

# My Journey Through Child Welfare

*From Sister to System Reformer*

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## Abstract

This autoethnographic manuscript traces the author’s lifelong journey through the U.S. child welfare system—from growing up as a sister in a foster family to becoming a system reformer shaping state policy and practice. Drawing on decades of professional experience in county and state child welfare administration, the narrative foregrounds connections—to family, kin, place, culture, and story—as both a personal lifeline and an ethical cornerstone for child welfare and nonprofit practice. Through concrete initiatives such as “The Adoption Option,” “Families for Kids,” and statewide Family Finding, the manuscript illustrates how centering children’s relational ties can transform foster care, adoption, and permanency planning away from practices that sever identity toward approaches that honor belonging, openness, and children’s voice in their own journeys. Interweaving intimate stories of love and loss with reflections on policy debates, organizational culture, and collaboration between governments and nonprofits, the piece advances practice-oriented recommendations for expanding adoptive eligibility, elevating lived experience in leadership, and designing child welfare systems that treat connection—not removal, compliance, or data systems—as the guiding principle for decisions affecting children and families.

**Keywords:** *Foster care and adoption, nontraditional partners and providers, collaboration, connections*

## Introduction

From growing up as a sister to more than 70 foster youth and throughout my long career in child welfare working with children and families to creating state programs, I have learned a lot about the ways in which we can better support those who are impacted by the system. Below is my story. Based on my personal and professional

experiences, I make recommendations throughout this story about how nonprofits and governments can better support the child welfare community.

### **Beginnings**

I was born in a small village of about one thousand people in New York State (NYS) in the 1940s. I lived with my mother, father, and grandmother in a small farmhouse on a dairy farm. I had two biological siblings, my brother, Howard, and my sister, Shirley. After World War II, child welfare experts advocated for family care over orphanages for children, as orphanages were known to be damaging to child development. Hence, when I was five years old, my mother and father became a foster family, bringing 70 foster children into our home through the early 1980s.

At first, we fostered primarily adolescents whose parents visited them at our farm. Later on, we cared for newborn infants who came to stay with us awaiting adoption. Of these 70 children, we adopted two: my brother, Robert, and my sister, Bobbi Jo. And so, I grew up with a kaleidoscope of siblings of all ages, intellectual capacity, and interests. I, myself, excelled in school, and prepared to go to college with the thought of becoming an archeologist, but . . . While I majored in English in college preparing to be an educator, one of a very few professions opened to women in the 20th mid-century, I quickly realized that teaching was not for me. After graduation, I got a job teaching English to 7th and 8th graders in Upstate New York. I did love the children in my classes but really disliked the work. Every day, I gave the students writing assignments, and every night I had to review and grade their papers! So, in the spring of 1969, I resigned from my teaching job and got a job at Livingston County Department of Social Services as a caseworker, drawing on my experience as a member of a foster family. My assignment was recruiting foster families in the Nunda-Portageville region. My career as a public service worker in child welfare began.

I continued to stay in touch with all of Mom and Dad's foster children. With one it was love at first sight: DEBBIE. Debbie was placed with my parents as a two-month-old foster child, I absolutely fell in love with her. I wanted to adopt her, but public policy at the time regarding ability of divorced individuals to adopt, and my divorce from my husband James made me unacceptable as an adoptive parent. It was not until the 21st century that the child welfare system accepted different types of family configurations, including single men and women, as adoptive parents. Debbie was placed for adoption in 1973. Immediately and coincidentally, I was promoted to Livingston County Director of Services. The work helped to distract me from my sadness.

**Recommendation 1:** Governments and nonprofits should work with families that are often considered non-traditional (those who are not in an opposite-sex, married dyad) to explore how these families can be included as foster and adoptive parents and the training needed to bring diverse families into the foster care system.

Before turning to the broader reforms and activities that helped me forge my career, there is one small boy whose presence still guides my choices. The following poem, "Crystal Blue Eyes," captures how his gaze became a guiding image for my life in child welfare and my resolve to keep children and families at the center of every decision.

CRYSTAL-BLUE EYES  
BY LINDA KURTZ

His eyes stayed with me  
For a very long time.

The little boy with crystal blue eyes first looked up at me with tears tracing down his cheeks.

