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Thomas Nolan: An Accidental Social Worker



Thomas Nolan receives Foster Care Project donations for the young people on his caseload.

Thomas Nolan never intended to be a social worker. In high school, he knew he wanted to work with people and make a difference, but he had never heard of social work as a profession. During his teen years, he worked in his family’s restaurant, and it seemed likely he would end up in the restaurant business himself, although he recognized it wasn’t his passion. After a circuitous route--which included school, philosophical questions, a teaching stint, volunteer work abroad, and more school—Thomas joined the Pasadena Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), where he has

been employed the last four years. Currently, he works with older youth, who are aging out of foster care. Thomas also serves as one of Foster Care Project’s “adopted” social workers, a role which has cemented his reputation as a highly reliable and committed advocate for the young people on his caseload. In the interview below, Thomas outlines his winding path to social work in the foster care system, discussing the joys of the job as well as the challenges.

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Mission Statement

All Saints Church Foster Care Project provides community education, public policy/advocacy and direct services for children and youth who have been removed from the care of their parents to the supervision of the state. The Project recruits and sustains volunteers who serve in public and private agencies or work on special projects designed to enhance the lives of foster, homeless, transitional and incarcerated children and youth.

**“Remaining faithfully with another who suffers
Is more than an act of compassion—it is a ritual of healing.
Reaching out to another who feels isolated and alone
Is more than a bridge of comfort—it is a sacrament of communion.
Relating to the other as a person of infinite value
Is more than an article of faith—it is the lived experience of sacredness.”**
Adapted from: An Affirmation of Those Who Care for Others by James E. Miller

Caring Hearts and Helping Hands

Helping Others: A Family Affair



Photo: Isabel Ramirez

ANSWERING A CALL TO ACTION: Irene French and Al Casillas provide snack pack donations to Judi-anne Simmons for homeless youth who visit My Friend's Place.

Irene French and Al Casillas, along with daughter Serenity (20) and son Crispin (21), are not “sit on the sidelines” kind of folks; they are full throttle “what can we do to help?” kind of people. So, when this caring and generous Culver City family spotted FCP’s Eblast on Facebook requesting donations for homeless youth who visit My Friend’s Place, they were determined to step up. Irene said, “Our family is so fortunate to have [resources] that I feel we should help those who are less fortunate. I like to know that I can make a difference in someone’s life.”

Over the past year the family has donated 50-60 snack packs at a time, on at least five occasions, with the packs usually themed to celebrate a holiday, such as Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and Valentine’s Day. Irene and Serenity often spend a weekend packing the snack packs, while Al and Crispin carry the many heavy bags from their apartment to FCP Chair Judi-anne Simmon’s car for transport to My Friend’s Place. Judi-anne noted, “The family remains committed to this project and is very happy to continue to offer this essential and often lifesaving support!”

Many thanks to this amazing family!



Photo: Isabel Ramirez

COMFORT FOOD: Irene French helps load donations prepared by her family for My Friend's Place.



Photo: Isabel Ramirez

ALL HANDS ON DECK: The French-Casillas family reaches out to serve those struggling with food insecurity.

La Cañada and Pasadena High School Students Reach Out to Others



Photo: Isabel Ramirez

HAPPY TO HELP: From left: Nancy Leininger (advisor to the youth group), students affiliated with LCF Sister Cities Association, and Judi-anne Simmons from Foster Care Project.

On December 3, 2021, high school students from La Cañada and Pasadena, in affiliation with La Cañada Flintridge (LCF) Sister Cities Association, held a “packing party” to benefit My Friend’s Place (MFP), a resource center based in Hollywood that assists homeless youth. For two hours, the students worked enthusiastically to fill more than 100 snack packs to help MFP’s young people, many of whom struggle with food insecurity, among other needs.

Through their affiliation with LCF Sister Cities Association, the high school students are given an opportunity to form a long-term, cooperative relationship and cultural exchange with students in a city in another country—in this case, Villanueva de la Cañada in Madrid, Spain. The Sister Cities’ mission is to “promote peace through mutual respect, cooperation, and understanding—one individual, one community at a time.” Here at home, the students welcomed the opportunity to assist their peers in Hollywood and adjacent areas, who are striving to overcome obstacles and achieve greater security and self-sufficiency.

