

## Adoptive Parent of the Year

### *Mallori Gallegos*

“In the end it was all worth it,” Mallori Gallegos stated as she reflected on her journey as a kinship, foster, and adoptive mother. Mallori Gallegos started her foster care journey by taking the placement of her second cousin, Isaiah. She received a call from CPS asking if she could take placement of Isaiah at five days old. Mallori was a 20-year-old single woman who immediately felt it was her responsibility to care for Isaiah for however long he needed. It broke her heart to know there were other children who needed a safe home, to be cared for and loved. In less than 24 hours, she became a kinship caregiver to Isaiah and advocated for him in all areas. Today, the Gallegos family is thriving and flourishing! Mallori works as a preschool director, continues to provide respite for foster children, and babysits multiple children in her community. Mallori shares that she has the best job ever because she gets to watch her children grow up, mature, and let them have the best childhood ever! Mallori said she never in her wildest dreams would have imagined this life, but the Lord is kind in allowing her to be the mother of three of the best kids in the world!

### *Jeremy and Kimberly Lindsay*

Jeremy and Kimberly Lindsay adopted two brothers in 2020. In 2021, the half-sister of the boys was born and in need of foster placement. The Lindsay family immediately said yes and accepted placement. In 2023, the Lindsays noticed something was off with the baby girl, as her energy level decreased, and she struggled to eat/drink. Initial tests did not reveal anything serious. After months of doctor’s visits, lab work, and hospital stay, at the beginning of 2024, the baby girl was diagnosed with AML, Acute Myelogenous Leukemia, a cancer of the blood and bone marrow. Before the diagnosis, the Lindsays were set to adopt the baby girl. With the new AML diagnosis, Jeremy’s and Kimberly’s desire to adopt was even greater. In 2024, they were able to officially adopt the baby girl. While she is still undergoing treatment, the family has not wavered in their commitment to one another, their children, or their family. They have adopted the statement of belief that they choose to embrace faith over fear, believing in the healing that will come for their sweet daughter. Jeremy and Kimberly Lindsay should be considered for the Adoptive Parents of the Year award as they have served in extraordinary ways as foster and now adoptive parents.

### *Chris and Jennifer Matlock*

Chris and Jennifer Matlock started an adoption journey only to be stopped by a cancer diagnosis. After beating cancer, they were determined to pursue adoption, as they felt that they were called to adopt. Chris and Jenn knew from the beginning that they wanted to pursue matched adoption of an older child because young children are often easily matched and adopted. They wanted to provide an opportunity for an older teen to have a family forever to help them navigate the world

around them after graduation. Two days after her 17th birthday, Chris and Jenn met their daughter, Anahi. Anahi believed she would age out of the foster care system due to her age and no one wanting to adopt an older teen. She did not think she would have a family to call her own. In November 2023, Chris and Jenn made official what God had done in their hearts and homes and legally adopted Anahi. In April 2024, Anahi turned 18 and had her wishes and dreams of having a family come true. Chris and Jenn embody the mission and vision of Addy's Hope Adoption Agency. They are the hands and feet of Jesus and are a voice and support for Anahi. They stepped outside of traditional adoption and adopted a child who never believed she would have a family. They are the heart of what Addy's Hope does.

### *Noe & Melody Garza*

We want to nominate Mr. Noe and Melody Garza because they helped two beautiful girls achieve permanency. The Garza home was licensed as a foster/adopt home in November 2018. They were motivated to provide foster/adopt care to children because they shared a desire to be parents together and to be a positive influence in a child's life. The Garza's wanted offer a foster child stability, family togetherness, love, nurturing, and safety. Mr. and Mrs. Garza reported they were willing to foster to adopt up to 3 children between the ages of 0-3. Less than 30 days after verification, the Garza's took in their first placement, a 3-day old baby girl. Less than a year later, they were awarded PMC of this child. While they embraced life with their little girl and made memories as a family, they took placement of a 5-day old baby girl into their home. As life would continue to evolve for them, 488 days later, they were in court finalizing the adoption. This adoption was special to them not only because their family was growing, but it was also on Valentine's Day, the day we celebrate love. What an amazing day to recognize love, with an adoption consummation. In addition, their daughter would now have an official sister. The Garza's ability to take a newborn child from the hospital came so easy to them. A subsequent foster care placement they took was a 9-day old baby boy. He achieved permanency with a relative a short 3 weeks later. The family met their goal of adopting children and subsequently chose to voluntarily close their home. They recently reached out to the agency to say THANK YOU for helping them achieve their goal and to say the girls were doing great and were currently enrolled in ballet classes.

### *Haroldo & Gloria Rodriguez*

Haroldo and Gloria Rodriguez's motivation to adopt arose when they found out that their grandchildren (8, 3 and 1 year old) would be taken into protective custody while their son and wife figured out their life. They immediately knew they had to step in to keep the family together. They want to provide a stable and loving home for them, especially because they are family. What really motivated them is that this will give them the opportunity to be a good role model for their grandchildren and keep the family together. Haroldo and Gloria love those children as if they were theirs. The family was licensed in March 2022 and by November 2023, the three children had achieved permanency with the Rodriguez family. During their verification, the family was provided ongoing support to ensure the children's needs were met consistently. The children met milestones while under the care of their grandparents. The children's trauma was addressed each

day through ongoing familial bonding and support. In addition, the family understood the importance of maintaining compliance with state standards and were able to do so during their verification. The family was oriented to keeping things in order as they knew it was all for the children and their benefit. The Rodriguez are one of many kinship parents who understand the importance of family relationships. Rodriguez showed this importance at each visit, medical appointment, request for documentation, etc. The Rodriguez are simply a great family who deserve recognition for this award.

### *Zarosky Family*

The Zarosky family have been foster parents for the last 8 years and have brought over 30 children into their home during that time. At least 25 of those children were medically fragile and several others required medical equipment like G-tubes and tracheotomies. In 2018 they had the opportunity to adopt their daughter, Zenaiah. Zenaiah had several medical issues, but after almost 6 years in their home, she has surpassed all expectations and is doing extremely well

In December 2021, the family received a call about taking placement of a primary medical needs child who had severe medical needs including the required use of a g-tube, trach, oxygen machine and vitals monitor. Scarlett had suffered from medical neglect and was in desperate need of a family that would be willing to go the extra mile with patience and knowledge on how to treat her medical issues and provide care to ensure the best quality of life. She has received exactly that as a member of the Zarosky family. Mom Mary spends much of her time researching new treatment options, medications and interventions that can help Scarlett enjoy her life in ways that are adapted to her special needs. She has researched tools like talking buttons and augmented communication devices to give non-verbal Scarlett a voice. She has adapted her home to meet Scarlett's physical needs including building a ramp and providing and organizing space for Scarlett's medical equipment and team of daily nurses. Scarlett is very bonded to the family and lights up any time they engage with her or include her in their daily routines.

In January of 2023, the family received another call about a baby boy who had severe medical needs. The family said yes and brought baby Michael into their home. When Belong asked the family to consider it being his forever home, they eagerly agreed. He is thriving in their care and making steady progress! He's doing even better than doctors had initially thought he would. Michael especially loves his older foster brothers and has the best dance moves! When the music comes on, he's ready to boogie!

The family is in the final stages of adopting Scarlett and Michael. They are eagerly anticipating getting to be their forever home. We can't wait to celebrate alongside them!

### *Aaron and Laura Burch*

Aaron and Laura Burch had been married for 13 years and were unable to have children. They contacted Texas Girls and Boys Ranch early that year with the desire to adopt a child...or perhaps 2 children. At that time, we were conducting foster care and adoption parenting training at our emergency shelter. Coincidentally, the shelter was caring for a sibling group of four, ranging in age from 4 to 8. It just so happened that these children needed a family. Upon meeting the

children, their plans for one or two children fell by the wayside. Suddenly they became a family of 6. The little girl and three brothers stole their hearts. The children had been through a lot in their short lives, and one brother had experienced significant trauma. The children were placed with a family who would adopt them, and then they changed their minds. One of the children greatly grieved this loss. He cried for the previous foster mother and became defiant and had tantrums. He also had problems with behaviors at school. The Burch family was selected to be the adoptive family for this group. Plans were made for three children to be placed with the Burch family, while one of the boys continued to work with staff and counselors to help him stabilize. His behaviors and uncontrolled outbursts were still quite challenging, but the decision was made to allow him to join his siblings. We arranged for Ranch caregivers to be at the home and to help model how to work with him. Mrs. Burch decided to quit her job and home-school the children. She wanted to spend as much time with them as she could to build attachment. Mrs. Burch had some very tiring days where she said they all had to take a time out - including her. However, it was so worth it. The children did connect with them in a wonderful positive way. The one boy's defiant behaviors significantly decreased. Mr. and Mrs. Burch were patient and nurturing with all four children. They seemed to be natural at using TBRI principles. Their love for the children was evident. Soon, they were a successful family of six. Or maybe not! Sometime later the Burch family decided they wanted to come back and be licensed again and to possibly adopt another child. After fostering several children, they finally had the opportunity to adopt a little girl who was just under three years of age. Finally, they closed their home, feeling their family was complete. Now all the children are doing very well. They are so polite, kind, and well-adjusted. They are almost completely unrecognizable from when they were first placed in their home. The children are now ranging from 4 to 15 years old. They are still home-schooled and are involved in sports within the community. We are so proud of this family and all they have done for these children. They are truly amazing, and the children are so blessed to have them as their parents.