"Kenny," I spoke to him softly. But he rolled over to avoid contact and instead wanted to cuddle with our half-collie/half German shepherd named Boy. Boy proved to be a magnet for our foster children when they first arrived in foster care and needed a sense of safety.

I stood and watched Kenny settle down,  
then finally,  
fall asleep on the big, gentle dog.

About three months later, when I was at school,

Kenny's Mama showed up to take him home.

I never saw him again.  
But how I worried! Kenny had come to us because he had been maltreated at home. Had his mother been sufficiently helped? Would Kenny now be safe?  
And grow up a healthy child?

When I became an adult and had the opportunity to make a difference on behalf of children like Kenny,

I often caught Kenny's eyes staring up at me,  
Glaring when my strategy seemed to not be on a path that would really help,  
Shining with approval when I got it right.

As I write this,  
I am reminded  
how frequently one child can touch your heart,  
and demand that you follow a challenging path until  
you achieve the goal.

Ah, Kenny's blue eyes are more than just a reminder;

They call to me to do my best,

my very best,

On behalf of children and their families.

*Thank you, Kenny. And all the Kenny's I met along the way.*

Based on my aptitude for delivery of services to children and families, I was quickly promoted to supervisor of Child Welfare, then to Training Director, and then to Director of Social Services, under Commissioner Robert T. Fox, in Livingston County.

During my time in Livingston County, I had substantial contact with New York State's Department of Social Services (NYSDSS or DSS). When the State of New York had an opening for a new Regional Director in Region 2 (Rochester overseeing nine counties), the state officials I had worked with reached out to me. I was just not convinced this was the right move for me. I drove to the cemetery in Owego, where I

“talked” to SaSaNa Loft, the Native American girl who had a gravesite there and was my longstanding muse who often helped me create an atmosphere of acceptance and confidence. I prayed, I wrote in my journal, and I still didn’t know what to do. I packed up to go home, and as I drove over the bridge that crosses the Susquehanna River, I felt the answer. I decided, “Yes.”

And a week, later, I became a state employee!

**Recommendation 2:** More research and discussions can help us understand the unique relationships that nonprofits and governments have in foster care.

### **Scope of My Work: System Reform from Enforcement to Collaboration**

I supervised the counties of Region 2: Monroe, Chemung, Steuben, Livingston, Ontario, Seneca, Schuyler, Yates, and Wayne, and the staff who were state representatives to those counties. In addition to working with state staff, I worked closely with the voluntary agencies that contracted with counties to provide preventive, domestic violence, foster care, and adoption services, including Hillside, St. Joseph Villa, Glovehouse, and Snell Farms.

The county DSS provided casework to families and children where the child was neglected or abused and needed to be placed in foster care or had been in foster care and “freed for adoption;” they did the necessary work of adoption services. While the term “freed for adoption” is rightly bothersome to many given its linguistic ties to slavery and property, the term is a legal term that indicates the biological parent(s) have gone through a legal process that removes their permanent rights as legal guardian. My job was to set standards for good child welfare work, train staff in the necessary skills, monitor their practice, and help them improve where necessary.

While quite a bit of administrative work came with this new position, there was also an opportunity to set new standards for child welfare casework to better service children and parents. In addition, there was oversight of individual cases, particularly in crisis situations. For example, when a child living in an institution was abused, I supervised IAB (institutional abuse) staff who investigated the report. And when a child in Region 2 died, and the death was suspected of being at the hands of their parents, I supervised Fatality Review staff who investigated the county DSS who investigated the child’s fatality.

The previous Regional Director had seen his role as one of *enforcement* of policies and procedures. But given my previous experience as a child welfare worker and my experiences growing up in a home with foster children, I saw the role of the state with the counties and voluntary agencies as one of *collaboration*. I strove to have my Regional Office work with the county DSS and voluntary agencies to assess their performance, create a plan to improve where necessary, monitor their implementation of the plan, and assess the results together, collaboratively. In addition, I helped the county DSS and voluntary agencies collaborate with each other through an effort I created, “Joint Planning,” where I facilitated monthly meetings with Directors of Services and CEOs of voluntary agencies. During these meetings we communicated with each other about shared needs, shared problems, and children in the custody of DSS who needed immediate attention. This model became quite celebrated across the state. Looking back, I strongly believe my facilitation skills and commitment to collaboration were part of the reason for our success.

