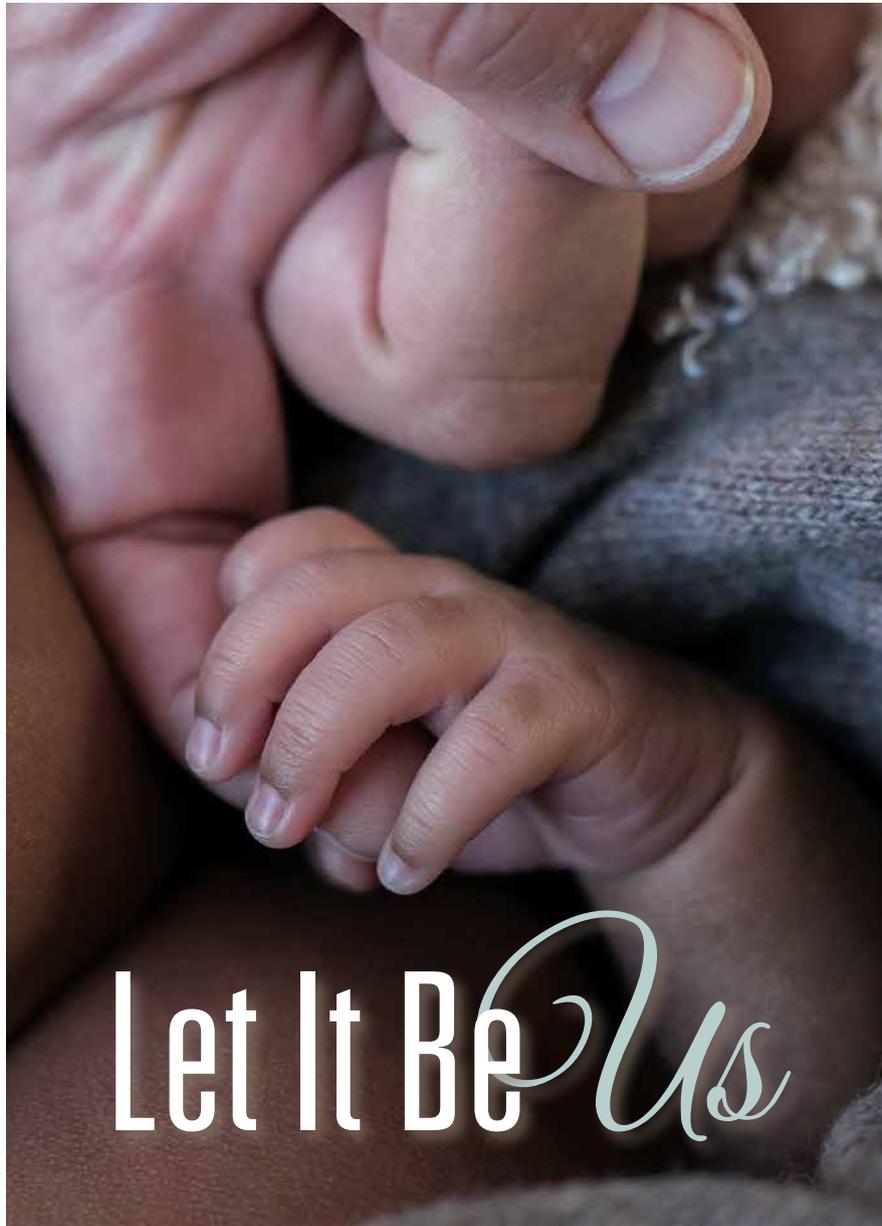




Tracy Hauschild, Susan McConnell, and Kheari McAndrews greet a baby that recently found a foster mother who has plans to follow through with adoption.

PRODUCED BY LISA STAMOS /// STORY BY SUSAN MCCONNELL  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LINDA BARRETT



Susan McConnell has been a friend to so many in our community, and especially to Quintessential Barrington magazine. From its beginning, she was our first and longest-serving on-location photographer. She helped us set high standards for fine art photography. One of her photography projects many years ago was that of helping create the Heart Gallery of Illinois, a way to focus in media on children who were available for adoption. That project planted a seed, one that years later has grown into a huge, but attainable, vision—to find Illinois children who have no home, a forever family. What could be more important? We asked the founder of Let It Be Us to share her story, some facts, and hope for the future. -Lisa Stamos



These beautiful children, Kheari McAndrews and Tracy Haufschild, were adopted into Barrington families.

I'VE BEEN WORKING on a big problem for a long time now. It led me to start Let It Be Us.