### *Julia Bennett*

Julia and Andrew Bennett were licensed as foster/adoptive parents with Pathways Youth and Family Services in 2019. The Bennett family joined Pathways already having experienced the joys of adopting two children from China. The Bennetts were eager to continue to expand their family through the adoption process in Texas. In the next few years, Julia and Andrew, with the support of their family, friends, and Pathways direct care staff, fostered several children to permanency, showing all the children who passed through their home the love and support that we all hope a family can provide to children in foster care. One of those children, Matthew, was placed with the Bennetts on December 27, 2022. The Bennett Family and Matthew fell in love with each other; it was a match that the family knew would last forever. While Matthew was placed with the Bennett family, it was clear to everyone that he was meant to be there. Finally, on April 16, 2024, it was time for the adoptive placement to occur, and Julia and Andrew signed all the necessary paperwork. The final steps toward completing the formal adoption process of Matthew would be finalized within the next week, making the Bennetts a family of eight. On the morning of April 20, 2024, four days after signing the adoptive placement documents, Andrew Bennett tragically never woke up from his sleep. Despite this tragedy, and relying on the support of her family, friends, and Pathways,

Julia Bennett knew that Andrew would not want anything to change about Matthew becoming a Bennett. On May 3, 2024, the adoption of Matthew was finalized, and Andrew and Julia's hopes and dreams had come true. With a very gracious and generous support system, many of whom are also foster parents with Pathways, the Bennett Family has been able to persevere after the sudden loss of their husband and father. In the most trying of circumstances, the Bennett family has consistently provided for the needs of the children living in their home and has shown themselves to be a fantastic example of the Pathways motto: improving lives, families, and communities. Pathways is very proud to work with this exceptional family and nominate them as Adoptive Family of the Year.

## **SSCC Staff of the Year**

### *Patricia "Tricia" Rogers*

As shared by the nominator: Patricia "Tricia" Rogers is an adoption worker for Belong. I shared cases with her in my previous role in adoptions. The dedication that Tricia showed to the cases she worked on was like something I had never seen from another worker. Tricia told me once that the kids were what mattered to her most in her work, and she showed that in the work she did. This often involved working with youth who have given up on being adopted. Tricia served as their guiding light to reinforce that everyone deserves a family. Tricia brought a level of positivity, support, thoroughness, and dedication that I have not seen before or since as a caseworker. In my opinion, she is the best caseworker I have ever had the pleasure to work with.

### *Shelli Nix*

Shelli Nix for SSCC Staff of the Year. Shelli truly embodies the mission of SJRC Texas, and she is a true champion of the Child and Family Well-being System. Shelli worked for DFPS as a CVS Caseworker before transitioning to Belong as a Permanency Specialist and has spent the last 13 years in that role between the two agencies. When Region 8b transitioned to community-based care under Belong, Shelli had the option to retire but chose to transition over to Belong because she was committed to seeing this transition be successful. She was committed to her children and families and wanted to ensure that they continued to receive great care during the transition process. We estimate that Shelli has served approximately 400 children and parents in the last 13 years. Prior to this, Shelli worked as a Special Education Teacher for 29 years, so her impact on children and families is truly immeasurable. Shelli is an absolute wealth of knowledge! She has served as a mentor to new staff countless times and often takes newer caseworkers under her wing to provide guidance and support. It matters to Shelli that the new staff learn the skills she has acquired and exercise the type of work ethic she expects of herself. She simply embodies what cannot be taught, she just has "it". Shelli takes everything in stride - nothing seems to phase her. She can handle the most difficult cases with ease. She is extremely thorough in her work and her documentation is exceptional. Above all else, Shelli is a fantastic advocate for children. She is often assigned to older youth with severe developmental delays and/or significant mental health concerns, and she is their champion. One example of this is "Billy" (name changed to protect identity). Billy was removed from his home where he lived with his father and sister. Billy was

autistic, non-verbal, and had very high needs when coming into care. Shelli has been Billy's Permanency Specialist for the duration of his TMC case. With Shelli's support and advocacy, Billy has gone from being sedated in medical hospitals to thriving with a provider that serves autistic youth. Billy is now spontaneously vocalizing short sentences and initiating physical contact with Shelli, laying his head on her shoulder while sitting next to her. Shelli has articulated in court hearings and treatment team meetings the importance of involving Billy's father in Billy's care and has integrated Billy's father into the treatment plan so carefully and intentionally that Billy now transitions between visits with his father in the community and back to placement with no emotional or behavioral concerns. After all these years, Shelli is not jaded - she will tear up with pride telling you about Billy's progress. Shelli plans to retire at the end of October after decades of serving children and families. She is finally ready to transition to the next phase of her life because she sees that her unit is stable, and she has faith in Belong to continue great work. Shelli is one of the many reasons Belong has been successful, and we absolutely could not have gotten to where we're at without incredible staff like Shelli. She will leave a legacy for years to come.

### *Angel Gillispie*

Angel is the Community Engagement Coordinator for Texas Family Care Network (TFCN) in region 5. Angel has a plethora of experience in the child welfare system and community engagement. Angel goes above and beyond to meet the needs of children and their families. Angel wants to see children/youth thrive to reach their highest potential. She works to ensure that all children have the resources they need to be successful in their foster/kinship care placements. This is accomplished through fund raising, attainment of physical item donations, and having a 'whatever it takes' attitude to ensure their needs are met. It doesn't matter if it is 2 am or 2pm, she is there to answer the call and jumps in with both feet to help a child and their families. So, yes, she has all the skills, but one thing you can't teach is heart. Angel's positive attitude, joyful nature, and willingness to serve others is what makes her uniquely qualified for this award. Angel, we are so grateful to have you as part of our team at Texas Family Care Network. You are truly deserving of this amazing honor.

### *Shari Pulliam*

Shari represents a joyful spirit that emotes a room when she enters. As the Senior Director of Community Engagement at Texas Family Care Network (TFCN), Shari is at the heart of the network. She works with provider agencies throughout Region 5 to ensure they are connected to the community and empowered to make positive impacts for the children and families we serve. She holds herself to a high standard and accepts excellence for our community. She is a relationship builder like no one I have ever met. She is so easy to talk with and once you hear her heart, you can't help but want to pull out your checkbook to donate or roll up your sleeves to help her with a project. Her passion for these kids runs in her blood and it is evident in every interaction you have with her. She recently led the Heart Galleries Launch Event in Beaumont Texas, and it was a showstopper. With the help of her daughter, Macey at Social Llama Events, the event was one to remember for years to come. Shari won't stop short of ensuring that every child has a safe and loving family to care for them and empower them for a successful tomorrow. Shari is truly one of a



kind and we are so grateful to have her leading Community Engagement for Texas Family Care Network. Congratulations Shari on a job well done!

## **Kinship Parents of the Year**

### *Brittaney Byerly*

Brittaney Byerly decided to come to Texas temporarily to assist her sister who was going through some personal struggles. After she arrived, the struggles worsened, and Ms. Byerly's five nieces and nephews were removed from their birth parents. Ms. Byerly was the only relative approved to take all the children, so she permanently relocated to Texas and moved into a two-bedroom apartment with all the children, who range in age from 1 to 11. Ms. Byerly gave one bedroom to her nieces and one bedroom to her nephews, and she slept on an air mattress in the living room. Shortly after moving into the apartment in Denton, TX, Ms. Byerly came to Arrow in the hopes of becoming licensed to foster. She was motivated to keep the children together and with the family.

### *Maricela Gurrola*

According to the American Psychological Association, the definition of resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands. This word and definition are embodied by kinship caregiver, Maricela Gurrola. On November 21, 2023, Ms. Gurrola's life was irrevocably changed when she witnessed the death of her beloved sister at the hands of her brother-in-law. Not only did she attempt life-saving measures, but she contacted law enforcement to safeguard herself and the children that were present in the home. Dallas County removed the children resulting in Ms. Gurrola advocating that her two nieces and nephew be placed with family. Unfortunately, the family member chosen by Dallas County was not able to provide the care and attention the children required after the trauma they experienced. Ms. Gurrola offered to be a permanent placement for the children and her three biological sons. She has worked with law enforcement, the U.S. Marshals and the FBI to bring justice for her sister while providing the utmost care, protectiveness, empathy, and understanding to the three additional children now placed in her care. Ms. Gurrola meets the children's mental health and educational needs. In every instance, she promptly scheduled appointments to ensure medical, dental, and psychotropic medications were met. She secured play and equine therapists for all three children and transported each child to every session. She has fought to have the children's educational needs met-making sure ARDs, and IEPs were completed and tailored to each child. Her kindness and sweet spirit while facing adversity continue to be inspiring, even to the most tenured of caseworkers. Ms. Gurrola has provided a haven and safe environment for these children to not only heal but thrive. SJRC Texas encourages you to consider Ms. Gurrola for her persistence, tenacity, and kindness as an incredible caregiver to Margarita, Izel, and "June Bug".

