

Family Connections



SPRING 2020

Opening his heart and home

Before they even knew one another, Jackson Duncan and Zymir Cobbs had a connection through similar experiences in their lives. Both had had to deal with trauma in childhood and both found an outlet in sports. When they did meet, the connection flourished.

And now that they are linked together as father and son through adoption, their connection is forever.

Duncan was 9 years old when his mother went to prison for killing his father because of alleged abuse. Now, at 35, he can reflect on that time and the impact it had on him.

“It’s part of my story,” he says, “with my seeking male approval because that’s something I didn’t have—a strong male figure in my life.”

That void was a driving force that led Duncan to start Focused Athletics, which provides mentoring, workout sessions, tutoring and SAT preparation for disadvantaged youths.

Above all, the organization works to surround its young students with positive male role models. The nonprofit works with coaches at Philadelphia-area schools to identify promising student-athletes who can benefit from what the organization offers.

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A super special time

Through an initiative of the Philadelphia Eagles football team, the story of Jackson Duncan and Zymir Cobbs came to the attention of NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell and the three met on the sidelines of the Philadelphia-Seattle game Jan. 5.

That was exciting enough, but Goodell had more in store: Duncan and Cobbs, two football fanatics, would become his guests at the Super Bowl in Miami Feb. 2!

What was even more special was that they made the trip as father and son because the adoption of Zymir Cobbs-Duncan by Jackson Duncan was finalized Jan. 15.



Tips for bonding with your foster youth

When families are first making decisions about whether they want to foster or adopt, one of their main concerns is: Will I be able to bond with a youth who is not mine biologically?

I recently read an article written by Matthew Kaplan called “How to Bond with a Child in Foster Care.” Kaplan offered eight tips to help parents create a meaningful relationship with a child who is in foster care. It can sometimes be challenging to establish this relationship because youths are untrusting as a result of past abuse or neglect; they have had adults in their lives they could never trust nor count on.

Here are a few of Kaplan’s ideas to help in development of a bond:

Be Honest

To create a relationship of trust, be honest. It’s impossible to form a bond without trust. Kids appreciate open, honest conversation even if the topic is uncomfortable to discuss.

Find Their Interests

As new parents of youths in foster care, find out what interests they have and then find opportunities for them to participate. This step shows caring and helps in the development of a trusting relationship. If they tell you they don’t have any interests or don’t know what they like to do, offer them a variety of opportunities to participate in something they may enjoy.

Maintain a Connection with the Birth Family

Research has shown that maintaining a connection with birth-family members can be important for healing. When you provide youths with the chance to stay connected, this shows that you care about them. Most youth in foster care feel they were torn away from their families.

Ask Thoughtful Questions and Value Answers

Just as we want our thoughts and feelings valued, so do the youths. By asking open-ended questions in ways that show caring and then valuing their thoughts, opinions and contributions, you build trust and increase participation in the family. They will see you as a trusted ally. Some of the best places to have these conversations are when you are driving, taking a walk or engaging in an activity together to decrease eye contact.

Positive Parenting

Parenting can be difficult at times, so it is important to have solid, effective parenting skills to help address the mental, emotional and behavioral needs of youths.

Diakon offers CORE—Critical On-Going Resource Family Education—which is state-of-the-art training to equip parents with skills necessary to meet the needs of youths who have moderate to serious emotional and behavioral challenges.

There also are many other ways to prepare yourself to parent by reading, attending workshops or online trainings. In addition, participating in a support group can offer new ideas on parenting. A listing of multiple parenting resources is available at Child Information Gateway (child-welfare.gov).

Provide Structure/Be Open-Minded

Many of the youths in care have come from unstable families and they have never been able to truly trust adults because the families have been unreliable and unstable. Most have come from environments where there was no routine or structure in their lives, so providing youths with a structured home life will help them feel safe. Some ideas include having a set time for meals, routines for bedtime and homework and regular fun family activities.

Tailor Your Actions Based on Developmental Age

Youths in foster care are often a bit behind developmentally because of their past experiences, so be sensitive to this fact when thinking about the best way to determine their care. Also, each youth is unique so take that into consideration as well.

Maintain Realistic Expectations

Self-care is very important. Make sure you are taking care of your own needs, so that you can be in an ideal state to care for your youth. Remember, you are not super-human!

To read the complete article by Kaplan or learn additional parenting tips, visit www.nacac.org/resource/successful-foster-adoptive-parents/

Kathy Roach
Executive Director
Diakon Adoption & Foster Care



Making connections for support

Topton Area

While many activities have become virtual because of the COVID-19 crisis, the information below is provided for awareness.

