

# NOTES FROM THE FIELD

THE CHILDREN'S RIGHTS NEWSLETTER

SPRING  
2013



Defending America's  
Abused and Neglected Kids

INSIDE:



Charity Navigator  
gives CR 4-Star  
Rating



Former foster  
youth share their  
experiences for new  
CR campaign

"Part of me will always  
be the scared little kid  
in a home that isn't  
really a home."

IN FOCUS:

## Struggling for Sibling Connections

When Deanna and Alyssa were found in a cardboard box in the bogs of New Jersey, their skin was caked with dirt. All but two of 3-year-old Deanna's teeth were completely decayed, and 7-month-old Alyssa's neck muscles were so underdeveloped that she couldn't even hold up her head.

The girls were rescued and placed in foster care—just like their sisters and brothers already had been.

But more than a decade later, the pair only has sporadic contact with some siblings, and none with others. They are now trying to find the sister they never met, whom they know only as Brandi.

"I know the state could have done a way better job, because our sisters and brothers are in different families and we don't get to see them," said Alyssa.

Adds Deanna: "I always think about the relationship that we could have."

When it comes to being split from brothers and sisters, Deanna and Alyssa are not alone. Studies suggest that more than half the children in U.S. foster care have one or more siblings in the system, and between 60 and 73 percent of sibling groups do not live in the same foster placement.

Experts agree that although separation may occasionally be in a child's best interest, for most kids the consequences can be harsh, especially to those who relied heavily on one another in chaotic homes.

"Separating siblings who have been temporarily or permanently removed from their parents can severely intensify grief and trauma. In some



Sunny remembering her baby brother whom she only met once.

cases sibling separations can be even more traumatic than separation from parents," Sharon Connor wrote in "Siblings in Out-of-Home Care," published by the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency at the Hunter College of Social Work.

Continued on page 6



# ON THE FRONTLINES

## FROM CR'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Imagine being a young child, suddenly torn away from your family. You weren't given the care you deserved. Perhaps you were even physically abused. But it was the only life you knew, and it was your *family*. If you were young enough, some of the horrors you endured might, in your still-developing mind, pale in comparison to facing the unknown.

You enter foster care with a brother or sister, the only comfort in a world of uncertainty. Then, hours or days later, your sole support is gone. You're put in separate homes, and have no idea if, or when, you'll see your sibling again.

When a child's entire world has been turned upside down, it is unconscionable to make it even worse. Yet states do this all the time. Not because they're mean-spirited, but because too many child welfare systems lack the capacity to treat children as human beings. The consequences of these many small acts of inhumanity are devastating.

In our cover story, "Struggling for Sibling Connections," Edgar Carranza describes waiting for months for his caseworker to arrange the rare one-hour visits with his brother. David Oliva, whose youth was punctuated with physical abuse and instability before he went into foster care and was separated from his brothers, says, "The only thing that bothers me is the feeling of not having a family."

Deanna knows she was fortunate in one respect. Although she and her younger sister lived in a box in the New Jersey bogs until the ASPCA rescued them, Alyssa "was with me all the time." And they stayed together—after Children's Rights named Deanna and Alyssa as plaintiffs in our New Jersey class action, the girls were adopted into a loving, permanent home. According to Deanna, "Children's Rights gave us a voice. Now, we're free of the neglect that we experienced for so long." It's one of the most powerful endorsements we could get for our work.

But there are others. You will also read stirring words from Tomas Rios, CR's engagement media associate, who recounts growing up in New York City foster homes where he was kicked, burned and went to bed hungry. He is writing this May in honor of National Foster Care Month, when we will launch a blog-a-day public awareness campaign that gives first-hand accounts of experiences in child welfare. "There is nothing I can do that will change what happened to me, but I can do something to help future generations," writes Tomas. "That's why I decided to work for Children's Rights."

It is these types of stories that convinced Jay Galluzzo, co-founder and CEO of Flywheel Sports, Inc., to become the newest member of our Board of Directors. "For each child that we can put into a safer environment, or expose to something more loving than a current state system provides, there is more of an opportunity for that child to do something spectacular," says Jay. "This is an organization that is taking every dollar raised, stretching it to two and putting it to good use."