## *Beverly Morris*

I first met Beverly in 2018. I, along with others who were certified to babysit foster children supported Beverly as she began to take parenting classes. This was the early formation of an informal group dubbed "Team Beverly", a group of volunteers who wanted Beverly to succeed, and who walked alongside her reaching out to their churches and small groups along the way as she needed help. Beverly took in her 6 grandchildren, ranging from 3 to 10 years old. When she took in her grandchildren, she had to give up her job (working for Progressive Insurance), and although she has had sporadic work since (Nordstrom's, working for the City of Austin and Lennar Housing) it has been hard to sustain permanent full-time work to support the children. And it has been a constant struggle.

Beverly is one of the most gracious, kind, and faith-filled women I have ever known. She has against all odds kept this family of six children together even when the PCA Agreement monthly stipend no longer covered her rent. But the reason I want to nominate her this year is not because of all the herculean efforts she has made to keep a roof over these children's heads and food on the table, it is because she is an outspoken and tireless advocate of kinship grandparents. She has seen first-hand the toll it takes on families to rescue their family members from foster care and she does everything in her power to advocate for and bring attention to their plight. Not only has she been a keynote speaker (2023) for Fostering Hope's A Future and a Hope conference, but Beverly also participated in a panel discussion in this year's (3024) Future and a Hope conference. Beverly has been a member of the DFPS Kinship Collaboration Group that meets quarterly to ensure kinship families receive consistent information and resources and support across region 7. In this role, Beverly has been actively involved in collaborations with DFPS staff, kinship caregivers and other community organizations as they develop and implement training support programs for kinship caregivers to equip them with necessary skills and knowledge to care for children efficiently. This work also involves reviewing and refining policies related to kinship care to ensure they meet the needs of children and caregivers. Beverly is also an active member in several national organizations including Generations United and Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network that help grandparents and kinship families nationwide. Here in Texas, Beverly has been active as a member of the Child Protection Roundtable - a meeting held monthly with several organizations in Region 7. This is a consortium of more than 50 child welfare member organizations statewide. Members share a child-centered common vision and seek to leverage data, resources, and strategy to collaboratively build a better future for the children of Texas. Because of her passionate advocacy for kinship families, Beverly was invited to give testimony on House Bill 1287. Before this bill, passing the caps of the maximum value for the first vehicle had not been updated since 2001 (\$15,000) and the maximum value for a secondary vehicle was not updated since 1974 (\$4,650). Beverly testified to the punitive nature of these values. She was getting food stamps, but when her car died and she received a gift of a car from a church member, this has subsequently disqualified her for food stamps (which because of her six grandchildren totaled \$1,400 per month). Even though she has been out of work for over a year, she has not qualified for food stamps due to the value of her gifted car (big enough to fit all 6 children). House Bill 1287 provided a one-time inflationary update to the maximum values of a first vehicle (\$22,000) and additional



vehicles (\$8,700). When Beverly finished her testimony both the State Senator and Representative marveled that she did not use notes. In response, Beverly explained that this was her life and the life of so many kinship families. Beverly recognizes the need to educate State legislators about the impact of certain legislation and policies on the lives of kinship families. Many representatives are appointed to committees to make decisions on legislation where they have no personal experience of the impact of the legislation. It is imperative that advocates like Beverly ensure that they are making informed and educated decisions. Beverly has already indicated that she is ready to speak again in the 2025 legislative session to do whatever she can to support kinship families. More locally, here in Austin Beverly has participated in IMPACT 365 - OUR CITY - OUR WORLD by acting as the facilitator and organizer to find support/resources for 15 grandparents kinship families in the Austin area that are raising their grandchildren/kinship relatives. As part of this effort, she has organized monthly support meetings, sought educational input on trauma responsive parenting and takes every opportunity to speak in front of church groups educating them about the needs of these grandparents. Just this week she was able to advocate for and find transportation for a Kinship family that needed a car. Faith is front and center for Beverly. Raised as a minister's daughter, she saw the power of love, and the power of deep service. Her father never turned anyone away, even when he had no more food or money to share. His commitment to others profoundly impacted Beverly. It is why today her heart breaks for other grandparents raising grandchildren that have been forgotten by the State, despite all their highly visible pronouncements of supporting kinship placements. These grandparents don't have any tangible support. They don't have their own Team Beverly. It takes a village to raise children and Beverly is committed to finding villages for these grandparents. To do all this it takes humility to ask for help and a tremendous amount of courage. Courage and grace to reach out and create an extended family as she did for herself in Team Beverly and as she now does for other kinship grandparents. It takes even greater courage and grace to stay connected for the long haul, even when it gets hard, especially when it gets hard. That is not easy to do. For these reasons, particularly for her advocacy and support of other kinship grandparents, I am honored to nominate Beverly Morris for kinship parent of the year.

## *Wassela Ajaj*

Ms. Ajaj has gone above and beyond as a kinship parent while caring for her medically fragile nephew. She is an exemplary advocate for her nephew and our mission to transform lives, families, and communities. Ms. Ajaj has embraced the needs of her nephew, making every decision based on what is best for him. She has completed extensive training on his condition and care and handled every potential crisis with a calm focus to keep him safe. Ms. Ajaj has always been open to direction and education from medical professionals and made multiple changes to her home to improve her nephew's care and quality of life. This includes moving to a different apartment on her own accord to make it safer for him to maneuver around and easier for him to go outside their home. Ms. Ajaj has built a positive working relationship with every single one of her nephew's service providers, including doctors, nurses, therapists and medical supply companies. Her strong advocacy ensures that she has everything she needs to care for him and provide him with a good quality of life. Her choices for her own life are limited by the extensive care her nephew requires,

but she has taken everything in stride with a smile on her face. She loves her nephew without limitations and has dedicated her entire life to him. Despite his substantial needs and delays, she meets him where he is and is proud of every little step forward, he takes, no matter how big or small. As an agency, it has been a pleasure to work with Ms. Ajaj who is a wonderful representation of our beliefs and vision. She is a worthy nominee for Kinship Parent of the Year.

## **Foster Parents of the Year**

### *Michelle Melton*

Michelle Melton is a licensed Treatment Foster Care parent in the Houston area who has served as a dedicated foster parent to many children and a mentor to other foster parents. Ms. Melton advocates for each child she encounters in each aspect of their lives. She seeks out and utilizes resources to make sure each child in her care gets every opportunity to heal and grow.

### *Cori Moyer*

Cori Moyer is an experienced and amazing foster and adoptive parent. She previously adopted her daughter and currently has placement of seven-year-old, Taye, who has been with her since he was four days old. Taye had visits with both parents when he was an infant, but his mother's rights were terminated after a year, and the Department made plans to reunify Taye with his father and paternal grandmother. However, due to Taye's medical needs at the time, the Department was unable to reunify. Taye's father is developmentally delayed and struggles with understanding the CPS case. He currently has visits with Taye but does not always engage with him during visits. Ms. Moyer has done a beautiful job ensuring connection with Taye's biological family and trying to promote a healthy relationship. This case has been going on for seven years and Ms. Moyer doesn't waver in her support and care for Taye. She dedicates a lot of time and resources to advocating for his educational and medical needs. She ensures she's up to date on the latest training for behavioral health and is very good at balancing nurture and structure for Taye.

### *Kristina Marvin*

Ms. Marvin has been serving children in care with our agency for the last 15 years. Ms. Marvin serves our therapeutic level teenage boys. Ms. Marvin goes above and beyond looking for any resource that may help meet the need of the teen in her home. She is enrolling herself in both agency courses and outside agency courses to help understand and meet the need of the child and their diagnosis. She recently retired as a Sped. teacher to focus more on the teens in her home. She has provided guidance and mentorship to many of our foster parents and is held in very high regard at our agency. She truly understands the meaning of foster relationships and has been the pinnacle of our ACH value of "kids can't wait." She does not give up, no matter the circumstance. She will do whatever it takes to understand each child and how she can best meet their needs. Ms. Marvin is intentional with any decision she makes regarding the child in her home. We truly do need more foster parents with the care and compassion she portrays!

## *Danny "Bart" and Carolyn Poe*

The Poe family has been fostering children for over 5 years, and they have been fostering with the Children's Home of Lubbock for 4 years. The Poe family is servant-hearted and has fostered children of different ages ranging from infant to school-aged. For the last two years, the Poe family has had placement of a specialized child with unique developmental and medical needs. The Poe family works diligently to ensure this child in their care gets the best possible care- including traveling for medical appointments, attending multiple medical appointments per month, coordinating numerous developmental therapies per week, and seeking out all services that could benefit the child. Medical professionals and therapists on the child's team have stated that they are impressed with the child's progress over the last two years and the quality of care the child is receiving. This child has thrived in the Poe's home and is closely bonded to them. The Poe family is also very encouraging toward biological families. The Poe family has contact with almost all their previous placements and their biological families to provide continued encouragement and support. The Poe family is diligent about keeping up with requirements associated with being a therapeutic foster home, and they will even attend supplemental training to further their knowledge. The Poe family has also had an impact on the Children's Home of Lubbock by providing donations of beautiful hand-sewn blankets for other children in care, being willing to provide respite services to other families, and consistently having a positive and servant-hearted attitude. The mission statement of the Children's Home of Lubbock is "Manifesting Christ through excellence in childcare." The Poe family truly provides excellent care to the children in their home and exemplify Christ in all they do. The Poe family is a well-rounded and extraordinary family.

