Expanding Boundaries
By Wilma Friesema, EPIC ‘Ohana Conferencing
and Bernie Hvidding, EPIC ‘Ohana Conferencing

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 1½ 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*