Proudly, Charity Navigator agrees. We just learned that the country's most prominent charity evaluator awarded Children's Rights four stars—its highest rating, and one that goes to only 25 percent of non-profits in the U.S. It is evidence that, when you support CR, your hard-earned dollars are used wisely.

The rating is a great accolade—but it is young people like Deanna and Tomas who inspire us to improve child welfare, day after day. Please support us as we fight for the rights of America's abused and neglected youth. We cannot continue our life-saving work without you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Marcia Robinson Lowry".

Marcia Robinson Lowry  
Executive Director

# CR INSIDER

*Children's Rights is delighted to welcome longtime CR supporter Jay Galluzzo to its Board of Directors. Jay is an attorney and the co-founder and CEO of Flywheel Sports, Inc., a leading chain of boutique indoor cycling studios. He lives in New York City with his wife and two small children. CR recently sat down with Jay to talk about his decision to take on a crucial role at CR:*

**CR:** This is your first time sitting on a charitable board. Why CR?

**Jay:** I've been passively involved in philanthropy since I started drawing an income. But I always felt that I was saving up for something really important. When I got to know Children's Rights, I knew it was the right place for me—the work they do to reform foster care is just that critical.

**CR:** Have you always been interested in children's issues?

**Jay:** Back in 2003, I was general counsel of a global apparel company, and one of my departments monitored labor forces of third-party manufacturers around the world. The biggest focus for us was on preventing the use of child labor. We had a real institutional philosophy about workforce and workplace conditions and that led to my interest in child protection.

**CR:** How does being a father affect your outlook on foster care?

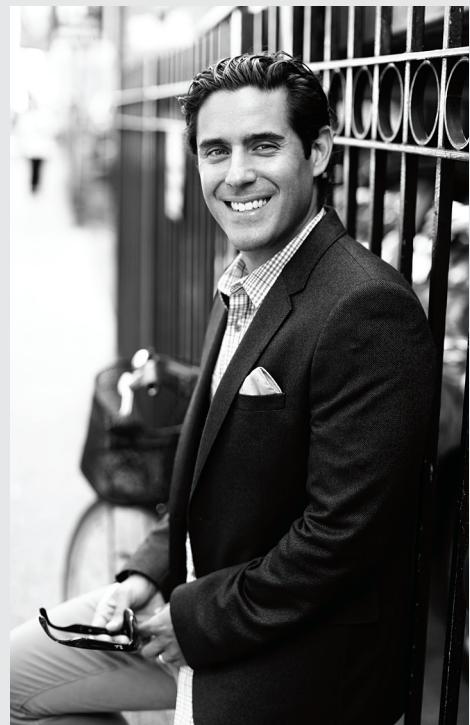
**Jay:** When you see your child in a risky situation, or not treated fairly—which often is nothing more than someone not being nice to them on the playground—you have this visceral reaction. It actually hurts. To extend that pain that you feel to the abused and neglected children that CR seeks to protect, it is heartbreakingly.

**CR:** Why do you think people should support CR?

**Jay:** At Flywheel, we give a lot of support to community causes. When I thought about joining CR, I realized I wanted to bring something forward that every single person in my organization would absolutely support. My colleagues' enthusiasm has been overwhelming. They, like me, see that CR is improving foster care systems in real time, and the funds are truly needed. This is an organization that is taking every dollar raised, stretching it to two and putting it to good use.

**CR:** Why should people care about fixing dangerous child welfare systems?

**Jay:** People often read about foster care problems in the news, and think, "Oh that is terrible, how can this happen?"



Through CR, I've met some of the children who have been hurt, and meeting them had an impact, to say the least. They have also made me think about all the stories we don't hear, because for every kid who stands up at a benefit and talks about how they made it through foster care, there are thousands of children who haven't. For each child that we can put into a safer environment, or expose to something more loving than a current state system provides, there is more of an opportunity for that child to do something spectacular.



## Children's Rights Earns Four Stars from Charity Navigator

Children's Rights' sound financial practices have earned the organization a 4-star rating from Charity Navigator, America's largest independent charity evaluator.