## *Berklee & Jeffrey Tidmore*

Berklee and Jeffery "Taylor" Tidmore go above and beyond to break the cycle of abuse by empowering children, families, and communities. They have been licensed foster parents with Upbring since July 2023. We are proud to serve alongside them while they provide foster care in their home. The Tidmore family are fierce advocates for their foster children and are consistently willing to do whatever it takes to provide the best possible care. Recently, the family was matched with a newborn baby boy who had already been through a great deal of trauma. The Tidmore family jumped as soon as the call ended and decided to offer care and cuddles, even while this little guy was still in the NICU. They knew that these early bonds and attachments would develop healthy neurological connections and produce positive and healthy improvements in this child's life. The Tidmore family cultivated positive relationships with nursing staff and medical specialists to ensure they could provide the best care for this child. They are very diligent in their documentation and communication with providers to meet this child's needs, both medically and developmentally. While both caregivers work full-time outside of the home, they ensure attendance at each therapy session so that they can learn the skills necessary to meet this child's needs and practice them in between sessions. The Tidmore family has created a healthy support network with their friends, family and church so that they can provide for a lasting foster parenting journey. They are realistic but positive about the foster care system and advocate firmly for the needs of their foster child. The Tidmore's are supportive of family contact and connection and ensure they send pictures and little gifts of mementos with family on visits. They offer to meet and

support relative placement options and connections when approved to do so. The Tidmore family completes timely and detailed documentation of incidents, medical appointments and monthly documentation but what sets them apart is their care for all people, their ability to meet others where they are at, and shine through adversity to be a champion for kids.

### *Mitchell and Emily Danesi*

Mitchell and Emily Danesi's have been foster parents for 6 years and have fostered 7 children. They have always had a heart for helping children and families in need, and they decided to pour that passion into fostering. They started discussions about fostering while they were engaged and decided to step into their foster care journey after careful consideration.

The Danesi's have provided a safe, stable and loving home to the children they have fostered over the years. Their biological children are welcoming and loving to the children that come into their home. Emily ensures all the children's medical, dental, and other appointments are kept up to date, as well as documentation and information that is needed for their CPA - Christian Homes and Family Services. Emily is flexible and easy to work with and does a great job of juggling all the administrative tasks that come with being a licensed foster home.

The Danesi's bring a positive attitude to any situation they face with fostering, and they genuinely enjoy in being able to serve in this capacity. They understand the goal of foster care is reunification. They show a tremendous amount of love, care, and support for the children in the home, and they extend that same love and support to the biological families. They do their best to support the biological families however they can. Recently, Emily testified in a final trial and spoke beautifully about her desire to adopt, however, she also shared that she wants nothing more than what is best for her foster child. The Danesi's recognizes the difficulties children face through when they are not able to be with their biological parents and families. Mitchell and Emily understand the importance of siblings maintaining a relationship and are willing to do whatever is needed to ensure their foster child can visit and contact their siblings. They have done an incredible job of showing patience and grace through the fostering process. They maintain their positive attitudes in the face of challenges, disappointment, and heartbreak, and they continue to inspire those around them.

### *Kenneth and Linda Green*

The Green family have been licensed foster parents with Lifeline Children and Family Services since 2010. They have fostered more than 70 children. The Green family is well known for taking in sibling groups to help maintain those sibling attachments and close bonds. They are extremely cooperative with all parties involved with each child's case. They maintain connections with foster youth that have left the home and have gone on to other placements, adopted or independent living. Each year several of the past clients return to visit the Green family and celebrate the holiday with them. The Green family is the epitome of love. They share their home, wisdom, traditions and ensure each child's needs are being met. The family is very active despite their age and continues to engage the children in activities of interest to them. The family participates in activities at home, in the community and active in their church. I nominate this family as I feel they are the epitome of what "family foster care " looks like. They support not only the child but directly and indirectly

support the parents of the children. The family continues to train, increase their knowledge and skills, and provide support and insight to new parents. Our agency is blessed to have such a wonderful couple that believes in our mission to serve children. They meet the expectations of "Touching a Life Changes a Destiny," coined by our Executive Director.

### *Arevalo Family*

Two years ago, the Arevalo's decided as a family they wanted to become a foster family. They wanted to help children in need within the foster care system who have little to no stability in their lives. As a previous foster child himself, Robert wanted to provide stability, comfort, and support for children who have faced abuse and neglect from their biological parents or family. Fueled by his own experience as a foster child along with his siblings, he knew this was something he wanted to pursue. With support from his wife and daughter, Arevalo's has been licensed with SJRC since 2022. Taking a role as a foster parent is not easy, one requires dedication, patience, selflessness, and sacrificial love. Foster parents like Robert and Sonia help SJRC Texas to successfully fulfill its mission by creating a supportive and nurturing environment for children through advocacy, innovation and the power of positive relationships. They understood the ins and outs of fostering and overcame many challenges and obstacles along the way. This family continuously demonstrates a true understanding of foster care and all the unpredictability that can come along the way. The Arevalo's provide positive mentorship to the children in their home and other foster parents. Additionally, they walk alongside other foster families in their community to provide respite care. They have done an amazing job advocating for children and working hard with all parties involved in each child's case for the best outcome. When foster children enter their homes, they treat them all equally providing unconditional stability, love, and support.

### *Heath and Sarah Ramsey*

Heath and Sarah Ramsey took placement of a newborn baby girl who tested positive for methamphetamines at birth. They worked with the Department to help locate her biological father and unify her back to him. They have since stayed in contact with him and the biological grandparents. They have built a relationship with the bio family and still help with babysitting and attending their family events. They took placement of a sibling set shortly after ensuring Bella was in a safe placement with her biological family. Sarah makes the bio parents' photo albums and sits and talks with them before and after visits to get information on the kids' likes and wants and such. Heath offered to pick up Mom to make sure she could get to court a couple of times. They have moved forward with adoption while ensuring bio mom can keep in contact as appropriate. They invite her to all major holiday events and birthdays.

### *Wesley and Daisy Gosdin*

Daisy and Wesley Gosdin opened their home for a 15-year-old girl named Kayli, who was a friend of their daughters and needed a safe place to live. Throughout her life, she had bounced around to different members of her family and was in and out of the system a few times. Kayli witnessed a lot of family violence and was not being cared for, because of this Kayli had made some not-good choices and was struggling with substance abuse. The day of Kayli's 15th birthday is the day her

life began to change as she entered Gosdin's home. They not only made her birthday special, but that was just the beginning. They took the time to sit on the couch with her and explain to her that she was valued and worthy of love and that she didn't need to put on all the fake eyelashes and non-modest clothing to get attention. Through Daisy's role modeling for her and taking the time to have these hard conversations they began to see Kayli's appearance change into more modest clothing, more smiles and laughs, and strong self-confidence and self-worth. She began to blossom into a wonderful young lady who now had a purpose in life and was driven to succeed. Kayli also remained sober for over a year now due to her environment change and realizing that she is wanted, valued and loved not by words but by actions. Kayli has succeeded through leaps and bounds while with the Gosdin's, not only with her personal struggles but also with her academics. The Gosdin's were able to get Kayli the help she needed with school so much that Kayli came home and was excited to take a STAAR test because she finally had what she needed. She has also had the opportunity to go on several Ag trips and was able to show a pig for the first time and get 2nd place. She has also obtained her permit and has her car. They continue to keep close contact with her grandparents who have also attended family functions of the Gosdin's. She is enrolled in dual credit courses and got accepted into the BELL program in Abilene where she will continue to volunteer in the community and learn proper etiquette. She is taking dual credit classes next semester. She spoke with Daisy at a foster event hosted by Hendrick Home for Children in May. She also volunteers all the time with Daisy for the American Cancer Society and recently raised over a grand for them by taking the initiative to go around selling raffle tickets at one of their events. They have never hesitated to rearrange their lives to ensure that Kayli feels welcomed and loved and has boundless opportunities. The day Kayli's parental rights were terminated, Kayli knew she had a strong support system as the courtroom was filled with people and even her principal from her high school came to show support. After the court hearing, I received these heartfelt words from Daisy, " We celebrate Kayli and continue to show her that we love her and will always love her, and when she feels it is time we build a relationship with her parents. We will never replace her biological parents, but we can show her a strong faithful family and support with a forever solid foundation and stability."

### *Ellen Bond and Travis Harsch*

Ellen Bond and Travis Harsch have been a licensed foster home with Helping Hand Home since 09/2018. Since becoming licensed, the couple has adopted two boys, one who recently graduated high school. Ellen and Travis are remarkable foster parents and continue to go over and beyond with all foster/adoptive children they have cared for. With their compassion, patience, and understanding, the couple creates a nurturing environment that fosters healing and trust. They empower children by allowing them to feel seen, heard, and loved. Ellen and Travis are not only intentional with all foster/adoptive children but also provide support and mentor other licensed families within our agency. We are grateful for all that they do for foster children and our agency.