In Illinois we have 18,000 children in foster care and that amount has grown by 1,000 children per year for the last four years. So, I assume it will continue to grow. Historic statistics tell us that in any given year 54 percent of those children will never return home. As sad as that is, it's a fabulous opportunity for parents who want to adopt and it's a fabulous opportunity for these children to join families through adoption. It's the best possible outcome, compared to what their lives will be if they grow up in foster care and age-out without being given the chance for the lifelong support system of a family.

What happens if a child grows up in and ages-out of foster care? According to the University of Chicago's research and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Service's research, if a child grows up in foster care in the Midwest, the statistics are stark. In terms of education, only 37 percent will graduate from high school, and a meager 3 percent will graduate from college. Compared with a town like ours, the loss of opportunity from the lack of education alone is incalculable. A study done by Northeastern University concluded that the lifetime cost to a state of a child who drops out of high school is \$292,000. If you multiply that number across this underserved population, the costs are staggering. You could argue that the opportunity costs are even higher.

More grim statistics from the University of Chicago indicate that 45 percent

of the girls will be pregnant by age 19, and a huge percentage of the boys will end up in the privatized Illinois prison system. The majority then will ultimately experience homelessness. From the lack of productivity, to the strain on our healthcare system, to the expanding prison population, the citizens of the State of Illinois are picking up the tab. Sadly, this financial strain, and the human loss, goes on for generations to come.

#### THE VALUE OF ADOPTION

Now let's look at what happens to that child if he or she is adopted. According to my personal research along with research by the National Center for Educational Statistics, if that child is adopted into a safe and functional family, rather than growing up in foster care, he or she looks forward to this: 92 percent will graduate from high school, 46 percent will graduate from college, the majority of the girls will not become pregnant because they are given access to high-quality and consistent birth control, and the majority of the boys will not end up in the privatized Illinois prison system. These are the rewards of a stable and nurturing environment—the kind that comes along with being part of a family.

#### A COMMON-SENSE SOLUTION

This is a gigantic math problem that's hard to quantify, but it can be solved with common sense. What I believe in is simple: we should invest in adoption for the children that will never return home, rather than investing in their growing up in and aging out of foster care.

In short, the child who is adopted becomes the beneficiary of an investment made in them by their adoptive families; their new parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, siblings, as well as their communities. They graduate from high school. They have an opportunity to graduate from college. They have successful careers. They have children when they are supposed to. They have very nice lives. They reinvest in society.

First and foremost, I'm a mother. I'm a mother through birth and I'm a mother by adoption. I'm also a mother of the Heart Gallery of Illinois, being one of its founders by bringing it to life. The Heart Gallery of Illinois is a photograph-and-story exhibit of children awaiting adoption. It's a tool that significantly increases a child's chance of adoption (some statistics indicate it improves those chances by 10 times!) and every state has one. I was on the team that founded the Heart Gallery of Illinois in 2005 and now, with my team at Let It Be Us, curate it, and publish it on our Let It Be Us website ([www.LetItBeUs.org](http://www.LetItBeUs.org)). We manage this for the State of Illinois and for the children it serves. This is an enormous sense of pride for me because I know, and it's been proven, that the Heart Gallery of Illinois, simply put, gets kids adopted.

