

Reunification: Growing Together

We often share stories

of COBYS families and adoptions. Adoption stories are heartwarming and natural milestones on the journey of foster (and former foster) children. Adoptions are a time to celebrate new beginnings and to reflect on the journey so far.

This isn't an adoption story. It is instead, a story that often occurs, but is rarely able to be told, for so many reasons. It is a story of reunification. Having children reunify with their biological parent or parents is almost always the primary goal of foster care. But for reunification to happen, vital changes must be made by the biological parents. This is a time of change, adjustment and hard work.

One important factor to a successful reunification is the relationship between the biological family and the foster family. The most successful outcomes generally occur when both families engage in the relationship.

This is a story of such a relationship. For privacy sake we have changed the names of the biological family members to mother Brianna and twin boys Logan and Luis. We are grateful to both the biological and foster families for being so open in sharing their experience, and present this story in their own words.



This story begins with Amy and Justin Martin, a new-to-foster care couple with no biological children. They shared what led them to foster care and COBYS.

A&J: There are several reasons and they all come back to Jesus and His love for children and their families. We really hoped and prayed specifically that we could form a good relationship with the parents of any children in our home. We couldn't have even imagined how awesome that relationship would become.

We chose COBYS to get licensed through because we love the extra support we get through them. We have been foster parents for three years.

Their immersion in to foster care came quickly with a placement request.

A&J: Logan and Luis were an easy "yes," and it was our first phone call! They were in our home for two years, so that gave plenty of time for about a million wild rollercoaster rides and

unexpected turns. It was over the beginning of the pandemic so we all made adjustments to zoom visits.

The relationship between biological and foster parents can understandably be fraught with tension, resentment and animosity. But trust and faith can soothe those emotions and lay the groundwork for progress. Both families weigh in on their relationship.

A&J: Relationships are hard but so worth it, especially for the children. We can't begin to imagine the extra stress the children feel when there is tension between the families. On one of the first visits the boys' mom said to me, "I'm relieved now that I met you. Everyone told me how bad foster parents are. I was so worried for my boys." It made me really stop and think about how awful that had to feel, we were determined to continue to show her that her babies were safe.

Brianna: I was afraid at first where my kids would be or who they were with. I heard nothing but horrible stories of

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We do realize that while we did work for a good relationship with bio family, so did they! We would never have this type of relationship if they wouldn't have worked equally as hard for it. – Amy Martin, foster mom

Mission Statement

Motivated by Christian faith, COBYS Family Services educates, supports and empowers children and adults to reach their full potential.

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Fostering Hope is the quarterly newsletter of COBYS Family Services, a Christian family service agency, affiliated with the Atlantic Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren.

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"It's Part of Their Journey"



One of the things I like to do is attend staff department meetings. I don't attend all these meetings, but when I do, I am always encouraged when I hear about the services that programs provide and the difference we are making in the lives of our clients. One phrase I hear with some regularity is, "It's part of their journey." It might have to do with a decision that was made by the courts that didn't go the way we wanted and negatively affects a child. It might have to do with a bad choice one of our foster kids made. It might have to do with an action that has serious consequences for one of our birth families.

The phrase is not spoken in judgement nor with any malice. It is often spoken in a very matter-of-fact nature. (When your job is dealing with kids that have been abused, a challenging court system, and parents, you learn to speak about such matters in matter-of-fact ways. Not always. There are times when the emotions grab us, sometimes when we least expect it. We are, after all, a caring bunch. But there are lots of people to care for, and we must figure out how to care for people without allowing each case to wreck us.)



I like the phrase because it applies to each of us too. Each of us has had experiences that shaped who we are. Some of those experiences were completely out of our control. Others were consequences of decisions that we made. I also like the phrase because it isn't the end of the story. The abuse and neglect our kids experience and the really bad choices that our birth families have made are not the end of the story. It just part of their journey. My faults, sins, bad choices don't define me. They are part of my journey, but those things do not define me, nor will they have the final say in my life. Your choices, those really bad things that have happened to you are part of your journey. Those things aren't the end of the story, just part of the story.

