

Engaging Youth. Building Supports. Strengthening Opportunities.



Since 2020, Tanja has provided a place to call home for 26 children and youth. Of those young people, she has adopted five, soon to be six. Tanja has had a full-circle experience with the child welfare system. Growing up, she entered the system and lived with several foster families. After having children of her own, those kids were placed in State custody, encouraging Tanja to get sober so she could reunite with them. Years later, Tanja and her husband, William, became kin caregivers for William's grandchildren, eventually transitioning to non-family foster caregivers for others. Ever since, Tanja has kept her house and her heart open to children and youth in need of a loving family. She is celebrating 21 years of sobriety.

"When my own kids got taken and got put into custody, them getting put into custody actually saved my life. That's when I got clean and sober," Tanja said. "I wanted to give back, and I knew that I could give kids what they were longing for, which was a family and a home—and a healthy one at that."

Having experienced the foster care system from so many different perspectives, Tanja has learned many lessons. As a deeply loving, nurturing mother, it comes as no surprise that her advice for others centers on providing the best support possible for the children and youth who come into their home. This National Foster Care Month, she hopes to spread the word about the importance of supporting mental health, listening to and empowering young people, and providing older youth with lifelong connections.

Supporting mental health. A cause that Tanja champions on a daily basis is supporting mental health. In Tanja's experience, many people often assume that a child will thrive once they end up in a foster home because they've left a situation that the State deemed unsafe. This assumption, however, overlooks the toll that all these changes have on a young person's mental health. Living with strangers in foster care—surrounded by new routines, foods, smells, and more—is a big life change. Tanja recommends that foster caregivers talk to youth about therapy and reach out to their caseworkers, agencies, or community mental health organizations to proactively arrange a mental health assessment before issues or challenges arise. She tells her children to think of therapy as a living diary:

That's my statement to all my kids that come in. That therapist gets to be their living diary that nobody gets to read. You get to go in, you get to tell all your secrets and all your hurts and all your joys and all your fears, and nobody gets to go open that book and read it. But you get to share it, and you have somebody that can help you get through those things that you don't understand.

Tanja has turned her passion for mental health into a career and works for the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health as a behavioral health case manager and family support provider.

The importance of listening. In Tanja’s family, one of the first things that young people who enter her home learn is that they simply need to ask to “assume the position” when they need to talk to Tanja about something. The “position” involves Tanja sitting on the floor while the young person sits across from her on a piece of furniture. The elevated stance places the young person in a position of power, allowing them to feel comfortable speaking up about whatever it is they need.

“It’s been empowering for all the kids in my house,” Tanja said. “I let them know when they come through the door that they have a voice and it will be heard. So, if you have something to say, I’m going to listen. I will listen, but you have to speak because I can’t fix what I don’t know.”

Forming lifelong connections. A major part of Tanja’s fostering journey has been her commitment to older youth and teenagers. All too often, older youth age out of the foster care system and are left to fend for themselves without adequate support. Tanja seeks to change that narrative by forming lasting, authentic bonds with the young people who enter her home. In child welfare, this type of connection is often called “relational permanency” and can benefit all youth, including those who do not achieve legal permanency before aging out.

“Teens get left behind,” Tanja said. “Kids who age out have no one to be accountable to so they can keep going in the right direction. They don’t have the ability to say, ‘Oh, my mom would be so disappointed’ or ‘my dad would be so disappointed.’ Instead, there is no one to disappoint and no reason to do the right thing. So, in an aged-out kid’s mind: ‘No one cares what I do, so what’s the point? When I’m down on my luck, who do I call?’”

Tanja and her children have been through a lot together, from the hard times, such as the loss of her husband in October 2022, to the exciting ones, such as her oldest adopted daughter planning to attend college next year. As for the future, Tanja doesn’t plan to stop fostering anytime soon.

“Being a foster parent is a blessing,” she said. “And as much as you can save them, they can save you.”

Tanja is a foster parent with the Oklahoma Department of Human Services (OKDHS). To learn more about becoming a foster parent with OKDHS, visit its [website](#).



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