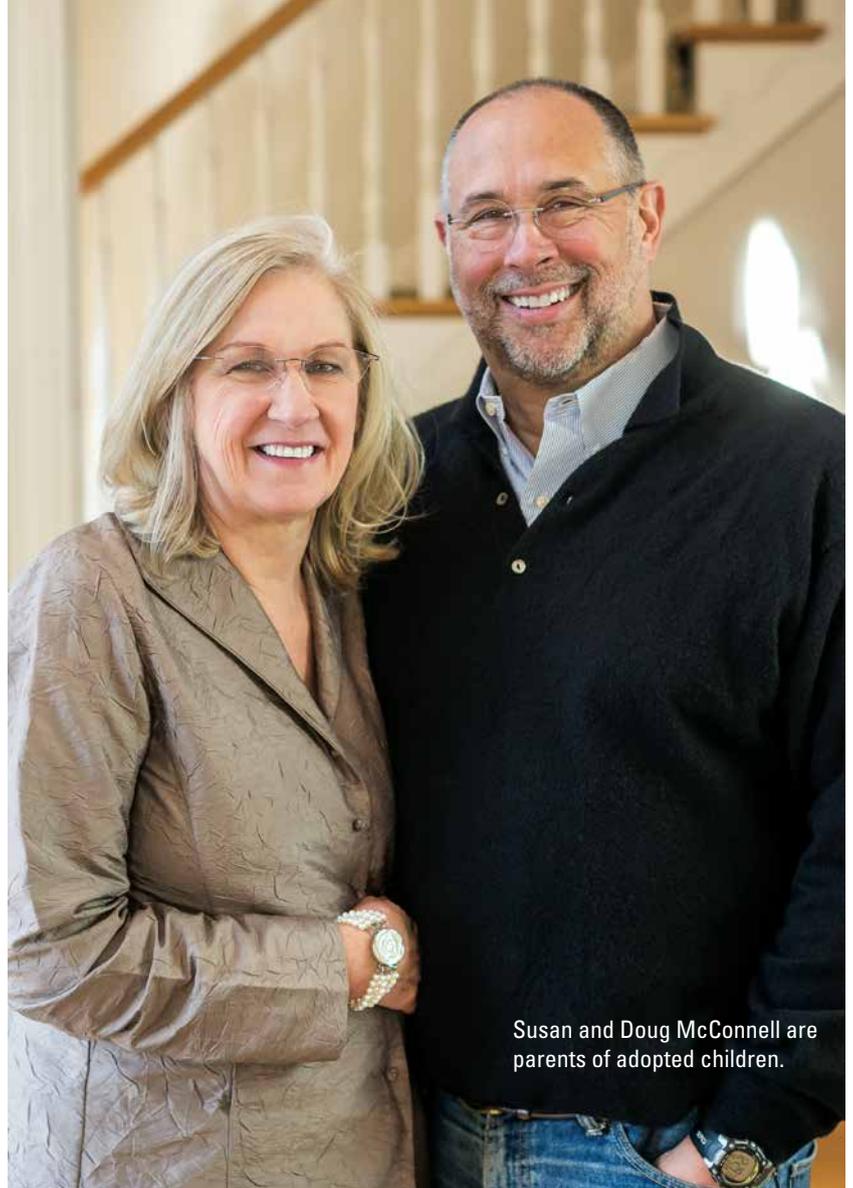
This is a rescue, after all, which begins when the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services removes a child from a world of abandonment, abuse, or neglect. My view is that the rescue isn't complete until the children—those who will never return home—are adopted into families who provide them a safe harbor and a lifelong support system so that they can flourish and become all they are supposed to.

Together, with my team at Let It Be Us, we've designed programs that invest our resources in providing adoption opportunities for these children. Together, we've decided to invest in their future and we've provided the platform for others to invest in them, too.

Won't you join us? This is a problem we can solve, and Let It Be Us has started a journey that is working to help home-less children find their forever home. There are many ways to support us, including coming to our February 22, 2019 fundraiser, being a sponsor, or donating. 

### Special Thanks to Barrington

I see Barrington as a nonprofit incubator and Let It Be Us has been fortunate to start and grow here. A big thank you goes out to our Board of Directors (Bob Noonan, Doug Locke, Rick Smith, Elizabeth Felice, Susan Stoga, Kerry Miller, and Nadiya Ali) who primarily are all from the Barrington area, Jennifer McAndrews, our original Board Chair, the Barrington Area Community Foundation, the Barrington Area Development Council, the Barrington Area Chamber of Commerce, Barrington's White House who granted us office space, Bob Lee, Amy Bash, Peter Yankala, Dee Beaubien, Tom Burns, Zina Jacque, Rita Canning and the Canning Foundation, Vince Foglia and the Foglia Foundation; and Lisa Stamos and Quintessential Barrington for continued coverage and leverage for reaching the Barrington community and beyond. I'd also like to thank the community of Barrington for wrapping her arms around Let It Be Us through our start-up phase.



Susan and Doug McConnell are parents of adopted children.

### Getting Started as a Foster Parent and/or Adoptive Parent

Your first step is to obtain a foster care license. In Illinois, you need to be a foster parent to a child for six months before you can adopt him or her. This applies to adoption through foster care, traditional agency adoption, as well as international adoption. Go to [www.LetItBeUs.org](http://www.LetItBeUs.org) and consider the following:

- Go to "ways to help" and you will find a digital map of all foster care licensing agencies in Illinois.
- Attend a Let It Be Us Adoption and Foster Care Information Fair. You will find them under "events." You will meet many agencies and hear from our panel of experts.
- Register for "news alerts" which will allow you to be among the first to learn of children in emergent need.

### Surprising Facts About Adoption

- Anyone can adopt from foster care – it doesn't discriminate against age, income, gender, sexual orientation, or marital status.
- To be a foster parent or to adopt from foster care is completely free. There are no legal costs.
- Each child comes with a monthly stipend, as well as medical insurance, and that remains until age 18, even if the child is adopted.
- Children in foster care or adopted from foster care can attend any Illinois State University, college, or community college for free.
- The average age of a child available for adoption from foster care is 8.