For the past 26+ years, part of my journey has been as an employee of COBYS, serving the last 13+ years as executive director. A LOT has happened over those years! But after much consideration, conversation and prayer, I made the decision to retire from COBYS, bringing a close to this part of my journey. Things are going well at COBYS. COBYS is a strong organization with a very strong team of employees. But it's time for me to move on. My last day has not yet been determined but I plan on serving at least through the end of this year. I look forward to continuing our journey together until that time.

Mark Cunningham,
 Executive Director

Life is Sacred
 Integrity
 Faith
 Teamwork
 Servanthood

Core Values:
LIFTS

COBYS Board of Director News

COBYS Family Services is happy to introduce two new members to our 2023 Board of Directors.



Sheri Johnson

Sheri Johnson is an administrative assistant for the Special Education Office as well as a fiscal aide for the Business Office of

Solanco School District. She is a member of Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren. At church, she plays the piano and is currently serving on the Ministry Commission, Church Board and Executive Committee in the role of church clerk. She has previously served as a youth advisor.

Through the Atlantic Northeast District of the Church of the Brethren, she has served as a District Conference and Annual Conference delegate. She enjoys singing with Southern Lancaster County (SLC) Community Choirs and has served on the board of directors for the organization. In her spare time, she loves to camp and hike, and has recently taken up running. With her children now independent, and after spending many years and hours volunteering with kids' activities like band or scouts, Sheri is looking for some new ways to volunteer and be involved in the community. So, when she was asked to serve on the COBYS Board, it seemed like the perfect fit.

Sheri has participated in the COBYS Bike & Hike, our signature fundraiser, many times, with her kids even coming home from college for several years so they could continue to participate. In a previous professional role of preschool director, Sheri worked with COBYS staff to present parent trainings for the school. "I am looking forward to serving on the COBYS Board of Directors and working with other individuals to continue the mission of COBYS, helping children and families in our community."



Rachel Bucher Swank

Rachel is in her 13th year of teaching, currently as a 7th grade general music

teacher and acting as the middle school musical director at Manheim Township Middle School. She has a Masters of Education in at-risk populations as well as a certificate in peace building and conflict transformation from Eastern Mennonite University.

She is also currently a student at Elizabethtown College, pursuing a Masters of Music and Peacebuilding. In her free time, she loves spending time with her husband, Mike, and daughters Annika (9) and Quinn (4), cooking interesting new foods, reading anything her book club throws her way, enjoying live theater, volunteering as a director at Camp Swatara for two different camps, and continuing to explore her call as a Church of the Brethren licensed minister. Rachel and her family, who worship at Mt. Wilson Church of the Brethren, regularly travel to Austria and surrounding countries to visit friends and family, giving her girls a chance to practice their German, and connect with new people and cultures.

Rachel appreciates the grassroots approach COBYS takes to walk with children, youth and families as they journey together through the foster and adoption process. "My family welcomed foster children all throughout my childhood, including my two twin sisters, now permanent members of our family." Rachel and her husband have financially partnered with COBYS for many years in appreciation of our unique organization as well as a thank you for helping to complete her childhood family. She is excited to serve on the COBYS Board because it allows her to support COBYS in new and exciting ways.

ExtraGive 2022 Recap

COBYS Family Services would like to extend our sincere thanks for all who supported us during the ExtraGive. This 11th annual day of giving in Lancaster was organized and sponsored by the Lancaster County Community Foundation along with the High Foundation and other Lancaster businesses.

Over \$58,800 was donated to support the ministries of COBYS during the 24-hours of giving on November 18. That support helps us start 2023 on a solid financial foundation, making the COBYS Difference in care possible.

And that total will grow. Once the results are all tallied, COBYS will be awarded Stretch Pool funds based on the number of unique donors, which this year totaled 219 unique donors!



Matching Families

Finding just the right match for many things can be challenging. Sometimes in the services COBYS provides, finding the right match in a forever home or adoptive family is a process of relentless determination. When conditions add layers to the process that traditional placements don't have, it takes Matching.