"The coveted 4-star rating puts Children's Rights in a very select group of high-performing charities," according to Ken Berger, CEO of Charity Navigator. "Out of the thousands of nonprofits Charity Navigator evaluates, only one out of four earns 4 stars."

Since 2002, using data-driven analysis, Charity Navigator has awarded only the most fiscally responsible organizations a 4-star rating. In 2011, Charity Navigator added a second dimension of Accountability and Transparency (A&T) to its rating methodology, and now reviews 17 governance and ethical

practices as well as measures of openness, providing information on its web site for each of the charities it evaluates. The A&T metrics reveal which charities have "best practices" that minimize the chance of unethical activities and whether they freely share basic information with their donors and other stakeholders.

"This is a testament to our stewardship of donor funds and commitment to accountability and transparency," said Sandy Santana, chief operating officer of Children's Rights. "In the current economic environment, it is important that our supporters know that we're maximizing our donations to uphold our mission—to protect the constitutional rights of abused and neglected children."

*On May 1, in honor of National Foster Care Month, Children's Rights will launch a public awareness campaign to highlight the ways foster care affects people's lives. Dubbed "Fostering the Future," the project will feature a fresh blog post each day of the month from someone intimately involved in foster care. You can go to [www.fosteringthefuture.com](http://www.fosteringthefuture.com) or like us on Facebook to share the blog entries and help spread the word.*

*One of CR's own, Engagement Media Associate Tomas Rios, is kicking off the project by sharing his story. We are fortunate to count Tomas as one of the dedicated staffers who is deeply committed to our work.*

## Coming Full Circle: My Foster Care Journey

When I was 5, my mother passed away and I entered New York City foster care. I quickly saw just how bad it can be inside a broken child welfare system.

In the first home, I was treated like I didn't even exist. It felt bad to be ignored, but I learned to be grateful for homes that were merely indifferent after I was placed in an abusive and neglectful one. A few more followed the first and I'm still reminded of them every day. Having my arm pressed against a pot of boiling water left a scar that I try not to glance at while I'm typing. A kick to the head from a work boot left a mark on my hairline that I glimpse whenever I comb my hair. There were many more injuries and they all have memories attached to them that I'll never forget.

Being abused wasn't the worst of it though; the countless nights I went to sleep hungry and hoping to never wake up again are what I recall most vividly. My entire childhood, or at least what I can remember of it, was spent knowing no one could be bothered with me, a feeling that has followed me well into adulthood. However, as I got older and learned more about the world outside of foster care, dreams of never waking up were replaced by dreams of escaping into a different life.

Luck came my way just before my 16th birthday, when I was placed with a foster family that cared about me. They went out of their way to make sure I got the mental health and educational help I needed to attain the different life that, until then, had been nothing more than a dream. Thanks to them, I was able to go to college and start the process of build-



ing a life for myself outside of foster care. Despite everything that happened to me while in care, I ended up being "one of the lucky ones."

However, I still entered adulthood without a family or support system. It's a day-to-day reality that weighs heavily on me—knowing that I don't have the safety net so many people my age are accustomed to having. The traumas I went through obviously were difficult, but what I struggle with the most are the seemingly little things. Knowing that every birthday will come and go without a call from relatives. Every holiday season will be spent constantly reminded that I have no family to spend it with. Part of me will always be the scared little kid in a home that isn't really home. This is what it means to have a "lucky" foster care experience for too many kids.

The idea that one has to hit the proverbial lottery to have a happy and productive life after foster care infuriates me to this day. There is nothing I can do that will change what happened to me, but I can do something to help make sure future generations of children don't go through the same thing. That's why I decided to work for Children's Rights.

Now I get to spend my days as part of an organization fighting for the widespread reforms that failing child welfare systems desperately need. We have won court-ordered improvements in more than a dozen states, making foster care a better place for tens of thousands of children. These include comprehensive screening of foster parents, better training for caseworkers and post-foster care services for youth exiting the system—the kinds of things that could have made all the difference for me while I was in care.

