



*This little girl was abandoned in a field in Joliet, was found, and adopted into a family on her first birthday; she now has a mother, a father, a brother, and a sister. Quinn was deemed a Woman of Strength by the Women of Strength Project, because she lived for hours in that field and she made it. The photographer is Jodi Swanson of the Women of Strength Project.*

## Ending the Wait

FINDING ADOPTIVE FAMILIES FOR ILLINOIS' FOSTER CHILDREN IS A PROBLEM WE CAN SOLVE

**T**HIRTEEN YEARS AGO, I opened the first woman-owned photography studio in Barrington, Ill., and the telephone rang. I welcomed a new and unlikely client, the State of Illinois. They were looking for a woman photographer to create beautiful images of children awaiting adoption and they were further interested in me because I was an adoptive mother. It was a match made in heaven.

The next 10 years were filled with angst. I photographed beautiful, smart, and loving children awaiting adoption. I photographed them at parks in summer,

with snowmen in the winter, and, when they couldn't go outside, in the cold interiors of their group homes. I saw firsthand that no matter how adorable these children were, and no matter how great my photography was, these children were not being adopted. In 2014, I founded Let It Be Us, a nonprofit that would be the powerhouse to help these children be adopted.

### A PERFECT STORM

Let It Be Us was founded out of inclusiveness, as it is going to take all of us to tackle the problem in Illinois, which is home to almost 17,000 children in foster care, 54 percent of whom will never return home. On any day, there are about 3,000 of these children awaiting adoption. While Illinois ranks dead last among all the states for achieving adoption for their waiting children, the State's loss is now our opportunity. And with international adoptions and infant domestic adoptions on the decline, and infertility on the rise, we have the perfect storm on our hands.

Adoption is important for these children because it offers them the life-long support of a family. Without adoption, according to research by the University of Chicago, 45 percent of the girls become pregnant by age 19, and a huge percentage of the boys will end up in prison, or homeless. They simply don't stand a chance.

### MULTI-GENERATIONAL IMPACT

Let It Be Us is a unique, one-of-a-kind nonprofit offering customized solutions through innovation, creativity, and strong partnerships. Our programming has lifelong impacts that will benefit generations to come. Here are some of our successful programs.

#### The Heart Gallery of Illinois

Let It Be Us curates and manages The Heart Gallery of Illinois, an online gallery of stories and photographs of children awaiting adoption. We partner with a team of talented professional photographers across the state who heed the call whenever their phones ring. Placing a child in the Heart Gallery of Illinois reaches hundreds and thousands of waiting parents, exponentially increasing his or her chance of adoption by up to 10 times. We currently have almost 50 children in The Heart Gallery of Illinois and our goal is to have 100 children awaiting adoption by the end of 2018.

#### Targeted Recruitment

Let It Be Us has aggregated a growing database of licensed and waiting parents with an army of followers on its blog and on social media who are mostly women who believe in our mission, and many of whom would like to begin or complete their family through adoption.

We are able to "target recruit" parents for children enrolled in this program. Caseworkers can give us a wish list describing the perfect parent for a child, and Let It Be Us can find at least one parent who matches that request by scanning our data base. If the perfect fit isn't already in our database, we are experts at targeting new parents with sponsored posts on social media. We see parent recruitment as a highly-specialized function most closely related to human resources and marketing, not as a social worker function. This perspective has turned out to an extraordinarily successful way of looking at parent recruitment.

#### Finding Forever Families Events

Let It Be Us hosts foster and adoptive parent recruitment events throughout Illinois. These events create opportunities for potential adoptive parents to hear from a panel of adoption recruiters and caseworkers about their individual programs and some of the waiting children, as well as adoption lawyers and child

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## MAY IS NATIONAL FOSTER CARE MONTH

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psychologists. Through these events, Let It Be Us has introduced thousands of prospective parents to the concept of adoption through foster care and to the process of obtaining a foster care license. Obtaining a foster care license is important because in Illinois a parent is required to foster a child for six months before that parent can adopt that child.

### **Mentorship**

For the older children who will most likely never become adopted, a Mentor increases their chances of high school graduation (which in Illinois stands at 37 percent), employment, college or trade school admission, and improving life skills. Our Mentors are encouraged to have long-term relationships with their Mentees, and then Let It Be Us is behind them to provide monthly mentorship training along with funds to support their Mentee's needs for technology and materials to accomplish their goals.

### **Home for the Holidays**

For the small percentage of children in foster care who can attend college through a State of Illinois scholarship, Let It Be Us stands behind them to make sure that they are not homeless during the holidays and summers. This program launched during Christmas 2017 and we're happy to announce that the families who hosted students have already offered to host them for the upcoming summer season, too.

### **MADE IN BARRINGTON**

While our work spans beyond Barrington, the roots of Let It Be Us comes from Barrington. I'm a 30-year resident of Barrington and an adoptive parent. Jennifer McAndrews, the Board Chair of Let It Be Us, is a lifelong resident of Barrington. Most other board members hail from Barrington, too.

All the initial working capital that started Let It Be Us came from local donors and foundation grants, and Let It Be Us enjoys a small, but necessary office in Barrington's White House. I worked closely with the Barrington Area Development Council and its board members to gain a strong footing from which to launch. Barrington truly is a great place to live, work and play, but I prefer to say that Barrington is a great place to live, work, and launch.

### **HOW TO BECOME INVOLVED**

It costs \$50 to sponsor a child in the Heart Gallery of Illinois. Every time someone sponsors a child it increases his or her chance of adoption even more. Donations may be made here: <https://letitbeus.org/donate-to-let-it-be-us/> 



*Susan McConnell (on left) of Let It Be Us partnered on a nonpartisan project with Illinois State Representative Nick Sauer (speaking) who passed legislation in 2017 to change children in foster care being called "wards of the state" to "youth in care." This legislation was Sauer's first, and it passed unanimously.*

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To learn more or connect with Let It Be Us, visit [www.LetItBeUs.org](http://www.LetItBeUs.org) or email Susan McConnell at [SusanMcConnell@LetItBeUs.org](mailto:SusanMcConnell@LetItBeUs.org). Correspondence may be mailed to 145 W. Main St., Barrington, IL 60010.