Foster Care Project’s Judi-anne Simmons and Isabel Ramirez attended the December packing party and were inspired by the students’ commitment to widening their perspective both at home and

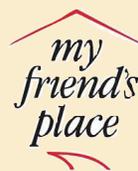
abroad, with the goal of taking tangible steps to provide support to those in need. Judi-anne said, “The kids were pleased to learn how their efforts will positively impact homeless youth who seek help from My Friend’s Place. They were visibly moved to hear that a snack pack can be essential, even lifesaving.”

Foster Care Project salutes these young people and welcomes their commitment and contributions.



Photo: Isabel Ramirez

FOOD AND FRIENDSHIP: High school students affiliated with LCF Sister Cities Association load snack packs for transport to My Friend’s Place.



My Friend’s Place in Hollywood has been a partnering agency with All Saints Church Foster Care Project for 18 years. My Friend’s Place offers a comprehensive range of services to 1,000 youth between the ages of 12 and 25, and their children, each year, who are experiencing homelessness and striving to attain wellness, stability, and self-sufficiency.

To learn how you can assist My Friend’s Place, please contact:
inbox@fostercareproject.org

Thomas Nolan: *An Accidental Social Worker*

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How did your time in college help set you on the path to social work and child welfare?

I went to school at the University of San Diego, where I majored in theology and religious studies and minored in Business Administration. I intended to major in business, but found the classes boring, and the end goal of the program was how to make the most money. That wasn't for me. I took a couple theology classes as part of my general education and fell in love with the ideas. I loved the philosophical challenges presented. I was particularly intrigued by the question of how there could be a God in our world full of such misery at times. Where was God in the Holocaust, in war, in hunger, and of course, where was God in the abuse and neglect of innocent children? Not to get too theological here, but the only answer I could accept was that God was in the ones suffering: the victims of violence, of war, of abuse....

Many people aren't sure of their end goal as college graduation approaches. Panic can set in! What was that process like for you?

As graduation approached, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I had worked as a teacher's aide at the university's preschool, so I knew I enjoyed working with children. However, I didn't want to just go get a job, as was expected of me, because I didn't know what job I'd find fulfilling. So, instead I joined the Peace Corps. In August of 2013, I accepted an assignment to Barranquilla, Colombia. The Peace Corps slogan is that it is "the toughest job I ever loved." I attest to that 110%. In Barranquilla, it is typically 85-95 degrees with 85-100% humidity, year-round. Air conditioning was a luxury I was not privy to. I lived with a host family, who became my own second family, and I was assigned to a local school to work in youth development and English education. However, nearby was a foundation, called the Fundacion Futuros Valores de Barranquilla, which was a home for abused, neglected, and orphaned boys. I decided to devote some extra time to working with these young men. These were some of the

most amazing young men this world has to offer. We worked together on building skills for the real world, achieving higher education and workforce development. I was successful in obtaining a USAID grant to build a library for the foundation. I still maintain contact with some of the young men I worked with.

How did your time in the Peace Corps shape your next steps?

As my service in the Peace Corps came to an end, I started thinking about what my next steps would be. I started looking for jobs in California and found I was seeking jobs almost exclusively in the child welfare and youth development sector. However, I also found that many of the jobs that caught my attention required a master's degree in social work. There was my answer. I applied to master's programs and was granted a scholarship to go to USC. For the next two years I worked on my MSW and completed an internship with the LA County Department of Children and Family Services, where I was hired upon graduation.

How would you describe your career at DCFS?

I spent the first two years of my career working in family reunification and family maintenance cases. I was then offered a position in the AB12 program to work with youth ages 18-21, who age out of foster care. This is where I found my passion. While I absolutely love what I do, the job comes with plenty of stress and anxiety. There are many sleepless nights worrying about the young men and women I work with; are they okay, are they being safe, are they with the right crowd? I have also had the opportunity to see them grow. I have seen some of these young men and women, who may not seem to have



Thomas Nolan takes local transportation during his 2013 Peace Corps stint in Barranquilla, Colombia.



Thomas Nolan at DCFS in March, 2022.

much hope for the future, overcome some of the toughest challenges and achieve successful independence. I get to share in some of their most difficult and trying times; I work with them through the challenges to also share in some of the most rewarding times. I work with addiction, homelessness, and severe mental health issues, and despite the stress of the process, I love it. These young men and women are the future leaders of our world. At such a young age they have already been through more than what most of us will have to endure in a lifetime, and they are the strongest, most resilient among us.

How has your involvement with All Saints Church Foster Care Project impacted your work and the young people you serve?

