

Published: RAC Newsletter, March 2009

## Expanding Boundaries

By Wilma Friesema, EPIC 'Ohana Conferencing  
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*For this Connections Corner I interviewed Bernie Hvidding my co-worker at EPIC. I thought Bernie would have an interesting perspective on renewing family connections between foster youth and their families since he was a social worker for 15 years; his foster son, David, has been with him for 14 years; and he works as an 'Ohana Engagement Specialist at EPIC. Little did I realize that an earlier, and deeply personal, journey helped form his perspective too.*

–Wilma Friesema

**Wilma:** Bernie, when you think of family connections work what comes to mind?

**Bernie:** In Western thinking there's been a myth that to develop strong connections to a new family you have to break all connections with the past family. But that's not true. In fact, just the opposite is true.

I grew up on the mainland and was the oldest of ten kids, which meant I had a lot of family responsibility early on. We were a poor, but close family. As attached as I was to my family, when I entered the Peace Corps after college I learned a whole new lesson about what family means.

I was sent to Samoa, and in Samoa the custom is: if you live with a family, you're adopted into that family. I found it was more than just a custom, though, as a real bond developed. I felt very attached to my Samoan family, and when I returned to the States after two years it was a hard adjustment to be away from them. It caused me to reevaluate some of my American customs and attitudes about family. I found I couldn't just leave my Samoan family as a memory.

Another family custom in Samoa is: if I'm acceptable to the family, then my whole biological family is acceptable to them too. While I was in Samoa my host family sent their granddaughter, Siu, to live with my parents. They felt they could trust my parents because they trusted me.

When I returned home I got to know Siu and after 1 ½ years we were married. We moved to Hawai'i so we would be between both of our families and live in a multicultural environment. I remained close with my biological family, but was also welcomed into my Samoan family which believes the more people in a family the better.

**Wilma:** So how did that influence your perspective on foster youth's connection to their families?

**Bernie:** Well, it influenced me to work for Child Welfare Services. In my work as a CPS investigator and case manager, whenever I removed a child I always assessed the family's resources and availability. Even if I couldn't place the child with family, I always worked to try

to maintain family connections. In about 95% of the families I worked with there was always at least one family member who was healthy, stable, and understood the importance of staying in contact with their relative in foster care. I never felt like it should be an “either/or” type of response --you can be safe OR be with your family, but you can’t have both. Instead, it should be an “also/and” response -- you can be safe AND still stay connected to your family.

I found this to be true when I became a foster parent too. When my family and I took David into our home I knew he could develop an attachment to us like I had developed with my Samoan family. I also knew I wanted to encourage and respect the attachment he had to his biological family, some of whom live here and others who live in Alaska. I never put any restrictions on calls to Alaska, for example, or on visits with relatives in Hawai’i. Granted, he never wanted to see someone who might be extremely problematic– if that had been the case I might have put some precautionary measures in place – but I think he didn’t need to test or push on boundaries because I had that “also/and” attitude.

As a foster parent, I always felt the first step was to bring David into my home. The next step was to bring him into my heart. When I brought him into my heart, what was important to him became important to me, and that included his family. I remember the day David’s brother, Isaac, came to visit from the mainland. They had lost contact for many years and when they first saw each other – well it was a beautiful thing to see. Clearly there was a puka in David’s life he could now fill.

**Wilma:** How has David’s connection to family enhanced your family?

**Bernie:** David was excited to introduce Isaac to our family, and now Isaac is like a cousin to my own biological children. Whenever we hook up with his family that lives here on O’ahu I feel their appreciation for what we’ve done for David, but there’s also a mutual respect. I’ve always found it’s more helpful to be inclusive, rather than exclusive, and that people generally respond in a positive way when they’re accepted. On a deeper, more personal level, I think it’s been expanding for my whole family to have played a part in healing an old wound, even if it wasn’t our own personal wound. For me, it’s been a way to pay back the caring that I’ve received in my life from so many wonderful people.

**Wilma:** Any final thoughts?

**Bernie:** In my many years at CPS and as a foster parent I learned that trying to create change through the use of fear rather than caring and love just doesn’t work as well. With David I never tried to force our connection or make it more secure by diminishing his past connections, I only stayed open and receptive to him being in our family. As an adult, David chose to add us to his family; I am now his “Dad” because, as he says, I’ve earned the title. That, to me, has been the greatest gift of all.

*For more information about `Ohana Connections work contact Wilma Friesema at EPIC `Ohana Conferencing, Inc. 748-7921*