**Recommendation 3:** Future work in nonprofit studies can explore ways that collaboration between foster care agencies and families can improve supports and services for children.

### **Connections: Broadening the Impact of My Work**

Several years on, I was asked by the OCFS Associate Commissioner of Child Welfare to move to Albany and become a Bureau Chief, supervising the five regional directors of the five regional offices! I needed to decide what to do. I went to the Glen Iris Inn in Letchworth State Park and spent the afternoon lying on the hill above the falls, pondering, as is my practice when contemplating a new move: “Linda, find a quiet space and meditate on the choice facing me. Suddenly a crow flew overhead.” He said to me, “TIME TO GO.” And I got up, packed up my journal, and drove home to type a note to the Associate Commissioner to tell her YES and ask when did I need to start.

Arriving in Albany to begin my new position, I quickly became acquainted with a variety of state actors in the child welfare system. Some were good and caring individuals, some lacked leadership skills, and most were very kind. Others were precise regarding the approaches we should take and were excellent administrators. One in particular impressed upon me, quite frankly demanded of us all, that we work together to better serve the minority populations in foster care.

Given my background and life experiences, I began speaking out about the direction of policy for families and children. Given that I was in an operational position, those in the policy office felt I was crowding in on their territory. However, my observation was that most in this office had zero experience in the field and had little understanding of the issues faced by families we served. Further, most county DSS administrators applauded my ideas and the new direction I was advocating for. I was seen as a person who had experienced the child welfare system firsthand as part of a foster family caring for these youth, a perspective that was and remains unique. And this was when I began drafting position papers, not only for state administrators, but for elected legislative leaders as well. And I began to meet with members of the NYS legislature advocating for the following:

1. Being able to use extended family and neighbors to provide care for children when they needed to be removed from their parents for reasons of neglect or abuse.
2. Keeping children in foster care within their own neighborhood, so that they would feel *connected* with their community.
3. Placing siblings together when they came into foster care to keep as much of the family together as possible.
4. Giving foster parents ten-day notice when a child was leaving their home to facilitate sufficient time and preparation for what follows next in ways that ease the continued transition.
5. Keeping an original birth certificate open for adult adoptees, so they could know who they are. Open meaning that the adoptive couple knew the birth mother and vice versa. For additional discussion on the ethics of adoption, open adoptions, and adoptee experiences, see Meyer (2025) and Nelson et al. (2025) in this special issue.

The universal need for *connections* became my underlying theme. Imagine my chagrin when New York State decided to implement an electronic case record named Connections. It became a hateful name of a hateful case record that took too much casework time away from children and families.

But to me, connections has always meant being connected to your family of origin, being connected to your neighborhood, to your school or place of employment, to your extended family—to your *Ohana* (Hawaiian concept) or your “kin,” to your ancestors and their story. In order to have a complete sense of self and be able to accept new family and friends throughout a child’s life, it was necessary to provide connections for those who came into the care of the state. My understanding of connections became my driving force in preventive services, child protective treatment, foster care services, after-care services, adoption services, and independent living services. And before too long, connections became a central theme of the foster care system— both family care and group care—as well as child protective services and after care.

### **The Adoption Option: Families for Kids**

I was working closely with a state employee who had close connections to the Cuomos (Mario Cuomo was governor at the time). He became troubled by how many children were in foster care awaiting adoption. During this same time, I had begun meeting with prospective adoptive parents who complained about how difficult public agencies made the adoptive process. We began to strategize on the systemic changes that were needed to bring about much needed reform.

I brought to our “planning discussion” my growing concern about how our NYS adoptive process asked our children to sever their ties to their connections, and “be born” on the date of their adoptive placement (no matter how old they were and how long they had known and even lived with their family of origin and/or extended family or kin). Shortly thereafter, I appointed him supervisor of the adoption unit. One day we were relaxing in Letchworth State Park—I needed to find a space where I could contemplate steps that needed to be taken—and we talked about our shared experiences and concerns including his experience with adoptees coming to him to learn about their birth families, and about their birth siblings—most importantly, we discussed solutions! We wrote our Plan down and named it “The Adoption Option.” One new step was to involve “freed for adoption” children to participate in their own search for an adoptive family.