Children with special circumstances make it more difficult to find the right family - the right match. Those factors could include:

- Being 10 years old or older
- Being part of a sibling group
- Having significant emotional, behavioral or medical needs

Matching is funded through the Pennsylvania Statewide Adoption & Permanency Network (SWAN). The Matching process has the goal of putting families and children in a situation where they can thrive, grow and flourish. The process has a few unique attributes:

- Staff learn as much as they can about each child's specific needs and the available families by reviewing family and child profiles and communicating with both parties.
- During reviews, special attention is given to understand things like family dynamics, needs of children already in a home and household finances.
- When a family is identified as a potential resource for a child, the family is interviewed by the county through which the child is placed.
- A series of pre-placement visits occur to see if what looks like a good match on paper, is in person and all parties get to interact with each other in different situations.

The Resource Home Unit provides the COBYS Difference with their diligence and determination and creativity in matching children and families.

THE COBYS+DIFFERENCE

COBYS Care Fund

Designating your donation

Throughout the year, our generous donors provide sustaining financial gifts in many ways, providing the COBYS Difference in our shared ministries.

As we begin 2023, here's a brief reminder of how you can designate a gift.

General Fund – Giving to our General Fund provides COBYS with resources to use where needed most across the organization. Work in child welfare and human services has shifting needs throughout the year, and having unrestricted funds allows us to respond to these needs. Donations given through special events like the Bike & Hike, or that are not designated for another purpose, go to the General Fund.

COBYS Care Fund – Sometimes our supporters want to give to something more selective. Our COBYS Care Fund allows that, enabling our staff to go above and beyond to provide our clients with care to meet their unique needs. Donating to COBYS Care Fund supports:

- **Counseling** – We recognize the importance of mental health and this fund helps provide access to services to as many children and adults across our community as possible, filling funding or coverage shortcomings.
- **Enhanced Child Preparation Services** – Our highly trained and compassionate caseworkers (who are CAREworkers) connect with children in the foster care system by providing child preparation services. Your gift helps enhance these interactions. It is the difference between just meeting with a young child in a park or going on a bowling outing. It is providing a small, occasional, "just right" gift to make a teen feel like they are being heard. These things change the interaction and a somewhat small change can make a profound difference.
- **Lessons, camps, educational opportunities and special life experiences for foster children** – Our resource families go above and beyond for kids in their care by getting them connected with these special opportunities. It can have an enormous impact on their lives. It can also be expensive and often isn't covered by the modest county funds families receive. Your gift to this fund provides discretionary funds to support families and kids with these memorable experiences.
- **Kids Closet** – We receive many donated items, but when a toddler needs a 2T coat and we don't have it in stock, we can make that purchase. Kids are special and sometimes their clothing and personal care needs are special too.

For more detailed information about the COBYS Care Fund and the latest needs list for the Kids Closet, please visit www.cobys.org/support-us/needs-list/.



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things happening to children in foster care. Throughout this process, the Martins have been nothing but kind, dear and supportive. We consider them as family. Establishing a foundation and relationship with the resource parents helped me in this journey because they loved my children and myself no matter our background and who we were. My kids love them as much as they love us.

A&J: I will never forget the first Mother's Day we had Logan and Luis. My emotions were all over the place. We had a zoom call with the boys' mom and I could tell she was struggling too and before we ended the call she said, "Happy Mother's Day, Amy." I don't think I managed to say much then but I cried as soon as the call was over. It meant the world to me and changed how I felt about myself as a foster mother. We personally never had safety concerns for the boys, so building that relationship was considerably easier because of that. Often it is recommended to put boundaries and safeguards in place with the bio family, we never did this and it has never been a problem. We liked to come to visits early or stay after to talk with them. We sent emails and texts with updates. Now being the people who are missing the boys, always wondering how they are doing, we are thrilled when we get an update or picture! This relationship has blessed us so much, the boys and their family really are family to us.

There is a dire need for resource families who are open to foster siblings. What do you think is unique about fostering twin children and why it is so important to keep siblings together?

A&J: It was wonderful that they had each other through all the changes. Even if bio mom and dad or foster mom and dad weren't there, their brother always was.

What characteristics do you think are important and help you to be successful as foster parents?

A&J: The things that helped us were



It was wonderful that they had each other through all the changes. Even if bio mom and dad weren't there, their brother always was.

– Amy Martin, foster mom

reminding each other reunification is the goal.

Communicate directly with bio parents as much as possible. This helped us a lot, hearing from them where they were on the case plan. Often I would get updates from the caseworker and bio mom around the same time. Foster parents need to treat bio parents how they would want to be treated if they were in that situation.

