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For this 'Ohana Connections Corner I spoke with Misty Watkins, a former foster youth who transitioned out of the system in 2008. I first met Misty when she was seventeen.

Misty believed her father was dead. Why wouldn't he be? Her mother and grandmother had both died within six months of each other when she was just fourteen years old. When Misty did a Mormon Church registry search for her father, David Watkins, and she read "Deceased" she didn't question it. She hadn't seen him since she was two years old; it wasn't hard to think of him as gone.

For legal purposes, EPIC was enlisted to locate her father's death certificate. After extensive searching, nothing was found so we began looking to see if her father was alive after all. Fortunately, while making cold calls, I stumbled upon his step-mother, who excitedly passed on my contact information to David.

Below are highlights of a conversation I had with Misty about her reconnection with her father.

*–Wilma Friesema, OES
EPIC 'Ohana Conferencing, Inc.*

Taking New Steps

By Misty Watkins & Wilma Friesema

Wilma: Misty, do you remember what it was like when you first heard that your father was alive?

Misty: My social worker, Catherine, called and said she wanted to meet me after school. I was the editor of the school paper and was supposed to meet with a teacher and the rest of the paper's staff. I told the teacher I'd be a few minutes late -- she knew I was in foster care and had to meet with my social worker sometimes.

When Catherine said, "We found your dad" I was stunned. I didn't know what to do. She asked if I wanted to call him while she was there, but I was in too much shock. I couldn't call him, I was just trying to absorb that he was alive!

I went to my school paper meeting, but as soon as I walked in my friends asked me what was wrong. I didn't answer, I just tried to do the work, but I couldn't focus. I had to call my dad. It felt awkward and weird to say, "This is your daughter." I remember him saying, "Finally." He had been searching for me too.

Wilma: What happened after that first phone call? How did you get to know each other?

Misty: After that first call we talked on the phone every so often and emailed letters and pictures. My dad lives in Utah with my stepmother, Karen. My grandfather lives there too.

Prior to contacting my dad, I was planning on attending Brigham Young University on O'ahu, and I left Kaua'i that fall. I didn't do so well and my financial aid was cut.

Meanwhile, I aged out of the system and had nowhere to go. My dad had said I could live with him when I first called; though we barely knew each other I decided to take him up on his offer.

Wilma: That was a big step. How did it feel to see him in person?

Misty: He didn't really need to hold up a sign at the airport – we recognized each other immediately. We hugged, but I didn't cry. To tell the truth, it was all so overwhelming I felt pretty numb. It reminded me of meeting a new foster parent; you don't really know each other yet you're automatically in this pretty intimate family relationship.

Moving in felt like entering a new foster home too, it had that same awkwardness and uncertainty. We didn't know what to say to each other at first, but eventually we started talking more. We also brought out the photo albums and that helped a lot. It helped me to get a sense of my dad's life and family, and the history that I missed.

I've learned more about my mom too, and that's helped to fill in the blanks. Some of the information has been hard, but overall I feel like I have a better understanding of why things were the way they were and why I am the way I am sometimes. I feel more empowered to not repeat some of the mistakes both my parents made.

Wilma: How are the two of you doing now?

Misty: One of my favorite sayings is, "Nobody said it would be easy, but it will be worth it." That's how I feel about reconnecting with my dad. It wasn't easy moving away from Hawai'i, the only home I had known. I left behind friends, my brothers, all that was familiar. I had to take a risk and get to know the dad I never had. I had to stretch out of my comfort zone, but it *has* been worth it. I now know my family and that I have the strength to try new things.

This Christmas I will be traveling to visit a friend in Panamá. My dad is protective and supportive, both at the same time. I'm eighteen now and he says I have the right to make my own decisions, but he wants me to be very, very careful. He's insistent that I stay in school too. I'm glad he's that way.

My dad and I can't make up for the lost years, but we are building a relationship that will carry us into the future. It hasn't always been easy, but it's definitely worth it. My major in school is international studies. I hope to travel a lot in my life; stepping into this relationship and getting to know my dad has helped me to feel more confident as I step out into the world.

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