



Reweaving `Ohana Connections

by Wilma Friesema

Resource parents, more than most, know how much it hurts children when abuse and neglect rips their family apart. For some families the tear can be attended to and mended quickly. In others, the family's fabric is torn and left in tatters, leaving the children with only threads of memories to hold on to.

Many foster children, with the help and support of loving resource parents, weave healthy new relationships. Others struggle to make their way despite heightened fear and distrust. Nearly all foster children harbor questions about their biological family and a longing to reestablish ties. At the very least, they want the power to decide whether to have family contact or not.

In response to this need, EPIC `Ohana Conferencing began the `Ohana Connections program in 2007. Funded by the Department of Human Services (DHS), the program has three components. The *Keiki Placement Project* locates the families of children under four years of age entering child protective services. The *`Ohana Finding Program* locates extended family for children of any age when an `Ohana Conference is requested. The *`Ohana Connections Program* locates family and assists in reconnecting adolescent foster youth with their families. Family members are located via internet searches, direct outreach, and CPS record mining.

Kahi's* case is a *Keiki Placement Project* example. Kahi's mom, Mary, gave birth to Kahi while in prison. Mary didn't tell her family on the mainland because she believed they were angry. She also refused to supply any family contact information, but EPIC staff did an internet search and located her parents and found that the parents' anger had dissipated long ago.

Mary's mom wrote a letter; it shocked and touched Mary to receive it. More letters and calls were exchanged, followed by an `Ohana Conference. Currently, Mary's parents are in the licensing process to take custody of Kahi, with Mary's blessings. The foster parents are supportive too, sending pictures and baby updates to the grandparents.



Not all cases result in the placement of children with family, but unexpected, positive results can still occur from the *`Ohana Finding Program*. Leialoha was in a bad way when she gave birth to her baby girl. She had previously lost custody of two sons due to drug addiction and neglect. The boys' adoptive parents took custody of the baby too. Lei's boyfriend denied paternity. She was all alone.

When EPIC staff contacted her and explained `Ohana Finding, Lei burst into tears. "Why," she asked, "didn't someone do that for me when I was a little girl?" Lei had been separated from her parents when she was five. Fortunately, she was placed with two brothers, but she lost contact with everyone else. She knew her father's name, but not her mother's.

An internet search produced a dated address for Lei's dad, John. EPIC staff went to the house and surprisingly John still lived there. John had turned into a solid, responsible adult. He was thrilled with the possibility of seeing Lei again. He also supplied a long list of relatives, including Lei's mom.

Mom was contacted and she, too, was excited. She also had family names and contact information. Twenty-five people attended Lei's `Ohana Conference. There

the facilitator asked everyone to say their name, relationship to Lei, and share one memory they had of her as a child. By the time everyone spoke there wasn't a dry eye in the room.

Lei made significant progress, but never regained custody of her daughter. The baby stayed with her brothers and their adoptive parents. Lei and her birth family are now working on mending their family.

The *'Ohana Connections Program* typically works with older youth in permanent custody; EPIC began working with 17-year-old Kaleo and his two younger siblings after his social worker requested help. Kaleo's father had died ten years earlier and his mother was a homeless drug addict. A maternal uncle took legal guardianship of the children, but it was later discovered he physically abused them. The children were removed.



A CPS record search produced the name of paternal grandmother, Ann, and an internet search found her in Oregon. When contacted, Ann was in total disbelief. She last saw the children at her son's funeral. Though she wrote and sent packages, there had been no response. The uncle moved and gave no forwarding address. DHS couldn't give Ann the information either.

For ten years Ann prayed she would see her grandchildren again. She eagerly described the many

aunts, uncles, and cousins the children had on the mainland. EPIC staff arranged for her and the family to have phone contact with the children.

Within two months, Ann, two aunts, and two uncles flew to Hawai'i. EPIC arranged for a meeting space to bring the family, foster parents, and social worker together. Excitement and anxious anticipation ran high for everyone.

Hugs and tears soon turned to laughter and questions as the children poured over the large piles of pictures the family had brought. Stories about their dad flowed easily and comfortably. Precious baby pictures were placed in three stacks to be taken home and cherished.

Ann had another gift, a remarkable scrapbook for Kaleo that was made by his first grade teacher. "Though I've moved a lot since your father died, I always kept this book, hoping I would give it to you someday," Ann told Kaleo as she handed him the book. On the cover was his handprint. Inside were photographs of him in school, along with his actual childhood drawings. Kaleo was speechless, but his face glowed as he slowly turned the pages. Tears glistened in Ann's eyes as she watched her dream become reality.

These are just three of the many family connections stories. Because of the support and encouragement of many caregivers, these families were brought together and mending became possible. For Mary, Lei, Kaleo and their families the mending isn't always easy, but the pain of separation, the joy of reunion, and the challenges of reunifying are strands of shared experience they're now weaving into a renewed family tapestry.

*The names and key identifying information within this article have been changed to respect the privacy and confidentiality of those involved.

Wilma Friesema is an EPIC`Ohana Engagement Specialist. For info about the `Ohana Connections Program call Wilma at (808) 748-7921 or go to www.EpicOhana.org.