Brianna: The foster care process is tough in itself. There's a lot of requirements that need to be fulfilled before you're reunited. Have patience.

The foster care process can be difficult for all parties, but can you comment on misconceptions about the families in the foster care system?

A&J: A misconception is that they are so different from us, but they're not. One difference was the healthy support we are very accustomed to, they did not have this.

What was a good support system like for you, for the twins?

A&J: We have an incredible support system. One that we have been able to share with the boys' family even after reunification. Our friends have been able to babysit the boys when we were not able to. The thing that was the best support was seeing people truly love the children along side us, no questions asked and no expectations on the child. I often had people go along to take them for visits and appointments. The added support and extra hands helped things go better. It was not uncommon for clothes and food to show up on our porch. All the support we had made it easier for us to support bio family.

This is a reunification story, can you describe what that transition home felt like for you?

A&J: I'm not sure there are words to describe this feeling. Our emotions contradicted themselves. We were heartbroken as we packed up all their things and yet we were rejoicing because a family was reuniting. We knew how hard the parents worked to get the boys into their home. It helped so much that the parents continued to remind us that we can still be in the boys lives, we really held onto that.

We have been able to babysit the boys since reunification. Transitioning from foster parent to babysitter was easier than we thought it may be. We asked the mom how she wants us to handle them calling us mommy and daddy. She told us to allow the boys to call us whatever they want. She added it would be confusing to the boys to suddenly not allow them to call us mom and dad.

Now that you also have a biological son, what hopes do you have for the future of your family and the boys?

A&J: We hope to always be in their lives. We hope Logan and Luis always love to come over and know they will

Current Programs

Blues Program for Teenagers

See description on the next page.

Cooperative Parenting & Divorce

See description to the right.

Incredible Years Autism and Language Delays Program

This 11-session program is geared to parents of young children (aged 2-9) on the Autism Spectrum or with language delays in order to promote children's emotional regulation, social competence, language skills, school readiness, and relationships with others.

Incredible Years for Lancaster County

See description to the right.

Parenting Autism (an educational discussion group)

This educational discussion group is for parents and/or caregivers raising children on the spectrum, providing education, advocacy and support. Join other families who are sharing the same experiences and challenges that you face every day. Wednesday evenings from 8-9 p.m.

Parenting Wisely

This highly interactive, evidence-based, curriculum provides parents and youth (ages 9/10 and over) with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to build stronger parent/child relationships and to promote regular school attendance. (Also available for parents of elementary-age children ages 4-8.) This online program is free for Lancaster County residents and referrals.

Seeking Safety

See description at right.

COBYS Family Life Education

COBYS Family Life Education Department offers a broad range of family life education programs. While we are best known for our parenting courses, our programs share the common goal of supporting the development of human potential by providing parents, other adults and children with information and skills to foster cooperation, courage, responsibility, self-esteem and respect. For a complete list of available courses and available times, visit:

www.cobys.org/family-support/programs-offered/

Incredible Years is a comprehensive program designed to support parents and their children (birth to 12 years old). Using the evidence-based Incredible Years Parenting Program, this 10-week program supports attachment and parent-child interaction, encourages positive parenting, and increases parents' ability to promote children's social, emotional and academic development.

In addition to the weekly group sessions, educators will also meet with participants for weekly individualized 15-minute Zoom sessions.



- 92% of parents participants had an improved understanding of how to create a positive home environment.
- 84% of parent participants had an improved understanding of child development, health, and safety.

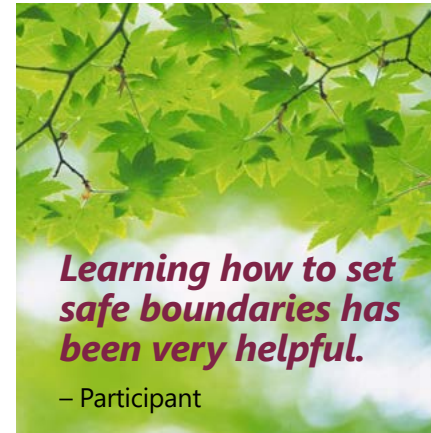
The most helpful information to me was knowing how to bond with my child and how to have a healthy relationship with my child.