We needed to “sell” our idea to our own OCFS administration and to the NYS legislature. We decided to ask Mrs. Matilda Cuomo, first lady of the State of New York, to be the point person for our Adoption Option album, featuring pictures of and statements by NYS “freed-for-adoption” children. Knowing the Cuomos personally, the head of my adoption unit arranged a meeting for us with Mrs. Cuomo. She took a shine to me and with my personal story about growing up as a biological child in a foster family that for two of the children became an adoptive family.

In a short while, the Kellogg Foundation approached NYS with an offer to give us a substantial amount of money if we improved our child welfare system. We asked Mrs. Cuomo to submit our Adoption Option. She re-named it “Families for Kids” and asked me to serve as Project Director. We met with adoption agencies, units, and staff, adoptive families and birth families, and adoptive youth and adult adoptees across NYS

to ask them to speak to what would improve our efforts to connect all “freed” children with a family of their own and support adoptive families once the children are placed.

Adult adoptees, adoptive families, birth parents, and adoption staff heard that we were creating a plan to improve adoptive services in NYS based on their input, and they began calling to request meetings with me and tell their story. Thus, we won the Kellogg Foundation approval for our “Families for Kids” plan.

Then the gubernatorial election was held, November 1994. Mario Cuomo ran, and ... lost. The Kellogg Foundation withdrew their funds and support.

Governor Pataki withdrew the governor’s support for our plan. And I was asked to wrap up my work as Project Director. We had begun the work of the Adoption Option/Families for Kids, and now we needed to discontinue our work.

**A Surprise Awaits!** But instead, our work had taken hold in the county DSS and voluntary agencies. We were asked by them to continue implementation in a collaborative style with adult adoptees, “freed for adoption” youth, adoptive families, birth parents, foster families, county DSS, and voluntary agencies that provided child welfare services. Our “assignment” had become a statewide “movement.”

### Family Finding

One day I was watching CNN, and Leslie Stahl interviewed Kevin Campbell. He had developed an approach to connections he called Family Finding. I was intrigued by what I heard and invited him to come to New York State and present on his initiative. He promised each child who had become estranged from their family or roots to reconnect them. As a result, NYSOCFS committed to develop a statewide plan, county by county, utilizing a Family Finding approach.

We decided we needed to work with a Voluntary Agency that would develop Family Finding expertise and then provide statewide training to county DSS and their voluntary agencies that they contracted with to provide child welfare services. OCFS chose Hillside to develop a training curriculum and develop the expertise needed so that training would lead to organizational change and, ultimately, to improved casework practice that successfully created family finding in the lives of the children they served.

I wanted to play a central role in the development of the training curriculum and implementation of organizational change to positively impact casework practice. Accordingly, I retired from NYSOCFS in May of 2010 and was hired by Hillside Family of Agencies. I began working with Hillside and their contract agency to develop a “Training to Practice” curriculum that translated staff training into concrete changes in day-to-day casework. I worked at Hillside as Senior Fellow of Family Finding from 2010–2013. Knowing that family connectedness is key to the healthy development of children, the program focused on making sure that youth in out-of-home placements did not lose their connections to family members and other supportive adults. We developed a pathway to permanency in six steps: Discovery, Engagement, Blended Perspective, Decision Making, Evaluation, and Follow-Up Supports (Family Finding, n.d.).

After this assignment, I began doing independent consulting, most notable being work with Hawaii on assessing and improving their child welfare system in 2014.

**Recommendation 4:** Nonprofit studies can explore policies on how to create a balance between adoption and keeping individual and familial identities for foster children who are free for adoption.

**Recommendation 5:** Nonprofit studies, as an interdisciplinary field, can use research from social work, public administration, and psychology to help those working in foster care to create environments that better support the families with which they are working.

### **Loss Expands in my Life (and hurts more)**

But as life does to all of us, I found myself dealing with many losses in my own family. Mom died September 8, 2001, her husband having predeceased her 17 years earlier. Her calling hours were on September 11, 2001, and her funeral September 12, 2001. My older brother Howard died on October 8, 2003. In 2017, my brother Rob, who lived in Austin, developed heart congestion. His cardiologist recommended a heart transplant, and in the meantime, a Ventricular Assist Device (VAD). In August, Rob entered St. David's Hospital to have it installed. His daughter Monica and I waited there for word of his surgery. Twenty-five days later, Rob passed away. It was time to stop being employed and focus on family and myself. With no restrictions from work obligations, I began to reflect on where I "belonged." I moved to Connecticut to be near my adopted sister, Bobbie Jo, and her two adopted sons!

