

Unidentified: How Kids Can Age Out of Texas Foster Care Without Documentation

#Unidentified

Story #3: "The Advocates"

LEAD

Excuse me - do you --- by any chance - know where your birth certificate is right now?

Even, if you don't - YOU DO HAVE ONE - right?

Most people do.

But, all this week we've been talking about children who DO NOT have birth certificates, or Social Security cards or IDs. It happens sometimes.

In Texas, some children age out of foster care WITHOUT documentation. You could say they're DE FACTO - undocumented - BUT - THAT's a term we normally use for immigrants - NOT for Americans. The Texas Standard's Joy Diaz reports on some of the advocates who are trying to fix that.

SCRIPT

In an ideal world - NOT TO SAY THAT THE WORLD OF Lamar County Judge Bill Harris is ideal - BUT - in an ideal world, children in foster care without documentation shouldn't struggle

Judge Harris CUT 1: "If somebody is having a problem, typically all we have to do - certainly all I have to do - is pick up the phone." (:6)

Judge Harris has a fairly easy time getting documents for kids when they need them - in part - because his county has very few children in foster care - [67 by the latest count.](#)

Judge Harris CUT 2: "I can call the local offices and the local officials and say "little Jimmy can't get an ID card, let's make it happen" and invariably we get it taken care of." (:12)

JUDGES - like Harris - are ONE line of advocates, children in foster care rely on.

In LARGER COUNTIES, the outcomes may differ - in part because judges are shouldering higher caseloads. the caseload of judges is vastly different. (for web)

Another key advocate for children in the foster care system who don't have documentation is their foster parents.

Nikki Ladden lives in Travis County //(for web)

There are TONS of photos on her mantel ---- full of children

Commented [1]: For instance - while the latest numbers from the Department of Family and Protective Services show Lamar County with well under 100 foster care cases ---- Bexar County has ALMOST 2 THOUSAND (1861) and Harris County has MORE than THAT (2185).

Commented [2]: where - by the same count - there are 410 children in foster care.

Nikki Ladden: “(CHUCKLES) - this was my family a year and a half ago!” (:5)

She shows me a photo where TWELVE kiddos surround her and her husband.

They’ve ALL been adopted from Texas foster care.

But, Ladden not only cares for HER adopted children. She still fosters.

Nikki Ladden: “This one - she’s not adopted - but - oh, man - we’re hoping so! We’ve had her since birth. We are in love with this baby! But, she’s also a part of this biological set right here - which we have adopted the older 3” (:16)

Ladden is rearing several teenagers at once. She says she has a soft spot for OLDER children - in part - because SHE was an older child when SHE entered foster care.

From that experience, she learned the importance of having ALL your vital records by the time you leave the system. Since she didn’t have ANY - not even a birth certificate.

Nikki Ladden: “[as a] matter of fact - it’s been so hard for me - even to get my copy of my highschool paperwork - in fact I had to actually go down and just get another GED so I could go to college because I couldn’t even get my schoolwork” (:14)

Without an ID, Ladden couldn’t get a job. Without a job, she couldn’t rent a place.

Nikki Ladden: “So, I stayed homeless a lot” (:2)

From the time Ladden left foster care - in 1982 - to today - many things have changed. Now, D-F-P-S HAS TO provide children with their documentation. And THERE ARE D-F-P-S resources that can help. BUT, Ladden says foster parents - like herself - can be a child’s MOST EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE in asking for those documents.

As we talk, Ladden’s youngest baby gets fussy --- to calm her down, she plays some classical music (**roll in music**) and tells me about another important group of advocates: CASE WORKERS and ATTORNEYS AT LITEM.

She says her children’s BEST ADVOCATE for MANY years was an attorney by the name of Maya Gamble.

Nikki Ladden: "She made sure they had all their paperwork, she made sure they had all their documentation. Maya is - ferocious - as far as making sure that things get done the way they should get done" (:13)

Today [Maya Gamble](#) - is a district judge. She was recently elected in Travis County and started her new job in January.

PAUSE

So far, we've learned - in order to secure a child's documentation, the best and most effective advocates are foster parents, caseworkers, court appointed attorneys and judges.

But, there are some cases that require more effort --- AND more advocates.

In a statement, DFPS told us the most challenging cases are those of children born out of state who don't have birth certificates. THERE ARE NO cooperative agreements between states and sometimes in order to get a child's birth certificate STATES require a court order.

Christopher Renaud's (ray-NOH's) case was like THAT. He goes by CJ -- and his story is DIFFICULT from beginning to end

Christopher Renaud: "(SIGH) arghh - where do i even begin?" (:2)

He was born in Hawaii. But his parents were not married to each other. In fact, CJ's mother was married to another man.

Christopher Renaud: "The actual husband found out about it and kind of went off on a rampage and shot my father, paralyzed him from the waist down, killed my mother instantly and then he killed himself" (:14)

It was a murder-suicide.

CJ was there - a baby - just a few months old.

His father was left in a wheelchair after the shooting.

When CJ was 5, DAD was killed in a hit and run accident, leaving CJ an orphan.

At THAT point he went to live with family in Austin. But there, he was abused.

At age 16, he decided to start tracking down the paperwork that proved he existed. Without his biological parents AND without support from the rest of his family - CJ turned to an organization called "Partnerships for Children," that works with current and former foster youth.

Erin Argue was on his case.

Erin Argue: "It took his volunteer mentor - and I - 6 months - no less than 50 phone calls to Hawaii and a senator to get this kid a copy of his birth certificate." (:14)

Argue says CJ was her hardest case.

Erin Argue: "And THAT was just for the birth certificate, so that we could work on the Social Security card, so that we could work on the ID." (:5)

They FINALLY got the documents. And, then, CJ's wallet was stolen.

Erin Argue: "So, in one 30 minute encounter on the street, he lost EVERY identifying factor that he had." (:7)

Erin Argue - THOUGH - was able to come to the rescue.

At her office, she has a safe (**SOUNDS**)

Getting CJ's documents the first time was so hard - she had the foresight to order duplicates for EVERYTHING.

Erin Argue: "HERE IT IS! This is it - and we found copies of his Social Security card, and his school ID (FADE OUT)." (:7)

NOW - THAT safe, ALSO has identifying documents for about 100 OTHER kids.

*** PAUSE ****

As Argue locks up - (**BEEPING AGAIN**) she says it's kind of overwhelming to think that - in lieu of family -or OTHER ADVOCATES - her safe - has QUITE LITERALLY become the safest place for these VITAL RECORDS

Erin Argue: "It is a really powerful noise once you figure out like just how important stuff is in here. Because it's not JUST STUFF - we have like identity - and we have the ability to help those kiddos who don't always have identity

Commented [3]: Leave in the whole byte from her, time allowing.

make sure that they have their identity. So, it's pretty cool!" (:14)

Because the alternative would leave these children - UNIDENTIFIED

I'm Joy Diaz for the Texas Standard.