A letter from Peg

Former foster youth Tanji is making it work

Triage Center offers a safe space for kids

More kids have mental health services thanks to Connections

A Warm Embrace
A Quilt of Compassion

I’m sure you’ve heard the expression “hanging by a thread.” It’s usually interpreted to mean someone or something is in danger of failure—only a thin wisp of thread prevents them from falling to their disastrous fate.

Many of the children and families we serve “hang by a thread.” I know that sounds dire, but the thing about thread is, when woven together and stitched tightly, it can become very resilient and, in the case of antique quilts and tapestries, can even last for centuries.

That’s what we do here at Child Saving Institute. With your support we stitch together the frayed edges and patch the rips and holes in the fabric of the families we serve. Whether it’s a foster child needing to feel like a valued part of a loving family, or a desperate, unraveling teen living in our shelter, with your help we create a tightly-woven fabric under which these children find safety, comfort, hope, and healing.

As a sewer myself, I know the best quilts are made with the help of many hands working together. If one program doesn’t completely cover a family’s needs, we have others to fill in the gaps. I am grateful to have you contributing to the patchwork of services we provide.

Quilts, like the families we serve, are made up of multi-layers. The top covers the surface and is usually the most decorative. Like the therapists who serve our Connections program (page 6), when you look a little deeper, you see a greater level of suffering than what first appears. Armed with skill, experience, and a sewing basket full of therapeutic methods, our experts provide the batting, the stuffing, to make these families whole again.

The final layer of the quilt is the backing. That’s you. No quilt of services would be complete without the backing to hold it all together.

Thank you for being part of this important work!

Making it Work

Tanji lived in several foster homes from the time she was 13 until she “aged out” of the child welfare system at age 19 three years ago. Now 21, she works part-time, attends school, and cares for her one-year-old son, Jacquelle.

It’s not easy, she says, but she’s determined to make a better life for herself and her son. In fact, though she had only just arrived home from her restaurant job, Tanji announced she intended to find a job that paid more as soon as possible. Her $107 paycheck doesn’t begin to cover her expenses, and she hopes to purchase a car soon.

And perhaps have more hours in her day... Tanji is studying early childhood education at Metro Community College, paid for through a PELL grant and the Education Training Voucher (ETV) granted to youth formerly living in foster care. After class she takes the bus to her job, and once her shift is completed, she rushes home to tag Jacquelle’s father so he can leave for his job.

It is a more manageable schedule than when Jacquelle was an infant. Back then Tanji got up for work at 5 a.m. and stayed up until 2 or 3 the following morning in order to fit in her job, school, studying, laundry, and caring for the baby.

As a former ward of the state, Tanji receives services through Child Saving Institute’s Independent Living Skills (ILS) program. Tanji works with CSI Specialist Dinyal McCray. She and Dinyal stay in contact at least once or twice a month via phone for updates on her progress or for referrals to community programs.

“My hope is for Tanji to continue in her mission to care for her son, complete schooling to obtain employment in her desired profession, and continue in her journey of emotional healing,” Dinyal says, noting the trauma all young people who enter the foster care system have experienced.
A Safe Place to Land

On a cold Thursday night in March, Kelley Carter and her small team provided aid and comfort to a staggering number of children arriving at the Triage Center—15 children and youth—all removed from their homes by police or caseworkers due to abuse or neglect.

All were suffering from varying degrees of trauma. Some of the children also struggled with serious developmental disabilities. Others struggled with emotional issues and needed constant supervision to keep them from harming the other children. All were scared, sad, and confused. A former caseworker at the Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services, Kelley isn’t new to the gritty realities of child abuse, but she admits her role as Triage Supervisor sometimes shakes her.

In addition to the severity of the cases she’s encountered, Kelley is shocked by the sheer volume of children in our community who have been physically, sexually, and psychologically abused. In 2015, the Triage Center provided nurturing care for 1,040 children—almost double the 565 children admitted in 2014.

Child Saving Institute manages this ground-breaking Project Harmony program. In operation since 2008, the Triage Center provides welcoming care for children in immediate need of alternative family placement. They are greeted by professionals like Kelley and her team and provided with a light meal, clothing, a medical examination, and other items as needed. In 2015, the Triage Center provided nurturing care for 1,040 children—almost double the 565 children admitted in 2014.

Upon graduating from college, Kelley Carter intended to work as a Child Life Specialist in a hospital—helping children cope with the fear and anxiety of chronic illness. She feels her training has prepared her well for comforting and reassuring children who have experienced extreme trauma.
Independent Living Skills Program, continued from page 3

ILS program specialists provide mentoring, hands-on education, and ongoing support for such critical life skills as finding a job, budgeting, searching for housing, as well as building healthy relationships. Most of the referrals come from Project Everlast, a statewide, youth-led initiative committed to providing resources, connections and support to young adults as they age out of foster care.

Dinyal McCray, one of Child Saving Institute’s team of three Independent Living Specialists, explains, “We meet with the client and formulate a plan based on their current and future needs. We put the clients in contact with available community resources and provide them with the tools they will need—but it is up to the client to use them. This, in itself, is an important life skill.”