In my work with a Meditation Practitioner that I had found, he and I began to work on my sense of belonging. He planted the idea that, if I came full circle into an honest me, I can belong anywhere I am. And that the way to belong is through making and growing connections, with family, with friends, with neighborhoods, with places, with concepts, with being myself and being honest.

My mother and father had died, my brother Howard and my brother Rob had died, and my only remaining family were my sisters, Shirley and Bobbie Jo, and her two adopted sons. Yes! When my adopted sister grew up and became of child-bearing age, she and her husband decided they loved adoption. They adopted one newborn from Mexico and one African American. They embraced the concept of open adoption and became good friends with Juilan's "Mama Jen," and the power of connections bled throughout the family. Likewise, I continue to feel connectedness with my entire family—living and departed—in addition to often feeling Kenny's crystal blue eyes on my work—questioning, encouraging, insisting that I do better. Thus, the Linda who grew up on a dairy farm in southern New York State, graduated from a rural school with a class of only 30 children, mourned the loss of nearly 70 foster siblings and two brothers—one biological and one adoptive—and grieved her parents' deaths, became a true force for connections in New York State's child welfare system and, in the end, realized in her own life the power of those connections..

Although losing children was hard (my parents cared for 70 foster children who came to our home, and I had to grieve the loss of 68 of them), looking back I would not have lived my life any other way. My childhood created the Yellow Brick Road straight to my career in my adulthood, and my career was enriching and challenging and I was good at it. None of it was pre-planned, but rather happenstance.

My passionate belief in connections for all of us has come full circle, returning to my own life and asking me to do that which I believed in, taught to others, and advocated for throughout my entire career.

**Recommendation 6:** Nonprofit studies can use the life experiences of professionals and families (many of whom overlap) to create stronger supports for foster care agencies.

### **From Lived Experience to Leadership: A Call to Lead with Connections**

My desire for this autoethnography is to convey the importance of deep, enduring connections—to family, kin, place, culture, and story—and its function as a personal lifeline and a necessary ethical foundation for child welfare policy and practice (see also Allen & Irizarry, 2025). My story highlights how growing up in a foster family, loving, and losing nearly 70 foster siblings, and grieving multiple family deaths transformed the Linda of today from “sister” to “system reformer.” Involvement in the child welfare system can be rewarding in so many ways, including for those of us who get to grow our families and communities—and ultimately our holistic sense of self.

While everyone’s path will be different, it is important to note that today’s Linda is grounded in abstract child welfare policy debates AND in lived experience. A key lesson learned is that the child welfare systems must prioritize maintaining and rebuilding children’s connections (to birth families, siblings, communities, and ancestry) rather than severing them in the name of safety or administrative efficiency. Concrete initiatives like “The Adoption Option,” “Families for Kids,” and statewide Family Finding are presented as examples of how centering connections can reshape adoption, permanency planning, and child welfare and human service casework practice.

Additionally, recall my experience with Debbie in 1973. While the work served as a helpful distraction from my sadness, from this experience, one practice proposal emerged: child welfare and adoption agencies should expand eligibility so that single adults and unmarried couples can be fully considered as adoptive parents when they can provide safe, loving, and stable homes for children. Unfortunately, not much change or progress in this area has been achieved in the U.S. child welfare system as of yet.

Finally, I share my story with readers to help them realize that rather than just critiquing practices that erase or hide children’s origins (e.g., closed records, “born” at adoption) we can insist that identity, belonging, and psychological safety depend on honoring relational ties and giving children voice in their own permanency journeys (see Berry-James, 2025; Irizarry, 2025; Ruiz, 2025). My hope is that my story helps readers see the power of connections and encourages them to use their own lived experiences—their stories—to foster effective leadership in child welfare because that only grows from reflective attention to one’s own attachments and losses. All readers should consider this story a call to design and lead child welfare systems that treat connection—not removal, compliance, or data systems—as the guiding principle for decisions affecting children and families.

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