ALL ABOUT THE CHILDREN
Report to the Community

2014 THROUGH 2015

FSS
Family Support Services
OF NORTH FLORIDA INC.
Family Support Services of North Florida (FSS) was established to protect children and help ensure their safety, stability and quality of life by working with the community to strengthen families. FSS is the lead agency in Duval and Nassau counties, providing four core community-based care programs to at-risk children and struggling families: family preservation, foster care, adoption and independent living.

**FAMILY PRESERVATION**

When families are in crisis and the children’s well-being is jeopardized, Family Support Services provides immediate assistance to help stabilize and strengthen the family as a whole, using a family-centered approach.

Families receive case management and focused in-home services, which can include parenting classes, financial management, job training, financial assistance and connections to valuable community resources. These efforts ensure the families have what is necessary to become successful and self-sufficient, and to help prevent children from being removed from their homes and put into foster care.

**ADOPTION**

Each year hundreds of local foster children are unable to safely return to their families, and are available for adoption. FSS has created extraordinary community partnerships and effective outreach efforts that help find forever families for foster youth. With a focus on finding adoptive families for teens and sibling groups, FSS hosts specialized events and maintains a Heart Gallery website featuring photos and information about foster children available for adoption.

FSS continues to be a statewide leader in adoptions and has helped Florida become nationally recognized for adoption success.

**FOSTER CARE**

When children are removed from home for their safety, FSS provides a temporary safe haven in foster care. They are placed with a kinship caregiver (a relative or family friend) or a foster family. Every effort is made to keep siblings together to maintain their bond and minimize trauma. The primary goal is to safely reunify families after resolving the issues that led to the children being placed in foster care.

FSS ensures that foster youth in Duval and Nassau counties receive medical and dental care, and counseling, in addition to love and support. FSS also strives to bring normalcy to their lives by providing enrichment and educational programs such as summer camps, art programs, tutoring, holiday gifts and fun outings.

**INDEPENDENT LIVING**

Teens in foster care are provided extensive life skills training and unique enrichment programs to prepare them for adulthood. They focus on education, job readiness and career development, as well as financial and personal development. Exciting opportunities to learn new skills are offered through creative programs that provide life experiences and teach teamwork, decision making, respect and the value of personal achievement.

When teens in foster care turn 18 and transition into adulthood, FSS provides the opportunity for extended services and support through age 23. With a focus on completing their education, finding employment and preparing to be a self-sufficient, contributing member of society, each young adult is encouraged to select the services most appropriate for their goals.
At Family Support Services, everything we do and every decision we make is predicated on what’s best for our children. We are all about keeping the children in North Florida on a solid course to develop into successful adults that ultimately thrive in our community.

Through four core areas of service in our child welfare system, we offer interconnected services and support to keep children safe and to help local families have positive outcomes. By laying down a strong set of solid tracks for our clients to follow, we provide the supervision and resources to keep them going in the right direction.

I am thrilled that we’ve implemented a new safety management plan that protects children when their families are in crisis by engaging them early on in the process. When a report is made and a child protection investigator is called, FSS now provides support at the beginning of the investigation to ensure the safety of the children while helping the family get on the right course immediately.

The FSS team, along with our dedicated case management organizations, embraced the introduction of safety methodology by the Department of Children and Families. This new approach in evaluating and interacting with families created an extraordinary conversion within our work force, requiring additional training, new processes and major changes in the tools used to manage daily work. This integration took place while everyone simultaneously handled a significant increase in the number of children coming into care in this timeframe. I am proud of all of the hard work from each agency and person involved in this transition to make our families stronger and our children safer.

Recognizing that foster parents are the backbone of the child welfare system, we stepped up our focus on recruiting foster parents. We licensed an astonishing 80 new foster homes, and continued to raise the bar on our training and screening to ensure our most vulnerable children go to well-protected homes.

Our community-wide Child Welfare Early Education Partnership brought remarkable success resulting in a 45 percent increase in the number of foster children attending high-quality programs. Our specialized training enabled local child care centers to meet the specific needs of foster children. This federally-funded investment in early education gives foster children an advantage in school and has lifelong positive implications.

Whether addressing the needs of our youth, funding for preventative services or a new program for young adults transitioning out of child welfare, our number one consideration is improving the lives of children.

Please take a few minutes to read further and meet some of our extraordinary people who are moving full steam ahead to a brighter future.
When 36-year-old Caroline decided to drive with alcohol in her system and her four-year-old son, Alex, in the car, her life took a dramatic turn. Another driver ran a red light and rammed into her vehicle, right where Alex was sitting. Fortunately, he was not injured and Caroline suffered only minor injuries. Caroline was charged with driving under the influence and child endangerment.