### *Yolanda Washington*

Ms. Washington is a great representative of the Pathways motto of Transforming Lives, Families, and Communities. Ms. Washington's mission as a foster parent is to provide a home and enrich the



lives of children on the Autism Spectrum. Ms. Washington treats all her children in her home as family. She ensures that all children in her home can live as normal as life as much as possible by taking the children on family outings, to local parks, and to dining out at restaurants with her. Ms. Washington is a fierce advocate for all her children, and she is always pushing for quality-of-life improvements. Ms. Washington is active in the child's schooling and will advocate strongly for their success while in school, attending ARD meetings, and setting up emergency ARDs. Ms. Washington remains in constant communication with the school regarding behavioral issues, dietary concerns, and ensuring a child's overall well-being while in school. Children in Ms. Washington's home often have trouble with biting, kicking, spitting, and scratching. Not once has Ms. Washington complained about the children's behaviors or suggested discharging a child based on these types of behaviors. Instead, Ms. Washington will reach out to the child's therapists, PCP, and any other necessary service provider to request guidance on how best she can help meet their needs at that time. Ms. Washington studies, researches, and completes training beyond what she is required to do. She remains knowledgeable and up to date with the current Autism treatment and service options. Ms. Washington has been a foster parent with Pathways for over 10 years. She accepts the hard-to-place, cognitively impaired children and has had over 17 children come to her home during her tenure. Some of those children leave for their homes and then return when they fail to handle their disabilities. Ms. Washington has moved to a different home to ensure enough space was available to meet the needs of a child in her care. Ms. Washington maintains that she will always care for and be a firm advocate for these vulnerable children until she physically can no longer do it. She states that caring for these children is her life's work. Pathways Youth and Family Services could not be prouder to nominate Ms. Yolanda Washington for Foster Parent of the Year.

## **DFPS /HHSC Employee of the Year (CPS, PEI, CCL)**

### *Lisa Lopez, Residential Care Investigator II*

Foster parents that have assigned Lisa as the investigator for a case in their home have reported that she is very nice, friendly and feels comfortable speaking with her. Although she is in a regulatory role, foster parents have shared that her approach is friendly and inviting. This speaks to her ability to investigate yet recognize that this is still a family who is caring for children. This approach is conducive to having good communication, respect and overall admiration for the roles each person has while in the child welfare sector. In addition, our staff have had contact with Lisa face to face, phone and email and she is very dedicated, empathetic, responsible and efficient. She does a thorough job and can provide feedback and suggestions on her visits. She does a great job in helping break the cycle of child abuse and can empower children and families.

### *Heather Thorp, DFPS Division Administrator for the Family First Prevention Services Act*

Heather has been an instrumental part of bridging the collaborative work between DFPS and Belong as part of the Texas Family First Pilot. Not only is Heather an expert in her field, but her

positive attitude and ability to convey unbiased perspectives make her stand out as a valued and respected colleague. She is a breath of fresh air in a line of work that can be challenging and stressful. Heather is always a phone call away and is happy to talk out challenges and/or brainstorm solutions. Additionally, Heather is our agency's go-to for all things involving Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) Implementation. Heather always comes from a place of "yes" and can always be counted on to share information at meetings, convenings and conferences. SJRC Texas is grateful for our partnership with Heather and looks forward to our ongoing collaboration.

## **Community Organization Staff of the Year**

### *Nickol Gomez*

Nickol's tenure as our Family Support Services Manager with Respite Care of San Antonio spans more than a decade, embodying unwavering dedication and loyalty to the team and families of Respite Care. Nickol epitomizes compassion, commitment, excellence, and integrity in all her endeavors. Throughout her tenure, she has provided invaluable support to over three thousand parents navigating the challenges of caring for children with special needs and complex medical conditions. Nickol stands as a pillar of strength for families seeking assistance or resources, consistently going above and beyond to meet their needs.

### *Susan Molitor*

In October 1990, Susan Molitor arrived at Casa de Esperanza in Houston, Texas, to begin a nine-month volunteer service term caring for the children at Casa. She quickly fell in love with the children and the agency's mission. Her initial nine-month commitment extended into a three-year tenure. During her final two years as a volunteer, Susan helped pioneer the Family Based Care program, which provided crucial resources to infants and toddlers suffering from HIV. In 1994, after a much-needed break in her home state of Minnesota, Susan felt called to continue her mission. She returned to Texas as the Casa de Esperanza Volunteer Coordinator. Since then, Susan has held various roles within the organization, including community engagement, staff recruitment, training, supervision, personnel management, casework supervision, foster home development, supervision of the Community Foster Care program, and Director of Residential Programs. She has been instrumental in ensuring the agency's compliance with all Texas Residential Childcare Regulation standards and has developed and written policies and training manuals to meet Minimum Standard requirements. Susan has set the standard for nearly every position in service to our children, and her work is far from over. She serves as the Licensed Child Placing Administrator for Casa de Esperanza and is Director of Outreach and Compliance. As we celebrate her 34 years of service this month, we recognize the profound impact of her commitment to excellence. Ms. Molitor's lifelong dedication to children is a testament to her passion for improving their lives and those of everyone around her.

## *Connie Kelpen*

Through her exceptional dedication and contributions to Entrusted Houston as the Director of Operations for our warehouse, Connie has been a cornerstone in our mission to provide essential items to children and families working with CPS. Connie has been my partner in this work for several years, and her impact has been profound. Under her leadership, our reach has expanded from serving 100 kids a month to an incredible 500 kids in the past two years. This growth is a testament to her unwavering commitment, strategic vision, and tireless work ethic. Her role involves meticulous coordination and management of warehouse operations to ensure that the child receives the support they need. Connie goes above and beyond to guarantee that we generously provide for each child, ensuring that they receive not only the essentials but also the care and compassion that make a significant difference in their lives. Connie's dedication to our mission is reflected in every aspect of her work. She has fostered strong relationships with volunteers and partner organizations, creating a network of support that amplifies our impact. Her innovative approaches and problem-solving skills have streamlined our processes, allowing us to serve more children more efficiently. Connie's genuine care for the children and families we serve is evident. She takes the time to understand their unique needs and works tirelessly to meet them, often going above and beyond what is required. Her compassion, coupled with her professional acumen, makes her an invaluable asset to Entrusted Houston and a true champion for the children and families in our community. For these reasons and many more, I wholeheartedly recommend Connie Kelpen for this award. Her dedication, leadership, and heart for service embody the very essence of our mission at Entrusted Houston.

## *Carina Noldan*

As shared by the nominee: "I met Carina Noldan when I began working for Upbring. Carina works as Wendy's Wonderful Kids (part of the Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption) Adoption Recruiter, and throughout the three years I have known her, I have seen few people as dedicated and hardworking as her. Carina is an incredible support system, not only for the children on her caseload, but she is a supporting system to her colleagues. Carina always begins and ends her days with a smile and a positive attitude. What makes Carina unique is her ability to create trust with the children in her caseload, enabling her to make the greatest impact in these children's lives." As a WWK Recruiter since March 2021, she has seen 9 children achieve legal permanency. The typical referral for a WWK Recruiter is often a youth who is over the age of 7 and has spent a significant time in foster care and where general recruitment efforts to adopt have been unsuccessful. Carina takes each case seriously and spends countless hours reviewing the case file and identifying people in the child's network. Then working with the child, they develop a recruitment plan that will outline what child-specific efforts will take place to help them achieve permanency. In addition, Carina uses her expertise to help families prepare for adoption through the many family visits/sessions, training, and often just listening to them about the "what ifs?" Carina is a pillar in helping the many thousand children who are currently available for adoption, even if it's just one child at a time.

## *Laura Linhart-Kristner*

Ms. Linhart-Kistner is a volunteer board member of the Comal County Child Welfare Board (CWB). The Comal County Child Welfare Board started in 1981 to support the victims of child abuse and neglect, ensure the needs of Comal County children in foster care are met, and educate the local community regarding these issues. Since Ms. Linhart-Kistner's involvement with the Comal County CWB in 2021, she has demonstrated her passion and dedication to children and families in her local community. Through her work with the CWB, Ms. Linhart-Kistner has assisted in developing a plan to engage local funders to elevate how the CWB supports youth, families, caregivers and staff involved in the Child and Family Well-being System. This allowed the CWB to provide hope for youth in foster care around the holidays and during special occasions like birthdays. The holiday planning initiative with the CWB is led by Ms. Linhart-Kistner and supported by other board members. Her innovative ideas have allowed the community to take part in giving joy during the holiday season through a massive virtual Angel Tree Program that allows residents to sponsor youth for the holidays. This is a statement about what Community-Based Care looks like in the South Central and Hill Country Region. Ms. Linhart-Kistner's efforts do not stop here. Her latest project includes collaborating with other organizations in the community such as the McKenna Foundation and SJRC Texas to initiate the Comal County Child Welfare Coalition. This Coalition consists of local non-profit, faith-based, and government entities coming together to develop a strategic plan to address how the community can stand in the gap and be part of the solution to ensure Comal County is safe for all. The Comal County CWB and Ms. Linhart-Kistner's contributions have contributed to a rippling effect throughout the community where change continues to be made!

