

American RadioWorks

Wanted: Parents

***Why Bother?* by Jen Braun**

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I arrive at the group home to meet my new client, and tell a worker why I'm there. My goal is to find this teenager an adoptive home.

"He's 17," she says. "Why bother?"

I fume.

Actually, I've been fuming a lot lately. This isn't in my nature. I'm not one of those people who seem constantly irritated by life. Until lately.

After four years, hearing this sort of thing gets tiring. I'm an adoption recruiter for teens for the federal demonstration project, The Homecoming Project. We find adoptive families for teenagers in the foster care system.

So I've heard it all. "Teens are too old to be adopted." "Don't get his hopes up." "No family would want to adopt a teen." "Don't disturb her foster home placement." "Let's leave him in the treatment center until he isn't angry anymore."

But how angry will that boy stay if he remains in treatment without a permanent family, without an incentive to leave? Sometimes I want to yell, "You think he's angry? I'm outraged by the unfairness of it all!"

Always in the back of my mind I'm thinking, "What will happen to this kid when she turns 18 if she doesn't have an adoptive family?" Because the truth is, most teens skip around from placement to placement like stones across water. Eventually they turn 18 and age out of the system.

For teens that age out, research tells us that their future is bleak: many become homeless, jobless, addicted, incarcerated, pregnant, pregnant again. Many don't finish high school.



Jen Braun is an adoption recruiter for The Homecoming Project. She tries to find families willing to adopt teenagers. *Photo by Stephanie Soucheray*

It is wrong that these teens are moved around, ignored, unprepared for adulthood, and then bounced out of the system at an age when most kids are still either living at home or financially supported by their parents.

Lately I take this injustice more personally. Because now, not only is this my livelihood, but it's my life. I find myself, at age 37, the sudden parent to Roger, a 170-pound, high-spirited, good-natured boy who in less than one year will graduate from high school and have voting rights. Sometimes it seems surreal.

Roger is something else. You'd have to meet him. He wakes up every day full of the conviction that life is a solid, fine thing. If you look up "carpe diem" in the dictionary, I'm certain his picture is there. His curiosity about the world came out recently during our San Francisco vacation. As he ran up and down the beach, he found a jellyfish, scooped it up, and came over to show it to me.

"Rog!" I yelled, sounding much too much like a worried mother. "Be careful! You'll get stung!"

"Don't worry. It's dead. I've scooped it from the side without the stingers." He proudly showed me his handful of gelatinous, almost-transparent goo, and reassured me that he was perfectly safe.

He reassures me a lot, actually, and I think one of his biggest gifts is his ability to reassure others that the earth is a mysterious sanctuary to be cherished.

His love of life is infectious. To me this is remarkable considering that the eclipses of his young life were frequent. He spent years in the foster care system after his birth parents' parental rights were terminated.



Jen Braun's son, Roger, shows off the jellyfish he found on the beach during a family vacation in California. *Photo by Jen Braun*

When Roger was 11, the police came to his home one evening to remove him and his siblings. The reasons for this are not pretty, and as he himself says, "I was taken from their care because they were doing things they shouldn't have been doing."

He was an angry kid, much like these other teens. He moved to different shelters and foster homes, and finally landed at his aunt and uncle's house, where they pledged to adopt Roger and his two younger sisters. His sisters got adopted. He got moved to a group home.

This story makes me ache for my generous, kind-hearted, glass-half-full son. But perhaps the most astonishing part of this story is Roger's total faith in humanity, his inner compass that guides him in his belief that the world is a good, safe place. My partner and

I adopted him the day before his 17th birthday. This was what he wanted his gift to be.

Now I realize: the gift was not his, it was mine. I didn't get into this job thinking that I myself would adopt a teen. In fact, if you had told me three years ago that I would adopt a 17 year-old, I would have laughed at you. But there was Roger, my peace-loving, dog-walking, star-gazing, jigsaw-puzzling poet. And I started to think, "Maybe I could be a parent." The truth is, changing diapers and chasing 5 year-olds never really appealed to me. But give me a fully-formed being, who is asking questions about the world and able to hold a meaningful conversation, and there's the hook for me.

Teens in the foster care system - at the very least - deserve the option to live in abundance. They deserve access to family. I think about Roger's 17th birthday/adoption party.

Picture this: a yard filled with 100 people, friends and family gathered to celebrate this extraordinary young man and the legal beginning of our family. Towards the end of the evening, my parents, my brother and his family, and my sister and her family, all gathered to say goodbye for the evening. As they are departing, one of my nieces yells, "Group hug!!!"

If you were a bird, this is what you would have seen: a kaleidoscope moment. Roger, smooshed in the center of 13 people, all gathered around him. A voice yelling, "Everyone make sure your hand is touching him!" And Roger in the center immobile, being embraced by 13 silent people, our hands all extended and touching his head, his shoulder, his arm. Just as kaleidoscope colors swirl together, so too do we - one to the other - merge, blend, and create new patterns.

This is a pack blessing. This is the concept of 'belonging' at its finest.

Finally, my sister loudly jokes, "Wow, I've never heard us not talk before." And we all laugh, and the moment is broken, but in a good way, in a way that says, "You belong with us. We do not own you, you are your own person, but you are welcome here always." I glance at my son. I hug him. His eyes are full of tears, but he does not cry. He has felt it, too. "I've never been so happy," he whispers to me.

I have two wishes. I wish all kids in the foster care system could have that certainty, could experience that family support. They deserve at least that much. And, after being bounced around the system for so long, my second wish is simple: that they possess the strength to deal with that inclusion.

And so, when I hear this group home worker say to me, "He's 17, why bother?" all of these thoughts rush through my head, like that San Francisco Pacific Ocean roaring inside of me.

I calmly say to her, "Let me ask you something: do you still have family that you talk to, family who are important to you, family

that you visit with or call when you have a problem that you'd like to talk to someone about?"

I see a light bulb go on inside of her. "Well, of course I do," she says softly.

I finish, "You say to me 'He's 17, why bother?' and my answer to you is this: because he's only 17."

Jen Braun works to find permanent families for teenagers through [Ampersand Families](#).

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