The young people I work with have ongoing needs, such as supportive housing, strong connections to appropriate adults, better job opportunities, and further financial

support for educational endeavors. The Foster Care Project has been a life saver in so many ways. A gift card for food or clothes, a Christmas present to let them know somebody cares about them, or a backpack full of school supplies to prepare them for the academic year mean so much to these youth, who would otherwise not have these items. At times, the youth do go hungry or end up having to choose between paying for food or new clothes. These youth are legally adults, but we know they are not fully independent. Without the generosity of the donations I receive, I honestly don't know what I would do, and I don't know what the youth would do. As I continue in the work, I know at times that I would not be able to do so without the support of All Saints Church.

Any thoughts about what the future holds for you? Your clients?

I am not sure what the future holds for me or the young people I am so lucky to work with. At times I joke that I would love to one day be laid off by DCFS because there are not enough clients or need, but until that day comes, we will keep pushing forward for the greater success of the young people in our system. ***Thank you.***

All of us at Foster Care Project would like to commend Thomas for the passion, determination, and commitment he brings to an extraordinarily challenging job. We are grateful he found his way to social work, child welfare, and an ongoing path of service. In the end, perhaps there is nothing accidental about that.

Partnering Agencies

- 50/50 Leadership
- Alliance for Children's Rights
- Aspire West, Pasadena
- Barrio Action Youth and Family Center
- Biddy Mason Charitable Foundation
- California Youth Connection
- Cal Tech Y
- CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate)
- Children's Law Center of California
- Children's Law Center of California Fresh Outfitters
- COLORS
- County of Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services
- County of Los Angeles Probation Department
- Cultural Brokers
- EOPS Resilient Scholars Program, California State University Northridge
- First Place for Youth
- First United Methodist Church
- Five Acres
- FosterAll
- Friends of Foster Children
- Hathaway-Sycamores
- Hillsides
- Hillsides YMO
- Holy Family Services Adoption and Foster Care
- Kidsave Los Angeles Weekend Miracles
- League of Women Voters
- Learning Works Charter School/ Home Boys
- My Friend's Place
- National Congress of Black Women, Inc. San Gabriel Chapter
- Neighborhood United Universalist Church
- Optimist Youth Homes and Family Services
- Pacific Clinics
- Public Counsel Law Center
- PUSD Math Power Hour
- Raise-A-Child, US
- STARS at PCC
- The Alliance for Children's Rights
- United Friends of the Children
- Violence Intervention Program
- Vista Del Mar Child and Foster Care Program
- Young and Healthy

**"Start where you are.
Use what you have. Do what you can."**

-Arthur Ashe

We Couldn't Do What We Do Without You: FCP Salutes "The Helpers" in Our Community

Although 2022 has seen some return to normalcy in the wake of Covid-19, the need for resources remains high as our families struggle with the ongoing effects of the pandemic and soaring gas, rent, and grocery store prices. Foster Care Project continues to assist our three longtime "adopted" Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) caseworkers—Thomas Nolan, Ruth Lee, and Sylvia Cortez—with diapers, hygiene items, shoes, clothing, food, and other essential needs. We recently added a fourth DCFS caseworker—Nirvana Castenada—to further our reach to vulnerable children and youth. As always, we couldn't do what we do without the amazing support of our helpers—our stalwart FCP donors and volunteers. Thank you for being a community we can count on.

75: Number of "Valentine's bags" put together by the Adopt a Child Abuse Caseworker (ACAC) team, which contained age-appropriate items, such as baby supplies, toothpaste and toothbrushes, shampoo, body wash, toys and games, art supplies, chocolate candies, gift cards, and more.

11: Number of stylish, well-made men's jackets donated to our older youth, a gift made possible by Stephanie Rizzardi and her San Marino-based Pillows and Plenty charity, with facilitation from FCP's own Gail Howland.

50: Number of clothing items and Easter outfits donated during the first quarter of 2022.

180: Number of Easter baskets filled by our ACAC team, with the generous help of our FCP supporters who provided stuffed animals, snacks, toys, games, puzzles, stickers, art supplies, journals, hygiene items, gift cards, and more.

22: Number of grocery bags donated to young adults and families during the first quarter of 2022.



Photo by Anne Riffenburgh

GOODIES GALORE: Lesli, a student at California State University Los Angeles, displays treats from her Valentine's bag, packed especially for her.



Photo by Anne Riffenburgh

SOMBUNNY TO LOVE: New pajamas for six-year-old "J," with a cuddly bunny in a matching outfit.