– Parent Participant

Cooperative Parenting & Divorce is a skill building program that assists parents in learning to shield their children from parental conflict and guide their children through the process of recovery, while establishing a positive, long-term, cooperative relationship with the other parent. Topics include:



shield your children from parental conflict; disengage from the former relationship; manage anger; establish a cooperative, long-term relationship with each other as co-parents; develop effective communication skills; negotiate agreements in a business-like manner; and increase co-parenting respect. Divorce is a reality for millions of families. CP&D will help parents navigate the challenges of co-parenting and assist them in making an intentional commitment to put their children first.



Learning how to set safe boundaries has been very helpful.

– Participant

Topics include: safety, stress and trauma, healing from anger, grounding, when substances control you, recovery thinking, community resources, healthy relationships, and boundaries.

Seeking Safety is an open-enrollment program. Participants may join the group at any point and receive a certificate after participating in 10 complete sessions.

- 88% have an increased awareness of community resources available to them, as well as having increased their coping skills.

This course helped me learn how to process my trauma and manage my intense emotions. I have learned how to identify my feelings and let them go.

– Participant

The Blues Program

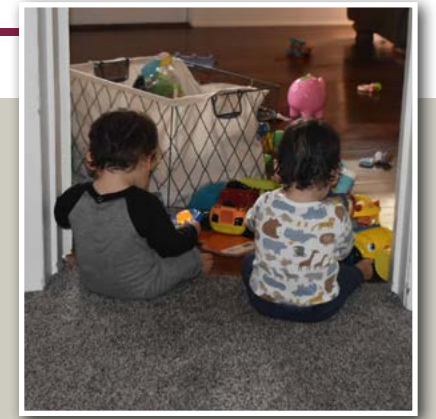
is a group-based prevention program for high school teens with symptoms of depression and anxiety. Students learn cognitive behavioral strategies with a simple focus: change how you think and what you do to feel better.

In addition to training other mental health professionals to teach the program, COBYS facilitated eight Blues Program courses last year, including sessions for teens from across Lancaster County at CrossNet Ministries, Penn Manor High School and St. Paul Lutheran Church in Lititz.



I liked being able to bounce ideas off of each other. That helped me learn about new tools of coping and dealing with different triggers/stressors in my life.

– Teen Participant



Reunification

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always hold a very special place in our hearts. We hope they will always know their toys and beds will be here, and their pictures on our fridge. We hope to continue to support bio family as they parent and have all of our boys grow up together!

Brianna: My goals and wishes for my children and family is that we continue to be this village that we built to raise our families together and always love one another because you never know what someone may be going through in their situation.

A&J: We do realize that while we did work for a good relationship with bio family, so did they! We would never have this type of relationship if they wouldn't have worked equally as hard for it. Trusting us had to feel like a huge risk. Some of the things we did to help build connection was anytime we were making parenting decisions we asked for their input and made a plan together, such as when to take the pacifier, when to introduce solid foods, how to correct behaviors. It was so good for the boys to have consistency between the two families. And it was incredibly helpful to us and helped us feel confident in parenting, as we had never done it before. We also put together a photo book every month and were sure to have milestones written in there. And when we met, even though the twins were young we think it was really good for them to see us talking and laughing together.

COBYS wishes both families all the best as they continue to grow together.



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Is it time?

Foster Care/Adoption

Considering Foster Care or Adoption?

What you should know:

- Approximately 15,000 children in Pennsylvania’s child welfare system are unable to live with their birth families due to abuse, neglect or behavioral problems.
- **The goal of foster care is to assist biological families in resolving the issues** that led to a child's placement, facilitating reunification as quickly and safely as possible.
- **Foster care is intended to be temporary for children.** If families cannot be reunified within 15-20 months another permanent option, such as adoption, is pursued.
- **Who Are Resource Families?**
 - COBYS Resource Families are married or single persons, families with or without biological children, and families with and without a stay-at-home caregiver.
 - They have a common a desire to share love and stability with children in need.
 - Resource Families provide love, guidance, nurture and structure children need to heal from past experiences and realize their God-given potential.



**For more information visit www.cobys.org/foster-care/request-information
 email careforkids@cobys.org or call us at 717-656-6580**