result, that she returned to school and graduated, too. She attributes her newfound success, including getting a new job with better pay, to the inspiration David provided to the whole family. David is an embodiment of the Foster Care Awareness Campaign motto: He truly makes a difference in the lives of many children, their families, the community, and the world – one child at a time.

## *Attorney Helps Families with Adoptions*

### **Mark Hirabayashi**



On average, foster children experience three different placements while they are in the system, and almost 20 percent wait five years or more for the loving home they deserve. Mark Hirabayashi is a private attorney who has touched the lives of hundreds of children who need a safe, permanent home through his work with families in completing dependency adoptions. Mr. Hirabayashi has donated his time and participated in preparation class panels for adoptive parents to explain the legal process to families who are completing adoption homestudies. Many families with unique situations with respect to their adoptions have contacted Mr. Hirabayashi for help, and he has always come through to assist on these complicated cases. He is readily available to consult with DCFS staff and goes above and beyond usual efforts in answering inquiries and finding information for callers. Mr. Hirabayashi cares deeply about the children and families he serves. His personal touches to the finalization hearing, including taking a picture of the family with the hearing officer and giving a certificate of family membership for the newest member of the family, make the difference for families he represents. Mr. Hirabayashi can be seen smiling as he goes about his daily tasks in the courtroom, and he creates an atmosphere of good will and celebration for families on one of the most important days of their lives.

## *Social Worker Looks Out for Kids on Skid Row Assessment Team*

### **Glenn Mills**



Children should be able to take certain things for granted – that they have constant, loving parents; that their home will always be their home; that their brothers and sisters will be near; and that their neighborhoods and schools are familiar places. For Glenn Mills, social work is a calling that has evolved over years of working with youth who do not have that kind of permanency. While earning his degree in Child Development, Glenn worked at Children's Baptist Home in Inglewood as a childcare worker. After college, he returned to the YMCA as a program director. He served as a cottage director at MacClaren Children's Center, which housed many of the Department's most troubled youth. Glenn met this challenge, as always, with a calm, warm spirit. Glenn is the first supervising children's social worker to volunteer to work with the Skid Row Assessment Team, where he has worked to build bridges with the three homeless missions in the area and with the residents themselves. His calm, supportive and focused demeanor in the face of tension and stress has been instrumental in making the team more accepted in the area. Glenn Mills says, "The Skid Row project is similar to Mac in that the people here do not have many choices and little control over their lives."

## *Kawasaki is a Pioneer in Community Involvement and Mentoring*

### **Harvey Kawasaki**



The single most important predictor of success for children who age out of the foster care system, usually around 18 years of age, is having a permanent attachment to a committed, caring adult who will champion them beyond foster care and into adulthood. As a Regional Administrator for DCFS, Harvey Kawasaki has been a pioneer in the area of community collaboration and mentoring for youth in foster care. Using his South Bay Community Partnership Council as his vehicle for change, Harvey has mobilized the South Bay Community, from faith-based to corporate to community agencies, to address the need for mentors for teens in care.

His enthusiasm, ideas, and can-do attitude have made it possible (without additional funding) for local mentoring agencies to reach out to foster youth and for new mentoring resources to take hold in the South Bay. Under his leadership, a mentoring training curriculum has been developed, recruitment events have been held, and group and individual mentoring opportunities are building. His mentoring model will be replicated Countywide. Harvey also walks the walk by mentoring a Probation youth himself. Harvey's energy, dedication and work go far beyond his County position. He is truly an unsung hero for foster youth.