## *Denise Sowders*

Denise Sowders is not just the Executive Director of Alternatives in Motion, she lives and breathes for Alternatives In Motion and Abba's Kids. I have never seen someone as dedicated; I can't say a job because this isn't just a job for Denise, this is her life - that she is. She is also the loving mother to four adopted children and raising her four beautiful granddaughters. A few years ago, she had a desire to help foster kids and find permanent homes with forever families for them. That is when she opened her Bible and saw, "Abba" and realized at that moment that it would be Abba's Kids. Her husband wrote this about her recently and I couldn't say it any better than he does. Here is the thing about Denise Matthews Sowders. There is so much to her that nobody, not even me, her husband, gets to see all there is to her. I see my loving wife, mother and grandmother. Her friends see her as loyal and true. Her church sees her as a faithful member and teacher. And then there is AIM. She didn't start the agency, but she has fought hard to keep it going and broadened its vision with Abba's Kids. She works countless hours to make sure that AIM, although it is a small agency, has a big impact on birth moms, adoptive families, and most importantly the kids. Her love and dedication know no bounds! I cannot think of anyone more deserving of this honor than Denise.

## *Debra Zagala*

In the words of one of her team members "Ms. Debra is a great mentor, role model and a pillar in the Fort Bend Community". The Catholic Charities vision: People of Faith helping people in need

achieve self-sufficiency and live with dignity. Mrs. Zagala lives by this vision statement. She is well known and respected throughout the Fort Bend community. She started her career at Catholic Charities as a Case Manager where she also developed the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Program. Her passion and commitment to the children and grandchildren is amazing. This program has inspired children and adults to grow and overcome many obstacles. Debra grew the program in two years from 8 participants to more than 75 participants. The program is sponsored by many who heard of her work and was inspired to help grandparents who lived on a very limited income. The testimonials from children and adults help raise funds to keep the program operational. This is a statement from one of the Vice Presidents over Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese Gal-Hou Programs. Through the Family Assistance Program Debra Zagala motivates participants with a shared vision and enthusiasm. Her leadership style creates an environment of trust, respect and opportunities to grow and develop into thriving community members. One of her many accomplishments is working with other agencies and nonprofits to help as many families as possible. Debra advocates for families and children and her work is often spoken of in many circles. She does not stop until she has done what others thought was impossible. She is one of the most compassionate staff persons at Catholic Charities. Her work through all her programs contributes to a positive image for our agency. Catholic Charities is a prominent agency in Fort Bend because of the work that Debra is doing and encouraging her co-workers to do the same. She leads by example, and we are so proud to have her on this team. Please see the attached letter from a child in the program who says all this better than anyone else. Thank you for the opportunity to recognize someone who is so dedicated to helping others and making a difference in our community.

### *Donna Waller*

The post-adoption program began at Spaulding for Children with the initiative of Donna Waller and was supported through United Way start-up money in October 1988. With her passion for the program they (then Spaulding for Children, now Arms Wide) responded to the DFPS RFP in the spring of 1989. Post Adoption quickly demonstrated that Post Adoption was her "why". Her focus was and continues to be a continuum of services for children removed due to abuse and neglect whom no one else was serving and then working to keep these children from returning to DFPS custody. Donna began the development of post-adoption service by exploring services in the community for families, provided ongoing monthly training for therapists in the community to better understand adoption and how it is different from raising a birth child, and started a support group for adopted teens to talk about adoption-related issues. At the beginning of the program, there were no services like this in all of Houston. With the initial grant money, only Spaulding adoptive families were served. This was changed with the award of the DFPS Post Adoption contract in 1989. This allowed us to expand services to any child that had been in DFPS custody and their family and to have resources to help pay for much-needed services in Region 6. Donna developed a program that served Harris County and the surrounding 13 counties. This is the same program base today. She developed forms and established procedures for this new cutting-edge program. She found and contracted with therapists, respite providers, and day treatment programs that were willing to address adoption issues. She presented the program at nationwide

conferences such as NACAC and the Attach Conference. Over her tenure, she worked closely with statewide providers and DFPS to continue to improve and expand the program. Local services that were developed included therapeutic groups specifically addressing adoption and trauma issues, a Mother's group for adoptive moms, ongoing training for sub-contract providers (therapists) around adoption issues, family camps when grant money was secured, children's camps designed specifically for adopted children that provided one on one supervision due to the emotional struggles of the children, and the expansion of program coverage to include Region 11 post-adoption services and eventually the Post Permanency Program. This program mirrors the post-adoption program but expands services to cover families formed through kinship and fictive kin PMC placements where DFPS was involved (except for allowing residential treatment services to be covered). Donna has influenced and shaped the direct support that families receive post-adoption services, and the influence continues throughout Arms Wide and other similar programs. She remains a strong advocate for children and families today.

### *Kenneth Collier*

The reasons for nominating Mr. Ken for this award are straightforward yet profound. As a leader and visionary at Trels, he not only spearheads our initiatives but also actively engages with the children directly on the floor. His unique ability to connect with each child on a personal level, understanding their individual needs and circumstances, is truly remarkable. Furthermore, Mr. Ken's effectiveness extends to his interactions with the staff, where he fosters a supportive and inclusive environment. Mr. Ken embodies the principles of TBRI (Trust-Based Relational Intervention) and champions a holistic and therapeutic approach in all his interactions. His leadership style is exemplary; he leads by example, consistently demonstrating compassion and commitment. His genuine care and support for everyone in our community make him not just a leader, but a pillar of support and guidance. To have someone like Mr. Ken, who dedicates himself wholeheartedly to the well-being and growth of both the children and staff, is rare and invaluable. He is not only the best at what he does but also richly deserving of every accolade. In my view, Mr. Ken stands out as a leader whose contributions are invaluable, making him a deserving recipient of this prestigious award.

## **General Residential Operations Staff of the Year**

### *Kenneth Collier, Founder*

First Nomination: The reasons for nominating Mr. Ken for this award are straightforward yet profound. As a leader and visionary at Trels, he not only spearheads our initiatives but also actively engages with the children directly on the floor. His unique ability to connect with each child on a personal level, understanding their individual needs and circumstances, is truly remarkable. Furthermore, Mr. Ken's effectiveness extends to his interactions with the staff, where he fosters a supportive and inclusive environment.

Second Nomination: We had a very high-acuity youth that TRELs accepted for placement. Prior to going to TRELs, the youth was in and out of psychiatric hospitals and multiple RTCs. This youth



needed a Partial Hospitalization Program through Houston Behavioral Psychiatric Hospital, and TRELs partnered with SJRC Texas to ensure that she got to and from her program every day for 8 weeks. TRELs also ensured that she got her schoolwork completed so she didn't get behind and provided family therapy during this time to support her permanency goal of returning to a kinship caregiver. With the support of TRELs, this young lady made huge strides and transitioned back to her kinship caregiver and achieved permanency. Her success would not have been possible without the support of TRELs. TRELs always goes above and beyond to ensure the safety and well-being of our youth, and for this we are grateful.

### *John Sigle, President and CEO*

The staff of Texas Girls and Boys Ranch would like to nominate our fearless leader, agency president, and CEO, John Sigle. After a 20-year career in the United States Air Force, John began his second career in residential childcare in 1995. In 2002, he began his adventure in leading what was then known as Texas Boys Ranch. We use the term "adventure" to describe John's career, as it has been a journey. There have been times that I felt unsure, or even negative, and of course, there were the COVID years! No matter if it was a confident year or a less optimistic time, John stayed steady and demonstrated what a true leader in this field looks like. During the last 22 years, John has helped the ranch to serve over 1500 children through our residential programs.

### *Anna Fisher - Ayanti RTC*

This company has helped so many young girls, changed their lives for the better. They love their girls with no shame and embrace them from the very first time they enter the facility. Their motto is simple. When you give a child a safe place to heal in, they will Thrive! The Behavior Technicians are Trained and operate in Trauma Informed Care. This company has demonstrated nothing short of amazing when it comes to the queens of Ayanti. They have consistently reduced the numbers of AWOLs and psychiatric hospital admissions. The Facility has a significant number of Successful discharges, this includes working on their individual service plans and completion of the program. They have consistently delivered child centered care at the highest standard. Ayanti does not only help and support the residents of the facility but their staff as well, this includes, continuous support and trainings, to ensure that their staff has the professional development and skills they need to succeed, not only in their current position but also in their future career endeavors.

### *Bernard Hewitt, Program Director*

Bernard takes the initiative to provide exceptional support and service to all residents and staff. He discerns quickly to assess individual needs and he moves efficiently to provide the direction always needed. Beyond this and during the most critical times, Bernard is a poignant ambassador for Hidden Cove RTC, and he reflects nothing except excellence in his day to day. These are the things that Hidden Cove stands for and strives to represent in the community. Hidden Cove was established in Texas in 2018 to be an agent of change to protect children through innovative, evidence-based practices with a trauma-informed care approach, highly effective and engaged employees, and community partnerships.

## *Taylor Halsey, Senior Caseworker*

Taylor is a Sr. Caseworker at Cal Farley's Boys Ranch who works diligently to incorporate her ongoing learning and experience into her care for the youth and families on her caseload. She consistently goes above and beyond in her pursuit of improving the trajectory of every child she encounters. Taylor embraces the struggle of helping youth in our care form better relationships with their family. She does this through individual talks with the youth and the family, through regular conference calls, through Zoom calls, and through working with the childcare team to develop meaningful interventions to address the underlying issues causing the disruption in the relationship. Taylor is also directly involved in providing regulation walks for the youth on her caseload, processing difficult discussions, attending their sporting events or school activities, and sponsoring all-night senior parties. She is very intentional in what she does and does not simply wait for things to happen and then react. Her efforts have led to meaningful growth, repair, and healing for many youths and their families. Taylor can always be counted on to have a good attitude and to represent herself, her team and the organization with the utmost professionalism and care.