Diakon's **Post Permanency Support Group** was established more than 10 years ago to help families who have achieved adoption, permanent legal custodianship or formal kinship connect with one another. This group provides a comfortable setting for families to ask questions, share struggles and celebrate successes.



The Post Permanency Support Group recently moved to Diakon's Topton location and meetings had been held the second Tuesday of every month from 6:30 to 8 p.m. When the groups are in session, child care is available. Light snacks are provided; however, families are welcome to bring dinner to enjoy.

For information on next steps following the restrictions of the COVID-19 emergency, please contact Jen Roe (Roej@Diakon.org) or Sara Rarick (Raricks@Diakon.org).

Central PA

In "normal" times, our **Kinship Support Group** meets monthly in York on the third Thursday of the month.

We also offer a **traditional support group** and an **LGBTQ support group** that had been meeting monthly. Meeting dates will be announced later.

For more information in the meantime, please email Kimberly James at JamesK@diakon.org or Michelle Brode at BrodeM@diakon.org.

Spreading the word at the Farm Show

Capital Region Staff worked at the 2020 Pennsylvania Farm Show Statewide Adoption & Permanency Network/ Pennsylvania Adoption Exchange booth, sharing information about foster care and adoption with Farm Show attendees.



Nationally Licensed Foster Homes

2019 **225,000**

2018 **215,000**



20 states saw a decline.
Pennsylvania was one of the states with the largest decline.



Finalizations

Thorien
Feb. 27, 2019
Bryan and Bethany
Perry County

Madison, Henry and Ira
March 14, 2019
Levi and Caitlin
Cumberland County

Elena and Stephanie
March 28, 2019
Wesley and Amy
York County

Ethan, Evan, Eli and Eian
April 5, 2019
Dan and Catherine
York County

Ana and Donald
May 15, 2019
Edward and Stephanie
York County

Anayla and A'milla
June 26, 2019
Allegra
Lebanon County.

James
July 17, 2019
Randy and Susan
Dauphin County

Joziah
July 17, 2019
Cody and Rebecca
Adams County

Nylah and Kai
July 23, 2019
Matt and Jennifer
Northampton County

Matthew and Joseph
July 30, 2019
Christopher and AmyJo
Northampton County

Patrick and Sophia
July 30, 2019
Jeffrey and Jennifer
Northampton County

Morgan
Aug. 2, 2019
Bradley and Tammy
Lehigh County

Nathaniel
Aug. 2, 2019
Joel and Arrianna
Lehigh County

Anessa, Elijah, Michael
and Anthony
Aug. 5, 2019
Sharnette and Arthur
York County

