



## **Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors to Honor Foster Care Heroes on Tuesday, May 13<sup>th</sup>**

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors will join Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Director Patricia S. Ploehn, Children's Law Center Executive Director Leslie Heimov and other County social service dignitaries to honor Foster Care Awareness Month heroes at a news conference on **Tuesday, May 13, 2008, at 8:30 a.m., in Room 864 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration** (Hall) located at 500 West Temple Street in downtown Los Angeles. The news conference will be followed by a public presentation to the heroes during the weekly Board of Supervisors' meeting at 9:30 a.m. in the Board Room at the Hall.

Every year during the Los Angeles Foster Care Awareness Campaign in May, a number of individuals and organizations are honored for their contributions to Los Angeles County foster youth. They are nominated by individuals and organizations involved in social services throughout Los Angeles County. A number of the honorees have been selected for overcoming adversity or for the outstanding contributions they have made in improving the lives of abused and neglected children.

This year's nominations include a government official, a juvenile court judge, a former foster youth, two DCFS social workers, foster parents, a birth parent and a church. The 2008 heroes include:

### **The Children's County Supervisor**

Los Angeles County Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich believes in the needs of all children and has been unwavering in his support during his many years of public service. He has made it a point to speak up for the needs of Los Angeles County foster youth, especially with regard for greater safety and permanence for abused and neglected children. His many accomplishments include funding the Juvenile Courthouse in the Antelope Valley; sponsoring foster care summits including the recent

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Dental Health Summit; his annual fundraiser "All for the Love of Kids" to raise money for the DCFS Family and Children's Trust Fund and sponsoring billboards promoting adoptions throughout the Fifth District.

### **The Children's Judge**

Supervising Juvenile Court Judge Emily Stevens has dedicated herself to the Juvenile Dependency Court for over 15 years. She has made countless contributions to the dependency system in Los Angeles County, not the least of which is her work as chair of the Coordinated Health System Committee. It is through her efforts that Children's

Court obtained the expanded services of a pediatrician through the Juvenile Court Mental Health Unit, and will soon have a Public Health Nurse stationed at the courthouse. She has been an ongoing advocate for youth aging out of the system and their needs. Her efforts have led to a higher degree of awareness by all of the judicial officers of services available to these youth and how and when to order them.

### **The Former Foster Youth**

Machelle Massey deserves recognition not only for her incredible ability to overcome overwhelming obstacles, but also for her outstanding contribution to child welfare and juvenile justice advocacy. As a child, Machelle was physically and mentally abused by her parents and became a ward of the court in 1993. During her three years at St. Anne's group home, Machelle struggled to balance attending school, working a part-time job, and raising a child whom she gave birth to at age 16. Machelle eventually graduated from high school at the age of 17 and enrolled in Los Angeles City College. However, at the time she lacked the support needed to hold down a steady job while trying to obtain her Associate's degree. In spite of her struggles, Machelle eventually found the strength to succeed. She speaks highly of the safety and structure provided by group homes. Machelle has had the privilege of working with foster youth for 12 years at several organizations within the child welfare system, including the Southern California Foster Family and Adoption Agency (SCFFAA). She has become a strong spokesperson for foster youth's educational needs and currently works as an Educational Community Worker for the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE)/Foster Youth Services. She married in 2006 and has a 13-year-old daughter.

### **A Social Worker Who Walks The Talk**

Children's Social Worker Fawnda Sandoval has worked in the DCFS Adoptions Division for 17 years. Her caring, belief in her work and dedication is so great that as a single mother she adopted three older youth through DCFS. Her family includes two sons and a daughter. The youngest was adopted at eight years old. He is now 22 years old, married and the father of two. Next was her 25-year-old son who was adopted at 15. Finally, she adopted her daughter, who is now 26 years old, when she was 17. While raising her three children, Fawnda has gone to the mat to meet their needs. She

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continues to be an outstanding advocate for the adoption of older, special needs children. She is also a fine example of how a loving, dedicated, caring parent can have a profound affect on abused and neglected children.

### **Everyone's Inspiration**

DCFS Children's Social Worker and former foster youth Porschia Meyers of the DCFS Torrance Office has faced many adversities in her life as well as having to wear many hats. Not only did she become a foster youth at the age of 4, but she also became a relative caregiver to her younger brother three years ago. She achieved her dream of graduating college and almost three years ago joined DCFS as a line social worker. Her colleagues describe her as always being the consummate professional and an inspiration to her families. Her colleagues note that she works long hours, well into the

evening and on weekends. Two years ago, she created the South Bay Teen Christmas Party with the help of her Assistant Regional Administrator and local churches. Last year, the party hosted over 150 youth who received gifts such as iPods, luggage and PlayStations.

### **Parents Who Keep Giving**

For a long time, foster parents Maria and Edward Lazo had been interested in foster care and adoption as a means of building their family. When they learned about Southern California Foster Family and Adoption Agency, they took action. Within a month of being approved as foster parents they received their first phone call asking if they could care for a three-day-old baby girl. Maria was laughing when she was wheeled out of the hospital with Alyssa in her arms, as though it was she who had just given birth. Over time, more children joined the family, four of whom have been adopted. The Lazos have a profound respect for the birth families of their children and have extended a warm hand of friendship and support to them, so that their children can know their birth families, and particularly their siblings. Maria and Edward Lazo are extraordinary parents who show incredible commitment to their children and the families of their children.

### **The Patient Parent**

Foster parent Laretta Norwood has cared for abused and neglected children for over 30 years. She exemplifies what a foster caregiver is expected to be -- she never turns a child away. While she is able to cut through red tape to get a child's needs met, she is also a team player. Mrs. Norwood accepted one child who had been turned down by over 100 foster homes and 40 group homes. He was in Juvenile Hall when she agreed to take care of him, so she kept a bed available and waited patiently for over two months without payment until he was finally released to her home. Meanwhile, this youth had very special needs not to mention that he was over 400 pounds. This never stopped her. She has been noted for consistent care for over 30 years.

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### **A Parent's Success**

Birth mother April Beaman has successfully completed a drug treatment program and has regained custody of her three children. For many years, she struggled with her addiction and her children had been removed twice. Her case successfully closed in 2007. Ms. Beaman remains clean and sober and now volunteers her time at a local church doing community outreach. Recently, her family of six moved from a one-bedroom apartment into a home with a large yard. Throughout their time in the tight quarters, Ms. Beaman never relapsed or neglected her children.

### **Generosity Personified**

The Self Realization Fellowship Lake Shrine Church in Pacific Palisades held the 10<sup>th</sup> annual Holiday Gift Program for Foster Youth for the local West Los Angeles County DCFS office in December 2007. Due to the generosity and dedication of the Lake Shrine members, social workers delivered almost 400 gifts with a total value of almost \$40,000 to foster children. The Self Realization Fellowship Lake Shrine Holiday Gift Program for Foster Youth is an ideal example of a partnership between the faith-based community and government as well as a model of a streamlined and highly efficient system designed to enhance the lives of foster children. Every child gets the gift of their choice. In addition to the high level of organization, other highlights of the program include the consistently good quality of the gifts and the focus on older youth in the foster care system who often go completely overlooked at the holidays.

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