“While I hate that the accident ever occurred, it likely saved my life. I am fortunate that no one was seriously injured. It was the wake-up call that I needed,” Caroline admitted.

Immediately after the accident, Caroline was required to participate in a substance abuse program and enroll in parenting classes provided by FSS. The family was assigned a family preservation case manager who made weekly visits to their home and provided supervision, guidance and support.

Caroline had worked as a bartender for years and considered herself a “closet drinker.” The support she received helped her realize that she needed to change her work environment and make better decisions for herself and her family.

Until she successfully completed the treatment program, Caroline could not be home alone with her son. Because her husband works nights, the case manager urged the family to have Caroline’s brother come from New York to help care for Alex. Offering solutions to obstacles is one of the strengths of family preservation professionals as they ensure the safety and well-being of the children in the families they serve. For Caroline, it helped spell success.

Caroline completed the outpatient program, regularly attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, secured a new job in an office setting and proudly remains sober. Her focus is now on being a better wife and a better mom to Alex.
If there were a guide on the dos and don’ts of parenting, foster parents Nicole and Mike Steele clearly read it cover-to-cover.

Once a foster child is in the Steele home, he or she is immediately welcomed into the family’s daily activities. The couple is organized, consistent and flexible, and they demonstrate extraordinary teamwork—qualities that helped them be named the 2015 Foster Parents of the Year by the Florida Coalition for Children.

“Our strategy is to treat each foster child like they are our own right from the start,” Nicole said. “We immediately put in place a child-parent agreement for accountability and start them off on chores right away. There is no honeymoon period per se.”

When 17-year-old Brandy came to live with the Steeles in early 2015, she was fiercely independent and had a history of running away from one foster home after another. She exhibited many of the characteristics of a teen who had been raised without structure. Adults in her life had let her down, and she understandably had trust issues.

“When I realized that someone actually truly cared about where I was, what I did and how my actions affected others, I began believing in myself,” Brandy explained. “More importantly, I wanted to be someone they could be proud of.”

Today, Brandy is on track and has a plan for her future. She will graduate from the Florida Youth Challenge Academy with a GED by the end of 2015, and sees herself in five years with a college degree and pursuing a career helping foster youth.

“Brandy knows that she has a family who loves her, and we will never give up on her.” — Nicole
“Go Further, Go Beyond and Go For It!” This is the motto of The Challenge, a new FSS enrichment program launched in 2015 for teens in foster care.

Modeled after the popular reality TV shows Survivor and The Amazing Race, the three-month program incorporates challenging physical activities with life skills that focus on education, careers, health and community service.

The Challenge offers fun-filled adventures such as ziplining, rock wall climbing, a scavenger hunt, canoeing, a ropes course, horseback riding and camping. Participants push themselves to success while participating in healthy activities that teach them the value of competition and how rewarding it can be to challenge themselves.

Eleven teens participated in the inaugural program and learned to develop trust and improve communication and team-building skills.

Seventeen-year-old Agnes enjoyed making new friends and said that The Challenge was an amazing experience that taught her to work independently and as a team.

The Challenge taught Clinton, 17, to be bold and try new things. “The Clinton of three years ago would have given up before a challenge even started,” he said. “I was proud of myself for how much I progressed throughout the program. I ended up doing things that I didn’t think were possible.”

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Doing the impossible challenges youth

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Doing the impossible and pride in accomplishments: life lessons from The Challenge.
Relatives often lend a hand when families are in a state of crisis. When Catherine Jackson, a 55-year-old mother of three grown children, learned that her five grandchildren would be going into foster care due to her daughter’s substance abuse problem, she stepped up and opened her heart and her home to all five siblings, including one-year-old twins!

“My mother died when I was only five years old and my aunt raised me, so I felt like it was my turn to give back,” said Catherine. “I know that God won’t give me more than I can handle. He is giving me the strength to take care of them until their mother gets her life back together again. Substance abuse is a powerful thing.”

Today, Keon, Benjamin, Catherine, Skylan and Skai are thriving in “Nana’s” care; all doing well socially, emotionally and academically. In addition, Keon and Benjamin are now involved in sports and extracurricular activities.

While working part-time in a school cafeteria, Catherine finds the time and energy to provide the children with love, patience and devotion, as well as structure and discipline. Because of her unwavering commitment and dedication to caring for her grandchildren, Catherine was recognized with the 2015 Kinship Caregiver of the Year Award by the Florida State Foster and Adoptive Parent Association.
Sometimes people have to hit rock bottom before they will realize how their actions impact those they love the most.

When Diana Beane’s alcohol abuse problem resulted in having her 10-year-old daughter, Samantha, removed from her home and placed in foster care, Diana initially responded with anger and resentment.

“When I was active in my addiction, I was very selfish and unconcerned with my daughter’s welfare,” stated Diana.