Blakely
Aug. 13, 2019
Curtis and Kayla
Northampton County

Everett
Aug. 16, 2019
Steven and Millicent
Berks County

Brayden
Aug. 20, 2019
Rayan and Darius
Northampton County

Jeremy
Aug. 23, 2019
Rosalie and Galen
Berks County

Nicholas, Brigg and Chase
Aug. 23, 2019
Philip and Angela
York County

Brooks
Aug. 26, 2019
Timothy and Heidi
York County

Ny'layla
Aug. 26, 2019
Sean and Michelle
Lancaster County

Benjamin
Aug. 27, 2019
Richard
Northampton County

Sophie
Sept. 5, 2019
Emily
York County

Jakar and Jakii
Sept. 23, 2019
Rebecca
York County

Aiden
Sept. 25, 2019
Rafael and Betsy
Berks County

Ariana
Oct. 1, 2019
Nicole
York County

Kayleigh and Bella
Oct. 8, 2019
Richard and Jade
Northampton County

Manny
Oct. 16, 2019
Josh and Stephanie
Lehigh County

Jameson and Lilly
Oct. 18, 2019
Charles and Nancy
Cumberland County

Hailee and Layla
Oct. 22, 2019
Bethanie
Berks County

Kayden
Oct. 22, 2019
Denise
Northampton County

Michael and Matthew
Oct. 22, 2019
Angel and Maria
Northampton County

Benjamin and Emma
Nov. 7, 2019
Eric and Claudia
Montgomery County

Chloe, Alivia and Sophia
Nov. 13, 2019
Collin and Patricia
York County

Mason
Nov. 14, 2019
Justin and Nicole
Perry County

Cameron
Nov. 27, 2019
John and Natalie
Berks County

Sophia
Nov. 27, 2019
Ana
Berks County

Mia
Dec. 2, 2019
James and Michele
Berks County

Anthony, Aydiin, Kayleigha
and Kylianna
Dec. 6, 2019
Kiki
Berks County

Anna and Gabriel
Dec. 10, 2019
Lori
York County

Triniti and Aurora
Dec. 10, 2019
Taya and Felicia
York County

Chase
Dec. 12, 2019
Tammy
York County

Hailey
Dec. 13, 2019
Nicholas and Gabrielle
Lehigh County

Mi'Journi
Dec. 17, 2019
Angela
York County

Sebastian and Daniel
Dec. 17, 2019
Wilson and Lina
Northampton County

Mark
Dec. 18, 2019
Martin and Savannah
Berks County

Anthony and Ciara
Dec. 20, 2019
Ann
Berks County

Asher
Dec. 20, 2019
Brian and Jennifer
Berks County

Ezekiel and Moses
Dec. 20, 2019
Joseph and Naomi
Berks County

Joshua, Cora and Jacob
Dec. 20, 2019
Jonathan and Amy
Berks County

Lucas
Dec. 20, 2019
Mark and Robin
Berks County

Parker, Connor, Elliot and
Aiden
Dec. 20, 2019
Jacob and Maxine
Berks County

Emma
Dec. 23, 2019
Jeremy and Jennifer
York County

Mayson and Jherica
Dec. 23, 2019
Scott and Mary
Berks County

Kingsley
Jan. 13, 2020
Michael and Susann
Cumberland County

Cheyenne
Jan. 21, 2020
Louis and Lynette
Berks County

Bentley, Jayden and Avianna
Jan. 28, 2020
Hairo and Joanna
Northampton County

Kyle
Jan. 28, 2020
John and Judith
Berks County

Patricia
Feb. 3, 2020
Richard and Cassandra
York County

Isachey
Feb. 5, 2020
Gary and Samantha
Berks County

Kayden
March 2, 2020
David and Jessie
Berks County



David and Jessie
adopted *Kayden*
on March 2, 2020.



Angela adopted *Mi'Journion*
December 17, 2019.



Joanna and Hairo adopted *Bentley*,
in Joanna's arms, *Jayden*, and
Avianna on January 28, 2020.

Finalizations Continued



Randy and Susan adopted *James* (held by Randy) on July 17, 2019.



Sophie was adopted by Emily on September 5, 2019.



Jeff and Jennifer, far right, adopted *Sophia*, held by Jennifer, and Patrick, standing in front (right) with new brother Emmett. Also celebrating the occasion are new sisters, far left to right, Julia, Genevieve and Olivia.



Joshua, Cora and *Jacob* (left to right) were adopted by Jonathan and Amy on December 20, 2019.



John and Judith adopted *Kyle* on January 28, 2020.



Asher was adopted by Jennifer, holding him, and Brian, far right, on December 20, 2019. Asher's four new siblings also are part of the special family photo.



Louis and Lynette adopted *Cheyenne* on January 21, 2020.



Triniti and *Aurora* were adopted by Taya and Felicia on December 10, 2019.



Gary and Samantha adopted *Isachey* on February 5, 2020. Pictured, left to right, are Gary, Osiris, Amia, Isachey, Aleya, and Samantha.



Mark and Amanda and their son, Jackson, officially welcomed *Danielle* and *Chas* (little boy with curly hair) to their family through adoption on 3/16/2020 at Berks County.



Bethanie adopted *Hailee*, in her arms, and Layla on October 22, 2019.



Tammy adopted *Chase* on December 12, 2019.



Kiki adopted *Aydiin*, *Anthony*, *Kayleigha* and *Kylianna* on December 6, 2019.

Help us to find *forever* families



Kaseem, age 14

Kaseem is an action-packed youth who is a huge fan of superheroes! Among his favorites are the Flash, Captain America and the Hulk. But Kaseem is a superhero himself as he has many amazing qualities and talents. He says his superhero powers are that he is “Athletic, smart, nice, and a good friend!” Additionally, Kaseem has an artistic side to him. He loves to be challenged by his peers to draw whatever they name. He has drawn fun subjects such as llamas, Pokémon, and tacos. Critical thinking is another of Kaseem’s superpowers. He enjoys playing challenging games such as UNO, checkers and chess, as well as putting together model toys. Kaseem would like a family who shares similar interests as his and who is kind. He would also like a family who will allow him to stay in contact with his siblings, because this is important to him. Kaseem will do well as the only or youngest child in the family and he looks forward to having a loving forever family who will always support him. A family will need to be patient in building a trusting relationship with Kaseem. Please contact Helene Kosciolk at kosciolk@diakon.org for more information.