## *Nikki Relford, CEO and Speaker*

Nikki Relford is a successful business owner of over 15 years, in addition to being a motivational speaker, business coach, and author. She is the Founder of Once Upon A Dream, a nonprofit childcare center for teen parents, owner of Niklem Kids Academy, Executive Director of Aspire 2 Dream; a residential operation for foster kids, and owner & creator of Aspire Doll Collection, a motivational doll and children's book company. She has devoted her life to helping children and families in need. She is motivated to continue working with children with disabilities and helping parents to deal with challenging behaviors. Nikki utilizes hands-on skills she has learned over the years from working with her own twin boys who have Pervasive Developmental Disorder. Nikki uses real-life situations from childhood trauma to working hands-on with children. Nikki also leads Aim to Achieve Ranch, an emergency shelter in Beaumont, Texas, which has proven to be a key part of the success of community-based care. Nikki is regarded as a vital community member who supports keeping children and youth close to home. According to her local SSCC (Texas Family Care Network), "Nikki is a true beacon and inspiration for our provider network. Her approach with our children and youth is truly monumental and sets a new standard for working with youth with high acuity needs." This is why the Texas Family Care Network nominates Nikki for Provider of the Year! Nikki lives in Beaumont, Texas with her husband Lemuel and 7 children. They love taking family trips, community outreach and entertaining family. The Relford's have a passion for cooking and serving others.

## *Azul Guinn, Case Manager*

Azul's contributions to Respite Care of San Antonio's mission are immeasurable. She embodies our core values of compassion, commitment, and excellence in every aspect of her work. By providing unwavering support to children in need, regardless of the time or circumstances, she ensures that our agency's mission of providing a safe and nurturing environment is upheld.

What truly sets Azul apart is her extraordinary commitment to excellence. She not only meets the basic needs of the children under her care but goes above and beyond to ensure they feel valued and heard. Her willingness to work tirelessly, even during evenings and weekends, to train caregivers and teachers on emergency behavior interventions demonstrates her dedication to continuous improvement and ensuring the highest standards of care for our children.

Azul's impact on our agency cannot be overstated. Her tireless efforts not only provided to comfort and stabilize over 90 children but has also inspired those around her to strive for excellence.

Azul's exceptional performance has had a profound impact on Respite Care of San Antonio, Inc, ensuring that our mission is fulfilled to the highest standards. Her unwavering dedication, compassion, and advocacy make her more than deserving of recognition as the General Residential Operations Staff for the TACFS award.

## **Community Partner of the Year**

### *Westside Community Center, New Braunfels*

The community collaborator that comes to mind that I would love to highlight is our Westside Community Center Partner, Jennifer Hernandez. Jennifer and her team for the past 4 years have been incredibly amazing and helpful when it comes collaborating for our community events, and fatherhood initiative. Jennifer has always offered space for programming in her facility and shares about programming to community members to try and connect them to resources they may need in the community to best serve their family. She's always reaching out to ask how she can support us and is willing to do all that she can to help the families we serve with any resource she offers at WCC. They truly do go above and beyond in their partnership and service delivery.

### *Trels Home for Children*

The reasons for nominating Mr. Ken for this award are straightforward yet profound. As a leader and visionary at Trels, he not only spearheads our initiatives but also actively engages with the children directly on the floor. His unique ability to connect with each child on a personal level, understanding their individual needs and circumstances, is truly remarkable. Furthermore, Mr. Ken's effectiveness extends to his interactions with the staff, where he fosters a supportive and inclusive environment. Mr. Ken embodies the principles of TBRI (Trust-Based Relational Intervention) and champions a holistic and therapeutic approach in all his interactions. His leadership style is exemplary; he leads by example, consistently demonstrating compassion and commitment. His genuine care and support for everyone in our community make him not just a leader, but a pillar of support and guidance. To have someone like Mr. Ken, who dedicates himself wholeheartedly to the well-being and growth of both the children and staff, is rare and invaluable. He is not only the best at what he does but also richly deserving of every accolade. In my view, Mr.

Ken stands out as a leader whose contributions are invaluable, making him a deserving recipient of this prestigious award.

## *Therapy 2000*

Therapy 2000 has gone above and beyond to support the mission of Upbring to break the cycle of child abuse by empowering children and families. I am working with a little one that needed greater support through developmental therapies than her very experienced foster parent could provide. This young child was referred to Therapy 2000 for an assessment of feeding, physical and occupational therapies. Therapy 2000 worked diligently and swiftly to ensure evaluations were scheduled with foster mom and subsequent therapies began almost immediately. The therapists have repeatedly been able to provide foster moms with a variety of things to work on and practice with the young child, new ways to look at things, productive changes to improve the quality of this child's life! Therapy 2000 was initially unable to offer in person physical therapy but worked hard to hire in our very rural area so this child's needs could be met as soon as possible. The therapists have been amazing to work with. They are receptive to the feedback and comments from foster moms about the child's needs. They are trauma informed and execute great skill in their specialties. I am most impressed by the provider's willingness to participate in parent child visits at the CPS office to ensure that all caregivers, parents included, can learn the skills and techniques to care for this child. Each of the therapists has made a point to support dad during these visits so that reunification can be as viable an option as possible. The therapists have created a positive and lasting relationship with this child's family to ensure transition home goes as smoothly as possible but is also a safe transition. Coordination of visitation participation has been taxing, but each therapist made it happen weekly. Therapy 2000 staff also maintain a stellar link of communication to this child's primary care physician and her specialists. This is even more remarkable due to the rural area where we are making communication key. Therapy 2000 makes providing lasting efforts to break the cycle of abuse in the panhandle of Texas possible. They are committed to positive and lasting outcomes for kids and for their families.

## *Rising Sons Boys Ranch*

Pastor Billy Pate is married to April Pate, and they have 3 children together. They have served full time in ministry for the past 24 years and are currently Lead Pastors of The River Assembly of God in Burkburnett, Texas. Billy and April have worked to create a space for children who are aging out of foster care. Their vision is to ensure the children who are aging out of care become contributing and benefiting members of a forever family. They hope to inspire families to consider supporting children who are experiencing the child welfare system. They work to build a community of people focused on advocating for foster children, especially those who are facing exiting foster care without a forever family to support them in their transition to adulthood. Together, they developed Rising Sons Boys Ranch. The vision on Rising Sons Boys ranch is to change the stark reality facing thousands of children in America. When a child turns 18 without being adopted or connected to a family unit, they face a future without roots. When children exit care without a support system in place results can be devastating. Those children could be faced with homelessness, imprisonment, human trafficking or even death. They believe that every child deserves a place to call home, and

every child deserves a forever family and support system. Their goal is to provide a safe, healthy and loving environment for youth in foster. They work to create an environment on the ranch where children can grow, develop and discover hope for their future. Their mission is to:

1. Provide a Forever Home for Boys who are currently in the Foster Care System.
2. Connect Children Currently in Foster Care with Healthy, Loving Homes who desire to be their Forever family.
3. Assist Foster Families in Moving Forward with Adoption.
4. Establish, Encourage, and Maintain a Village of Support for the Foster Community.

Their vision is every child deserves a family forever and they are committed to building a community that provides for and supports children in foster care. Their core values are courage, confidence, community, character, commitment and competence. Instilling those skills in foster youth will better equip them as they step into their future endeavors when they exit the child welfare system.

In addition to the ranch, they provide an after-school program designed to equip boys by providing life skills, life lessons, and experience as they work on the farm. Rising Sons has help provide training to new foster families and individuals who provide respite care. They have helped place over 15 children in homes, many of which are on the road to adoption.

The Pate's are committed to being a forever family and providing the roots, support, resources, and heritage needed to be set up for success.

## *Foster 325*

Foster325 is a wonderful non-profit in Abilene, TX, focused on gathering and equipping local churches and communities to get involved in foster care. The organization has a vision to ensure there are loving, stable homes for every foster child in the Big Country area. They officially launched in February 2022. This non-profit has branched out from Beltway Park Baptist Church's Foster and Adoptive Ministry to support any foster family within the 325-area code. Beltway recognized that they were starting to have families leave their home churches and join Beltway for foster parent support. Beltway did not have the goal of gaining new church membership but wanted foster families to be supported by their church and community. Therefore, under the leadership and guidance of Jeannette McQueen the idea of Foster325 was launched.

Jeannette McQueen is the wife of Senior Pastor David McQueen. Through no formal training but truly life experiences Jeannette has become a local child welfare guru. She and her husband adopted from foster care several years ago. She has learned about services and lack thereof within the Big Country. Beltway Baptist Church has created a 2030 Vision and one of the goals within this plan is to address the needs of the poor and underprivileged. One of the strategies within this goal is to ensure that there are loving and stable homes for every kid who needs it by partnering with and equipping other local churches to meet every foster care need in our community. This is the true idea of Foster 325.