# IN THE COURTROOM

When Children's Rights began its investigation into the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families (DCF), several things stood out. The high rate of maltreatment in care. The frequency with which kids are bounced between placements. The percentage of foster youth on psychotropic medications. The number of children who are reunified with their families, only to be abused and neglected again.

These were some of the troubling issues that compelled Children's Rights and Boston law firm Nutter McClennen & Fish LLP to file a federal class action lawsuit in April 2010. Connor B. v. Patrick asserts that DCF violates the constitutional rights of children by failing to meet the legal obligations of the state-run child welfare system, and seeks broad reform on behalf of abused and neglected children statewide.

Since January 22, when the trial started in Boston's U.S. District Court, our team of attorneys has demonstrated the need for a court-ordered remedy.

"The substantial majority of the approximately 7,500 children in MA foster care entered state custody because they did nothing more than endure abuse or neglect in their family homes," said Sara Bartosz, lead attorney for Children's Rights. "Far too frequently these children suffer shocking abuses once in state care."

The case went to trial as the Office of the Child Advocate released a startling report showing that 40 children died under the state's watch in 2011. The tragic outcomes underscored in this report, and by the named plaintiffs in Connor B., reveal systemic flaws that the lawsuit seeks to remedy—from overwhelming caseloads to a lack of appropriate training and inadequate accountability systems.

Children's Rights and co-counsel rested our case on March 1; the state is likely to call witnesses into May. As we await Judge William G. Young's ruling, one thing is certain: Children's Rights will continue to put its all into fighting for the protection and well-being of Massachusetts foster youth.



Team Mass. at the John Joseph Moakley U.S. Courthouse in Boston, during the trial to reform Massachusetts foster care.

# REFORM WATCH

Most of our lawsuits end with settlement agreements and a mandate for massive reform. Children's Rights, along with independent monitors, ensures the reform goals won on behalf of children and families are met.

**Oklahoma** has stopped housing abused and neglected children under the age of 2 in state shelters. The state recently has recruited 930 new foster families.

In **Michigan**, the number of youth waiting to be adopted dropped by more than 35 percent.

New leadership is moving the **District of Columbia**'s long-struggling child welfare agency toward reform. D.C. complied with 11 performance standards for the first time, including fulfilling the required annual in-service training, and keeping all children under 6 out of group-care facilities.

**Metropolitan Atlanta** has ensured 84 percent of kids have their adoptions or guardianships finalized within a year of parental rights being terminated.

Kinship care is increasing in **Connecticut**, with relatives accounting for 28 percent of foster families, up from 19 percent two years ago. The state also has seen an 84 percent drop in the number of children living in out-of-state residential centers.

# IN FOCUS: Struggling for Sibling Connections

(continued from page 1)



Alyssa and Deanna are together, but are still trying to find their youngest sister.

David Oliva's childhood was marked by abuse. His mom was in and out of his life, and he never knew his dad. He entered foster care with his four brothers. Three were adopted together, while David and one other brother remained in care. "The only thing that bothers me is the feeling of not having a family and being alone," David said. "In the earlier years when my brothers and I were separated, it was hard not knowing what was going on or where they were."

After his father was deported, Edgar Carranza was put in foster care and split from his brother. "As many times as I asked my case manager to set up an appointment for me to actually see my brother, it would always take months just to be able to see him for an hour," he told Children's Rights.

## CHILDREN'S RIGHTS' ROLE

"The sheer impact of severing sibling ties can devastate kids," said Marcia Robinson Lowry, executive director of Children's Rights. "It is unconscionable that systems are denying children the right to be with, or even know, their brothers and sisters."

An experience Lowry had early in her career became a driving force behind her push for states to preserve sibling relationships. Lowry successfully advocated for Carlos to be moved from a dangerous out-of-state institution. But being in a safer environment didn't fix everything for the boy. Carlos, who entered foster care at just 13 months old, continued to struggle with his need for a family.

"He truly had nobody," Lowry said. She fought for his records, and then located a sister, but visitation was denied.

"For years, he asked me if he could see his family," Lowry said. "The very idea that he had siblings and never met them tormented him. It was so critically important for him to have that connection."