Lenny, age 14



One thing you should know about Lenny is that he loves to laugh and make others laugh as well! In fact, he tells everyone his nickname should be “Laffy Lenny.” It does not take long to get to know Lenny. He enjoys relaxing in a comfy chair chatting about his favorite things, while also learning more about you. Lenny is very personable in that way. As a teenage boy, Lenny has a big appetite and wants families to know how much he loves sweet potatoes! Other favorites are cauliflower and carrots. Lenny would love a family whose members gather in the kitchen and make a sweet potato recipe with him during the holidays. He’s also very helpful in the kitchen and doesn’t mind doing the dishes. Lenny needs a family who will continue to teach him life skills to help him achieve success as he grows older. A family with understanding of special needs also would be beneficial to Lenny’s long-term goals. Please contact Helene Kosciolk at kosciolk@diakon.org for more information.

Children in foster care created beautiful artwork for residents of The Lutheran Home at Topton to enjoy. The senior living community is streaming photos of the artwork on internal screens. The project was the idea of Patti Menow, a permanency supervisor; the Rev. Colleen Kristula, chaplain, then coordinated getting the artwork included in the video stream. To keep everyone safe, photos were taken of the artwork and emailed, rather than having multiple people touch the artwork.



Game, set, match: What it takes to find a forever family

Game, set, match is the complicated scoring system in tennis.

Matching a family and a youth is just as complicated; sometimes the experience goes through varying degrees of complication, which is why recruiters of both families and children are so jubilant when a match finally occurs between family and child.

Finding a match is never easy or straightforward. It's never magically generated. It's hard work, time, effort, understanding and commitment on everyone's part, not just the family's or the child's or the workers' parts.

The characteristics and traits of the child have to be taken into consideration; the family's dynamic has to coordinate with the child's wants and needs. Ultimately, all the work involved moving a match forward can pay off as a successful, permanent and joyous union.

Of course, each match is special.

As just one example, the path of Christian and his forever family's connection illustrates what a winding road a match can take; it did not result from a straight linear path.

As youths in foster care youth often do, Christian traveled a lengthy road of uncertainty, ambivalence and often ambivalent support, resulting in the curved and indirect path he walked for years.

In the end, thankfully, Christian got to his final destination: a true supportive, responsive parent. Christian required specific characteristics in a family for him to be successful as a person. Luckily, there was a family who was able to respond to Christian's needs and respond with warm, generous open arms!

Christian and his family mirrored each other. They were relaxed, non-confrontational, flexible and understanding of each other. Thank goodness for Christian's forever family!

We all have different and unique traits. As adoptive parents, we can seek a (forever) child who's comparable to us, as well as compatible with us, perhaps a match "made in heaven." As foster children, we can be our true selves and look to our workers to help us locate the best possible forever family for us.



Christian was adopted by Kim on November 22, 2019.

Opening his heart and home *Continued from Page 1*

That's how Duncan met Cobbs, who was 15 at the time and had been in foster care since he was 5. A few times through the years, he had been placed with families but those placements did not work out. When he met Duncan, he was living in a group home in North Philadelphia and attending Imhotep Charter School, where he played football.

Duncan, a former football player at Franklin & Marshall College, saw something of himself in Cobbs.

"I had that connection with Zymir as guys who didn't have a strong male role model growing up," Duncan says. "Young guys can look at the wrong guy for that...and they know it's wrong. But that's what happens."

The road to adoption

In Duncan, Cobbs found a kind, understanding man, who shared his passion for football and physical fitness. As their bond grew stronger, Cobbs made a bold move—he asked Duncan to adopt him. And while the idea took Duncan completely by surprise, he ultimately took the steps needed to become a foster parent and to adapt his city living accommodations to accommodate a teenager.

There were definitely bumps in the road, Duncan says, as he established more structure and insisted on more responsibility from Cobbs. That included getting better grades. But from his own life experiences, Duncan knew how to help teenagers succeed but parenting a teen was way more challenging, he quickly learned. Cobbs is "headstrong," Duncan says, and they "buted heads."

But the two have come a long way from those early days of getting used to their new relationship. Cobbs is a freshman at Lackawanna College in Scranton where he has found success both in the classroom and on the football field. Duncan has converted a South Philadelphia triplex into a single home with six bedrooms and three bathrooms and on Jan. 15, Duncan legally adopted Cobbs.

Plus, he is now fostering two more teenagers: a boy and a girl. The household also includes Duncan's girlfriend, Haley Houck, a former Temple University lacrosse player.

Focused on teens

Focused Athletics works with teens who can benefit from strong mentorship, guidance and support. That mission mirrors Duncan's journey as an adoptive parent and his current fostering arrangement. His commitment to help make lives better for older children in the foster-care system is contagious.

"For me, I would only want to take kids 16 years and older," he says. "At Focused Athletics, we have made open spots available for kids in the foster-care system. Our concept is to let potential foster parents come in, watch a workout, maybe start to build a relationship. If it happens organically, that's great."