She blamed others—the foster care system, therapists, the legal system, and society at large. Eventually, with the support of FSS partners, Diana channeled her anger into something more productive: a plan for reunification.

A major turning point was when she finally understood that her drinking had affected her daughter more than it appeared. Until then, her defense was that Samantha was bathed, had a hot lunch and was only late for school on occasion. She didn’t realize that her drinking had a far-reaching emotional and spiritual impact on her daughter, in spite of providing for her basic needs.

After successfully completing parenting sessions, family therapy, individual therapy, anger management and Alcoholic Anonymous meetings, Diana and Samantha were reunified. Their relationship is stronger than ever.

Now, Diana is a sponsor to five other women facing similar challenges, and Samantha is living the life of a normal 5th grader.

“This whole experience has given Samantha a voice,” Diana said. “Whenever she is upset, in fear or doubt, she now talks about her feelings with the assurance that I will listen and be a supporter, nurturer and, most importantly, a positive role model.”
Twins + one find a forever family

The courtroom was adorned with balloons and festive decorations as families waited eagerly for the judge to confirm what was already true in their hearts. The Honorable David Gooding finalized the adoption of six-year-old twins, Jasmine and Jacob, officially making Jason and Toni Bell the twins’ parents.

Jasmine and Jacob were now part of a “forever family.”

The Bells were not new to the adoption process. They had also fostered and then adopted their daughter Destiny.

Toni explained that they quickly fell in love with the twins. “We knew right away that if Jasmine and Jacob couldn’t go back home, then we would adopt them,” she said.

Today, the Bell children are healthy and happy, surrounded by unconditional love only a family can give.

Jason and Toni relish in the excitement and pride on their children’s faces as they learn to read, help cook dinner, or get off their first ride on a roller coaster. They are amazed to watch a little boy who was labeled as ‘non-verbal’ chat with his friends.

Toni said, “They have more advantages, opportunities and support than they had previously, but if anyone’s lives have changed for the better, it’s ours.”
Kristi Phoenix

Eighteen-year-old Kristi Phoenix is ambitious, driven and focused. She has overcome the struggles of her background and family issues, the loss of her grandmother, and the obstacles of being in foster care. She said that the challenges in her life have helped her to become the successful person she is today.

Her many accomplishments and involvement with other youth are among the reasons she was named the 2015 Rising Star by the Florida State Foster and Adoptive Parent Association.

Kristi has always been goal-oriented. Her desire for a better life motivates her every day and inspires her to do what she loves and to help others.

After being accepted at five universities, Kristi is attending Florida International University on multiple scholarships. She is majoring in social work, with a minor in business. Her ultimate goal is to earn a master’s degree and work with at-risk youth.

She earned an associate of arts degree from Florida State College at Jacksonville as a dual-enrollment student, simultaneously attending Ribault High School where she maintained a 4.0 GPA and was ranked eighth in her class of 400. She was a member of the National Honor Society, National Beta Club, Trojan Scholars, and Mu Alpha Theta, the Math National Honor Society. She also mentored younger students through the Superior Scholars program, and served as a cheerleading coach and mentor at a local elementary school.

Kristi also completed the FSS Passport to Leadership program, a six-month enrichment opportunity. She is in extended foster care, one of FSS’ Independent Living programs.

Kristi lives by the philosophy that you won’t see a change in your life until you become the change in your life.

Patrick Watson

Advocating for youth in foster care is a priority for Patrick Watson, recipient of the Florida Coalition for Children’s 2015 Outstanding Youth Award. Patrick transitioned out of foster care at age 18, but he regularly returns to his former group home to talk, listen and encourage the kids who live there today.

Through advocacy, Patrick helps give foster youth a voice that he believes needs to be heard. “Many of the kids in foster care have endured terrible situations. Some kids act out, because they think no one is listening to them. I want them to know that I am listening and I understand their struggles. I’ve traveled a similar road.”

The 19-year-old shares his life story with foster kids, especially teens, so they can avoid making some of the same mistakes he made.

With educational services and support from FSS Independent Living, Patrick is attending Florida State College at Jacksonville where he is studying to be an emergency medical technician. During the summer, he earned a certification in cosmetology. He also has a part-time job.

Patrick proudly lives in his own apartment. He was fortunate to receive brand new bedroom furniture through a charity donation program, and rather than selling his old furniture, he gave it to a youth aging out of foster care who was getting his own place.

Patrick’s advocacy efforts were bolstered when he participated in FSS’s Passport to Leadership program, which includes a focus on public speaking. He is more prepared than ever to speak to and for youth in foster care.
Supporters

All donations made to FSS are greatly appreciated. During the 2014-2015 fiscal year, these supporters made contributions in various forms valued at more than $5,000:

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