Through Children's Rights work to reform dangerous and dysfunctional foster care systems throughout the country, we have met many youth who say they wish they were closer to their siblings. And we have used comprehensive reform campaigns to ensure more siblings visit each other frequently in foster care and are placed together into the same foster and adoptive homes. In Tennessee alone, the percentage of sibling groups living together in foster care jumped from fewer than 35 percent in 2002 to 81 percent in 2011, thanks to our advocacy.

We also have ensured kids maintain ties to other important people in their lives. Our campaigns make it possible for more children to reside in licensed foster homes with relatives and close family friends, and to be placed closer to home—all factors that help them feel more comfortable and connected.

## "THEY ARE... A PART OF EACH OTHER"

Deanna and Alyssa were plaintiffs in Children's Rights' class action lawsuit, which led to vast improvements in New Jersey's child welfare system. Even as their siblings were scattered throughout the state, the sisters remained together as they moved through two foster homes and into an adoptive family.

Their parents, Denise and Tim, believe it is best for siblings to be adopted into the same home.

"They are already a part of each other. Whatever changes they are going to go through in a new home, they will go through together," Denise said. "They don't have that sense of being alone."

The girls told us that they are grateful for each other and for Children's Rights. Our reform campaign did not seek monetary damages, but it helped the sisters gain something they say is much more important—a permanent,

loving family. The girls are growing up side by side. They go to high school, ROTC and martial arts together.

"I am extra thankful that I have Deanna because at least I have one blood related sibling that I know," Alyssa said.

"I don't have all my siblings in the same home as me, but at least I have one," Deanna said.



Photo courtesy of Laurence Borten

Edgar frequently asked his caseworker to see his brother more often.

## THE RESULTS:

## CR Helps Siblings Maintain Connections in Foster Care

- Eighty-seven percent of Connecticut foster children lived with their siblings last year, compared to just 57 percent in 2004.
- In Tennessee, 81 percent of sibling groups lived together in 2011, compared to fewer than 35 percent in 2002.

- Last year, metro Atlanta, which too often split up siblings prior to Children's Rights' case, ensured 81 percent of children entering foster care were in the same homes as their brothers and sisters and 95 percent of required monthly visits occurred between separated siblings.

## Advocating for a Relationship

Kerry Shiga doesn't want her daughter Sunny, just 4 years old, to ever worry about where her brother is or if he is safe.

Kerry fostered Sunny since she was 6 weeks old, and adopted her last year. When she learned Sunny's birth mother was pregnant with another child, she started writing to judges, hospitals, and child welfare officials to tell them she was able to care for the new baby too.

"I am willing to do whatever it takes so she can feel like she always had a connection," Shiga said.

But now, with the boy in the home of a relative that isn't allowing visitation, all Sunny has is the memory of a visit that took place when her brother was with his first foster family, and the photos that family shared.

"She looks at the pictures and says, 'that's my baby brother. He looks like me,'" Shiga said. "She asks, 'when am I going to see my baby brother'?"

Even as Shiga advocates for Sunny to have a relationship with the boy, the possibility that Sunny may never really know her brother weighs heavily on her mind.

"He belongs to her. I don't understand why she doesn't have the right to her brother," Shiga told Children's Rights.



Defending America's  
Abused and Neglected Kids

Children's Rights  
330 Seventh Avenue  
New York, NY 10001

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Permit No. 8048  
New York, NY

Like Children's Rights on **Facebook**  
Follow us on Twitter @**ChildrensRights**

**[www.childrensrights.org](http://www.childrensrights.org)**

## DID YOU KNOW?

**A**n estimated 60 to 73 percent of sibling groups are not placed together in foster care.

**C**hildren separated from their siblings in foster care are more likely to develop anxiety, depression, anger and developmental setbacks.

**C**alifornia is the only state that releases comprehensive data on sibling separation in foster care.

To support Children's Rights, visit **[www.childrensrights.org](http://www.childrensrights.org)** and click "Donate Now." Gifts from new supporters or those in excess of prior year contributions will be matched by an anonymous donor.