"When we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed."

—Maya Angelou

Photo: Anne Riffenburgh



HOP TO IT! Volunteer Jane Burtis (foreground) helps FCP's Rosemary Hyde and Beth Gertmenian fill Easter baskets.

Photo: Anne Riffenburgh



THINKING OF THE KIDS: FCP supporter Silvia Sowell provides Legos, books, and games for children in foster care.

Photo: Anne Riffenburgh



ONE OF OUR EASTER BUNNIES: DCFS caseworker Sylvia Cortez picks up Easter baskets donated to Foster Care Project to deliver to children on her caseload.

Photos: Thomas Nolan



ALL SMILES: Eric, Justin, and Jaheim show off their new jackets, a gift from Pillows and Plenty.



Photo: Anne Riffenburgh



PROVIDING NECESSITIES: FCP supporter Meredith Ryness drops off emergency packs with masks and hygiene items for children and youth.



“When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’”

—Fred Rogers

“Now is the Time to Build a Brighter Future:”

Addressing the Overrepresentation of Black Children in Foster Care

Jeanette Mann, Chair of Foster Care Project, Public Policy Committee.

The Foster Care Project continues to work to address the overrepresentation of Black children in foster care. In Los Angeles County 23.6% of the children in foster care are Black compared to 9% of the population of the County. Black children remain longer in foster care and are less likely to leave foster care through reunification with their families, adoption, or legal guardianship. Forty percent of the children who age out of foster care are Black.

The future is bleak for young people who age out of foster care: only 50% will have some form of gainful employment by the age of twenty-four; less than a 3% will earn a college degree at any point in their life; seven out of ten girls will become pregnant before the age of twenty-one; and 25% will suffer from the direct effects of PTSD (National Foster Youth Institute).

In order to address the disastrous effects of foster care on Black children, leaders of community organizations, members of the state legislature, and employees of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) are focusing their attention on the process by which the children enter foster care—a process marred by implicit bias and racial disparity. In 2019, although only 9% of the county is Black, 19.7% reports of child abuse were for Black children and 20% of the investigations were of Black families.

Although anyone can report child abuse or neglect on the DCFS Hot Line, the great majority of allegations come from mandated reporters who are required by law to report instances of actual or suspected child abuse and child neglect. Teachers, social workers, police officers, therapists, mental health workers and clergy are all mandated reporters, but most allegations pre-pandemic were made by professionals in law enforcement (22.8%) or education (20.3%). At least 20% of the calls to the Hot Line are for “general neglect,” while only 1% are for “severe neglect.” General neglect is defined in California as “failing to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care or supervision.”

The majority of children in foster care are removed from their homes because of general neglect rather than abuse.

DCFS, partially through the new federal funding requirements, is establishing programs for referring many of the calls of general neglect to community agencies instead of opening a case. They are using what they call a “Hot Line” and a “Help Line.” Calls to the Help Line are referred to an appropriate community agency.

A bill introduced in this session of the legislature by Assemblymember Chris Holden would address this issue by changing the reporting requirements for mandated reporters (AB-2085 Crimes: mandated reporters). AB-2085 would eliminate the requirement to report general neglect and would require mandated reporters to report only cases of child abuse or severe neglect. “Severe neglect” is defined as those situations where any person having the care or custody of a child willfully causes or permits harm or injury to the child or causes or permits the child to be placed in imminent danger of harm.”

“We see this bill as a critical step to addressing the issue of racial disparity of Black children in foster care. We are indeed fortunate to be represented in the Assembly by a legislator who has taken a leadership role in child welfare. Assemblymember Holden is not only addressing the issue of mandated reporters--he also carried the first bill that provided density bonuses for housing for foster youth and former foster youth (AB 2442),” said Jeanette Mann, Chair of Foster Care Project, Public Policy Committee.

She added: “This bill provides a realistic and workable strategy to reduce implicit bias in the removal of children from their homes. We have collected hundreds of ‘care packages’ for children after they have been removed from their homes—now is the time for us to do what we can to keep them from being removed. Now is the time to create fair and equitable solutions in the child welfare system. Now is the time to build a brighter future for all our children.”

All Saints Church



For Volunteer Opportunities
visit our website:
www.fostercareproject.org or email:
inbox@fostercareproject.org

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Jeanette Mann: Writing/Editing
Anne Riffenburgh: Writing/Editing