Youth aging out of foster care without guardianship or permanency face joblessness, homelessness, persistent mental health issues, unintended pregnancy and a host of other challenges. But with the help of people like Dinyal—and caring community partners like you—we help to remove barriers that keep them from achieving personal success.

We’ve Got Connections

“Na,” 10, moved to Omaha five years ago as a refugee from Burma. Her family was displaced due to an oppressive military dictatorship in their Southeast Asia home.

The family struggled with the culture and language. Na’s older brother, “Vu,” just 17 when they arrived, quickly got caught in a trap of drugs and despair, but Na kept going. She went to school and learned English by day, and returned home at night to the family’s impoverished apartment complex where intravenous needles—and their users—were often scattered on the stoop and in the hallways.

She also witnessed terrifying physical fights between her parents and brother, but law enforcement was never contacted because of the cultural barriers. This past December, tragedy struck the already-fragile family when Vu committed suicide.

Na and her mother discovered his body.

Help is on the way

Still no one knew about the personal life of the sad, silent little girl who kept to herself at school. That is, until Child Saving Institute’s Connections therapist Jamie Weis was contacted.

Connections is a ground-breaking collaboration with Project Harmony. This innovative program offers mental health services for children in elementary school and their families. Most notably, it targets children NOT involved in the child welfare system.

CSI Clinical Services Supervisor Joanna Halbur explains that Connections helps remove the barriers many families face when seeking mental health services. Before Connections, families were waiting for weeks or months to be able to see a therapist.

“Now kids in need don’t have to wait anymore,” Halbur says enthusiastically. “We get a referral and

that child gets on a therapist’s calendar that same week. Families receive the help they need when they need it.”

The need is great

More families than anyone expected in the Omaha community are struggling on a daily basis. When Connections was launched in January 2015, it was assumed the problems the therapists would encounter would not be as serious as those of children in the child welfare system. “We originally thought the program would be more prevention focused,” Halbur recalls. “We didn’t predict the magnitude of the trauma, and because the children weren’t in the system and the families had barriers to accessing mental health services, the issues weren’t being addressed.”

The issues include family violence; physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; substance abuse; neglect; and extreme poverty. Child Saving Institute has hired four dedicated Connections therapists to address the many referrals that come from the Project Harmony Mental Health Coordinators, and several other CSI therapists serve clients in the schools in order to meet the pervasive need.

Many of these families’ needs extend far beyond therapy. Often one or both parents have experienced their own trauma or suffer from mental illness. Sometimes the family is food-insufficient or, as was the case with Na’s family, living in unsafe housing conditions. If these children attend Omaha Public Schools, the families are referred to School & Family Enrichment (SAFE), a program that offers home and school-based support for at-risk elementary-aged children and their families. (CSI also provides dedicated family support workers for this invaluable program.)

“Some families are struggling so much you just can’t work with only the child and expect things will be okay,” Weis explains. “You have to work with the parents, the teachers, and the community to address their needs. In these cases, we understand that just an hour a week in therapy is not going to help these kids with all that they need.”

Judy Connelly, CSI Director of Prevention Services, agrees. “These kids have been through so much and yet, on the other side, they are such typical kids. It is critical for us to create a sense of hopefulness for these children and their families,” Connelly notes. “It can seem daunting at times, but it’s imperative that as helping professionals and the community in general, that we are holding on to the hope for a better life—particularly for those kids and families who have lost hope themselves.”

10-year-old Na went to school and learned English by day, and returned home at night to the family’s impoverished apartment complex where intravenous needles—and their users—were scattered on the stoop and in the hallways.

A Warm Embrace
How You Can Help!

Don’t miss out on a moment of the fun and philanthropic opportunities we have planned for you in the coming months! Visit our website, childsaving.org, or call 504-3661 for more information about these events and how you can get involved!

**Omaha Gives! | Wednesday, May 25**
Midnight to midnight | omahagives24.org

On Wednesday, May 25, for 24 hours, you can help raise money for abused and neglected kids by going online to omahagives24.org and designating your donation to Child Saving Institute. Because we know you care about kids, we are encouraging all our closest friends and supporters to donate a minimum of $20 during this 24-hour window.

**Golf Fore Kids | Monday, June 20**
The Players Club at Deer Creek | 11 a.m. Start

Don’t miss this fun Golf Tournament featuring great prizes! For more information, contact Mary at msenff@childsaving.org.

**PurseOnalities | Wednesday, October 5**
Hilton Omaha | 10:30 a.m. - 1 p.m.

Great purse packages and great fun, all for great kids. The Child Saving Institute Guild is delighted to host PurseOnalities 2016—their annual luncheon to help raise funds for at-risk youth. For more information, contact Mary at msenff@childsaving.org.

Leave a legacy for kids! For information about including Child Saving Institute’s kids in your estate plans, please contact Cathy Tibbels, Legacy Giving Coordinator at Child Saving Institute: 402.504.3663 or ctibbels@childsaving.org.