Through Jeannette's adoption journey, she also recognized a lack of counseling services for children and teens. So, a second goal of the above strategy was to provide Christ-centered counseling services for children and teens. In 2024, Beltway opened the Beltway Ministry Center, which consists of onsite children/youth counseling and daycare services. The Beltway has created space for any child in foster care and seeks to fill that immediate need for any foster parent.

Jeannette is such an advocate for foster families and, as mentioned, her own lived experiences. Jeannette decided to write a children's book titled "They Called Him Bucky: A Children's Storybook about a Frightened, neglected horse learning to trust again". This book tells a beautiful story of how Bucky learned to trust again and is a tool to help foster/adoptive parents discuss hard subjects such as strength, courage, identity, attachment, and the value of helping others. The illustrator of this children's book is Dr. Nancy Capra who is also a local volunteer for Big Country CASA.

Foster325 continues to grow and advocate for the needs of local foster homes. They have created citywide babysitting training so that anyone from the churches can get the necessary training and provide this support to foster families. Foster325 also has resources for pastors to utilize as they start to preach about fostering and get the church ready to be a partner church. This local non-profit organization is a huge support to 2INGage and we are so thankful to partner with them.

### *One Hope for Kids (New Braunfels Foster Closet)*

In recognition of their remarkable journey and invaluable contribution to the community, SJRC Texas would like to nominate One Hope for Kids, specifically the New Braunfels Foster Closet, for the TACFS Community Partner of the Year Award. Originating from the Ladies Grange in 2019, One Hope for Kids took a visionary step forward, recognizing a profound need in the rural landscape to support foster and kinship families opening their hearts and homes to children in need. Since its inception, the New Braunfels Foster Closet has been a beacon of hope and practical assistance for families navigating the complexities of foster care. Serving over 500 families from January to May 2024 alone, they have provided essential resources ranging from beds and car seats to clothing and emotional support. Their commitment extends beyond mere provision, fostering a sense of community and belonging among foster, kinship, and adoptive families. Their annual back-to-school event, offering free clothing and haircuts, underscores their dedication to the holistic well-being of every child in the child welfare system. The relationship cultivated by the staff at the New Braunfels Foster Closet is characterized by empathy, understanding, and a genuine desire to nurture not just the children but the entire family unit. One Hope for Kids, through the New Braunfels Foster Closet, exemplifies the transformative power of compassion and community. Their tireless efforts have not only filled a crucial gap in support but have also sown seeds of hope and resilience in the hearts of countless families. It is our sincere belief that their unwavering dedication merits the highest recognition and recommendation.

### *The Fostering Collective*

4Kids4Families is nominating The Fostering Collective for the Community Partner Award presented by the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services (TACFS). As the Community Relations Director for 4Kids4Families in Texas Region 4, I have witnessed firsthand the profound impact The Fostering



Collective has had on our agency's mission and the broader community we serve. The Fostering Collective has been instrumental in advancing our (4Kids4Families) mission of Helping Kids & Strengthening Families through their innovative approaches and tireless advocacy. By fostering meaningful partnerships with local stakeholders and leveraging community resources, The Fostering Collective has facilitated access to crucial services and support systems that empower foster parents, biological families, and, most importantly, the children in our care. Although The Fostering Collective serves only Smith County and surrounding counties, eight out of the 23 counties in Region 4, they work tirelessly to collaborate with other partners to meet needs region-wide. Their collaborative approach has streamlined processes, improved communication channels, and fostered a culture of mutual respect and support among all stakeholders. Additionally, they have been pivotal in preparing the region to adopt our new fostering model, Community-Based Care. Their efforts have laid a strong foundation for the transition between DFPS and 4Kids4Families, ensuring that all involved parties are well-equipped to embrace this change. The Fostering Collective also provides practical support through initiatives like the Collective Closet, a community closet stocked with clothing, toiletry items, diapers, car seats, cribs, and more to meet the needs of foster, adoptive, and kinship families. Their Family Resource Center offers families access to technology and a wealth of community resources, further empowering them to thrive. They have established four distinct programs—the Mom Collective, Dad Collective, Family Collective, and Agency Collective—that focus on different support groups in several counties. These groups meet once a month to connect, empower, educate, and address fear-based behaviors, providing crucial support to all family members.

Through 4Kids4Families, The Fostering Collective has been awarded the East Texas Heart Galleries for Region 4. They will lead these efforts by establishing a website, broadcasting stories, hosting galleries, and educating the community about children ready to find their forever families. Moreover, they host a variety of events, such as the Back to School Bash for Smith and surrounding counties, which significantly benefit the community and foster a sense of togetherness and support. They also lead events that align with National Adoption Month, Child Abuse Prevention Month, National Foster Care Month, and others, raising awareness and providing essential resources and support during these critical times. One of their most impactful initiatives is their annual foster family recruitment campaign, "Be The Light." The Fostering Collective gathers all agencies and hosts recruitment events through strategic planning and collaboration. They begin by engaging with local churches and having pastors teach about the mission, creating a strong foundation of community support and awareness. This campaign has been instrumental in recruiting new foster families and ensuring that more children find safe and loving homes. In conclusion, The Fostering Collective exemplifies the highest standards of community partnership and service excellence. I wholeheartedly nominate The Fostering Collective for this prestigious award and am confident that their continued leadership will inspire others to join us in our collective efforts to build a brighter future for every child in Texas Region 4.

## Program Team

While much has changed in Christ's Haven's 70 years, the organization has stayed true to providing a family model of care for displaced youth, believing that every child deserves typical childhood experiences and nurturing caretakers in a consistent home environment.

Seeing the increased demand to support families in need, Christ's Haven Program Team has been able to serve a unique population of families who often don't have available resources. Just a few of the examples of families who have partnered with Christ's Haven with voluntary placement in our neighborhood of homes include:

- A parent who needs a place for their children while they find housing and employment
- A parent with a CPS Safety Plan who needs time to focus on maintaining sobriety, improved mental health, or leaving a domestic violence relationship
- An aging grandparent who is unable to care for an older teenager who would otherwise age out of foster care
- A parent of a sibling group of 3, 4, or 5 siblings who needs help with their children but doesn't want them separated from each other

The Christ's Haven Program Team has continued to adapt to best serve the needs of youth. As a trauma-informed organization, the team has stayed up to date on the latest understanding of the impact of trauma on children. In 2023, staff completed 675 training hours, including evidence-based, TBRI (Trust-Based Relational Intervention), the trauma-based intervention that understands the complex needs of youth from vulnerable places. Since 2020, there has been a 38% increase in the intake of calls. While staying laser-focused on the organization's core values of Normalcy, Dignity, & Hope, Christ's Haven's Program Team has been able to meet an increased demand in services by growing the direct care program maintaining a 95-98% capacity. While a child lives at Christ's Haven, whether it is a few months or years, Christ's Haven Program staff use that time to support the child and their family in ways that will benefit their local community for years to come. Their approach includes caring for the whole child, which means more than just food & shelter but also making sure a child's physical, emotional, academic, and spiritual needs are met. When youth have experienced trauma, it impacts all aspects of their lives. Christ's Haven supports displaced youth who have typically had instability in their caregiving, education, and developmental needs. Caregivers who are experiencing poverty or trauma don't always have the capacity, bandwidth, or resources to provide educational support.

Recent education outcomes:

- Christ's Haven youth missed an average of 7 days of school, compared to foster youth who missed an average of 25 days. Christ's Haven's average school attendance rate is 96%.
- 80% of school-age Christ's Haven youth receive tutoring, totaling close to 400 hours of individual and peer tutoring.
- 70% of Christ's Haven high schoolers who took the STAAR test improved at least one of their ratings.
- 100% of high schoolers at Christ's Haven have a 2.5 GPA or higher.

Christ's Haven also puts a great deal of focus and resources around ensuring older teenagers or young adults are prepared for life after living at Christ's Haven. Part of that includes surrounding youth with a network of support both at Christ's Haven and in our community. Relational permanency, rather than just legal permanency, is gaining traction after the results of a study of long-term outcomes for youth who transition out of the state foster care system. The Texas Youth Permanency Study (TYPs), published by the Texas Institute for Child & Family Wellbeing at the University of Texas at Austin, recommendations were, "The foster care system must redefine success around child wellbeing, specifically three interdependent factors: strong relationships with adults, a sense of normalcy and crucial life skills." This study underscores the importance of Christ's Haven's core values of Normalcy, Dignity, and Hope. Ensuring that the children and families have trusted adults in their lives through houseparent's, mentors, and community volunteers is critical to every aspect of Christ's Haven's programs. As part of Christ's Haven's Program Team's regular check-ins with teens & young adults at Christ's Haven using the Casey Life Skills Assessment, we asked "Do you have a trusted adult you can call in crisis?" Of the young adults in the Supervised Independent Living Program at Christ's Haven, 90% answered yes, and 10% answered mostly yes. We believe that is a critical aspect to relational permanency. With an individual case management approach, the Christ's Haven Program Team can assess gaps young adults may have with various life skills and address them with increased resources or training. Christ's Haven is committed to relational permanency for all the youth served. We believe in surrounding them with strong and stable relationships that will follow them beyond their time at Christ's Haven.