

The Search for Smith Relatives

Placement update: February 27th

All three children were placed on November 28th with their maternal aunt and uncle, Brandi and Brian Smith who became certified resource parents. On December 5th, the court adjudicated the children dependent and ordered a disposition of custody to the county Children and Youth Agency and that the children continue in out-of-home placement.

Brian and Brandie acknowledged the stress that the placement is putting on the family. Brandi said she copes with the situation because they are family and feels strongly that it is a family's obligation to support all family members. The couple said that they would seriously consider adopting their niece and nephews if proved that their home was a "good fit" for the children. They appear sincere in their commitment to the children and said they "wouldn't do this for anyone else except family".

Both Brian and Brandi were challenged immediately with Carley's parentified behaviors. Carley didn't understand why anyone would need to take care of her. In addition, she needed to be "in charge" of her siblings and stated that she felt that she knows how to care for Christian and Cameron better than her aunt and uncle." She believes that she can teach them what her siblings need, but is frustrated because they will not listen to her. If Carley cannot be returned to a parent, she would like to stay with Brian and Brandi if they would start to listen to her. However, Carley is adamantly opposed to being adopted.

Carley's relatives:

During the last case opening, a diligent search found Carley's father, James Webster. Brian and Brandi met Carley's father, James Webster and felt comfortable with him continuing to be a part of Carley's life.

James Webster lives just three miles over the border into Ohio. Subsequently, the caseworker encouraged the family to maintain regular visitation between Carley and her father. Hour long visits were eventually lengthened to day long visits. Since that time, Carley and her father have visited consistently, yet not frequently and have developed a positive relationship. Ever since Carley and her two siblings were placed in substitute care, she has been asking to see her father more frequently.

James has a long history of depression for which he used to manage through medication. In the past couple of years, his depression has caused him to miss shifts, resulting in multiple job losses. He is not currently being seen by a mental health provider. He has not been able to find a full-time job. He currently rents a room in a house with other single or divorced men. He considers his sister and brother-in-law, Jennifer Webster-Crow and Ed Crow his primary supports. They live in the same neighborhood as James.

There are no Safety Threats associated with the father." James expresses some ambivalence about being a full time caregiver to Carley, but is considering it.

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Jennifer teamed with the caseworker in developing a genogram of the Webster family. She provided the agency with identifying and contact information for the known Webster family members to the fifth degree. Three weeks after placement, the agency mailed letters to these relatives informing them of Carley's placement and invited them to contact the agency to explore being team members. Over a dozen relatives contacted the agency. Although none of them so far can commit to being a permanent resource for Carley, three have agreed to be part of the team. As relatives are contacted, they are also asked to provide contact information for additional family members. The agency continues to contact newly found family members and invite them to be on the family team.

Christian's relatives:

Brian had some concerns about the agency seeking out Christian's father and Cameron and Christian's paternal relatives as he believes most of them are "bad news" due to having extensive drug and criminal histories. Generally, Brian's contact with paternal relatives has been minimal. He was not able to identify specific family members other than Christian's father, Michael Johnson, and his own father, Bill (now deceased), who were of concern to him.

Diligent search efforts were successful at locating Christian's father, Michael Johnson. Mr. Johnson has been living in New York for the past two years and has been in and out of psychiatric care for most of his life. He is currently living with his girlfriend. He knew that he had a child with Crystal but lost contact with her soon after she became pregnant. He described his relationship with Crystal as a "fling" and that they were together for only a short period. He comes across as distant and non-engaged. Although he wishes Crystal and Christian well, he expressed no desire in becoming involved in the life of his son, even after a full disclosure interview. He volunteered to relinquish parental rights. The caseworker explained that relinquishment is not currently an option and that it would be in Christian's best interest to know some of his paternal relatives and that they would conduct a relative search. He was concerned at first about this, as his family did not know about Christian. He did not want to be identified by Christian as the "dad who gave him up". After much discussion, Michael was finally able to consider Christian's needs and agreed to provide contact information for his mother, Gale Johnson. Michael Johnson's father, Bill Johnson, died of cancer in 2004. The agency subsequently initiated contact with Gale.

Crystal initially had mixed feelings about the agency contacting Gale Johnson. Gale lives in the same county as the Smith family. The caseworker contacted Gale who was surprised to know that she had a grandson. She voiced frustration with her son, Michael, for not telling her of Christian's existence. Gale was informed that Christian was in agency care along with his siblings, due to safety concerns with his mother and his mother's husband. She expressed an interest in meeting Christian, but was not quite sure how she would explain to him who she is. Together, with Crystal's help, the group decided how to introduce Gale to Christian.

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Brandi transported Christian to the agency for a visit with Gale on January 3. The caseworker supervised. Overall, it was a very positive visit (see visitation notes). Christian had questions about his father's absence. Gale answered the questions truthfully, but in an age appropriate way. Gale finds Christian to have endearing qualities, such as his shyness, which Gale says is similar to her son's. Christian feels safe around his grandmother. Gale and Christian decided that they would like to continue visits. Brandi and Brian exchanged phone numbers with Gale so that Christian can talk with his grandmother on the phone. It was decided that another visit would be scheduled after the caseworker makes a home visit to Gale's home to determine safety.

Cameron's relatives:

The agency conducted a search for Cameron's paternal relatives. Contact information for at least fourteen relatives was identified. They included aunts, uncles, great aunts, great uncles, and a few first cousins. Letters went out to these relatives explaining Cameron's identity and encouraging them to contact the caseworker. Two relatives called the caseworker requesting additional information. The relatives are Colin's uncle, Chester Levitt, and aunt, Jana Levitt, both residing in Pittsburgh. The caseworker invited them to be family team members who would work toward providing Cameron with a safe and permanent home. Both expressed disdain and fear of Colin, were appreciative of being notified about Cameron, and concluded that Cameron is in the best place with his maternal relatives. The caseworker learned that Colin has "burnt his bridges" with most family members throughout the years. He has borrowed money from many of them and has not paid back his debt. Jana reports that she does not allow Colin around her daughter, Bobbie as his behavior can be quite hostile, erratic and scary to her. The last time he came to her house, he was extremely drunk, tripped up her front stairs, gave himself a bloody nose and scared her young children. She mentioned that she would be surprised if many other Levitt relatives made contact with the agency, as they all feel similarly to her in regards to Colin. Jana noted that the family members that have not become disgusted with Colin have their own problems with drugs. Jana agreed to send the caseworker some photographs of Colin and his family throughout the years, as the caseworker explained that the photographs would be used for Cameron's Life Book. Jana agreed that she would like to meet Cameron if the agency could assure her safety and could guarantee she would not have any contact with Colin.