Diakon Adoption & Foster Care works with other related agencies on the Older Child Matching Initiative specifically to help find forever families for older youths.

"Youths can stay in foster care until the age of 21 if they are in an educational setting, are working at least part-time or have global developmental needs," explains Karen Knodel, MSW, LSW, manager of permanency services and grants for Diakon Adoption & Foster Care. She worked with Duncan and Cobbs to complete their adoption process. "Older children do get adopted, but not as often as we would like."

Duncan's enthusiasm for how he can make an impact both personally and through Focused Athletics is evident.

"I enjoy every second of it," he says. "It's a lot of fun. I love having purpose and seeing change."

He puts his work with Focused Athletics in a business context.

"We are a nonprofit, but we have a 'product' in a sense and our product is incredible young men who will give back."

That sounds a lot like what Duncan also is accomplishing as a foster and adoptive parent.

2019 NATIONALLY COMPLETED ADOPTIONS



52% by foster parents



36% by relatives



12% by individuals or couples*

*Neither kin nor foster parents



Brian, far left holding a checkered flag, joined race-car driver Matt Hirschman, his family and team in Victory Lane.

Life-changing experience drives a desire to be the best

Last summer, Marian Kolcun, M.S., a child-specific recruitment specialist for Diakon Adoption & Foster Care’s Older Child Matching Initiative, accompanied a youth awaiting adoption to a very special event. The experience had a life-changing impact.

By Marian Kolcun

Matt Hirschman of Northampton is a race-car driver. He joined with “Adopt Lehigh Valley Kids” to help 14-year-old Brian promote himself for adoption on TV. Matt, his father, Tony, a former race-car driver himself, and several other

members of Matt’s family, along with his racing team, showed Brian the equipment and the skill and conviction it takes to be a champion driver.

Brian was overwhelmed by the experience. He listened intently to Matt and Tony as they talked about what it takes to be a winning driver—a lot of practice, intense passion to be the best and the humility to learn from one’s mistakes.

Matt showed Brian a trophy he had earned and Brian’s eyes got as big as they could be! The racing champions knew what they were talking about; the trophy proved it. The experience left an indelible impression on Brian; he, too, wants to be a champion someday. The occasion had been an amazing life lesson. Brian wanted to be as successful as Matt and his family and team.

Next, Matt offered Brian the opportunity to attend an upcoming race in which he would be competing. Long story short, Brian, a friend of his and I attended the race. We dropped Matt’s name at the entrance, got in at a nominal price and sat to watch the race. We were all mesmerized as the cars went around the track, taking turns owning the lead and sometimes falling back.

We all cheered on Matt, providing him with “our” advice on how to win the race. Then we met up with some of Matt’s



Racecar driver Matt Hirschman shows Brian his largest trophy.

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

Information Sessions

Families interested in learning more about adoption and foster care are invited to attend Diakon Adoption & Foster Care's free informational sessions, now being held virtually.

Please consult our website for updated lists as meeting times can change.

For information in eastern Pennsylvania, please call (610) 682-1504 or email DryC@diakon.org or check the website at www.diakon.org/adoption

For information in central Pennsylvania (Mechanicsburg), please call (717) 795-0320 or email SpurgeonS@diakon.org or BrodeM@diakon.org

For information in central Pennsylvania (York), please call (717) 845-9113 or email JacksonC@diakon.org or CroneH@diakon.org

Training Classes

Please go to www.diakon.org/adoption for information on training sessions, now being conducted online.

Life-changing experience

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family on the sidelines, cheering him on but cautiously monitoring the race with headphones, listening to strategies being provided to Matt to help him win. The boys were intrigued by the use of headphones.

Matt's family was confident he would win; they invited us to go to Victory Lane with them when Matt finished. Ultimately, luckily and skillfully, Matt did win!

We proceeded with Matt's family to Victory Lane. The boys saw firsthand how the victor gets "the spoils." There had been a generous cash prize, plus lots of photos, camaraderie and accolades. What an awesome setting! Brian and his friend witnessed how hard work pays off, how success requires hard work and how both teams and families can work together toward a goal and achieve that goal. What an amazing lesson for Brian and his friend!

The generosity of Matt, his team and his family to invite us to share the winning moment with them was so special! One could live an entire life and not have an opportunity such as that.

Thanks you for the memories, Matt Hirschman and family and team—you changed lives!

(Brian is currently living with a family with the expectation of being adopted.)



First Presbyterian Church in Allentown put together, donated and delivered 40 wonderful Easter baskets for our youth in kinship care.