

Danielle Smith

“God only gives his toughest battles to his strongest soldiers.”

Page 7



INSIDE

2

Agency Updates

3

Fort Bend Post Adoption Program

4

It Takes a Village

5

The Pelt Family Spotlight, Part II

6

Meet Our Kids

7

Danielle Smith: A Voice for Change

8

Blizzard of Giving

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Shannon Kinney - *Chair*

Amanda Venta, Ph.D. - *Vice Chair*

Whitney Cox - *Secretary*

Chris Dodd - *Treasurer*

Riz Amanullah

Andrejka Bernatova

Julie Comiskey

Stephanie P. Fleck

Katie Bailey Grahmann

Richard Holt

Kurt Hueni

Sidney E. Lacey

Kristen Olson Lyons

Amelia McKnight

Anthony J. Nocella

Marla Oates

Dylan Parker

Peter C. Retterer

Daria M. Russell

Stephanie Sanders

David Thaxton

Mindy Vela

ADVISORY COUNCIL

Kathy Schenck - *Chair*

Mary Banks

Mark Dobbins

L. Paul Gerson, M.D.

Pat Kiley

Elizabeth Labanowski

Lance Loken

Samuel Luna

Tricia Miner

Melva M. Meronek

Ramona Ortiz

Corine Prieto

Brian Romere

John Seo

Lee Vela

PRESIDENT AND CEO

DeJuana S. Jernigan, MSW

LEADERSHIP STAFF

Annie Richardson

Director of Development

Arianne Riebel, LMSW, LCPAA

Director of Foster Care and Adoption
Services

Rachelle Webster, LMSW, LCPAA

Director of Compliance, Post Adoption
and Post Permanency Services

Take the First Step Information Meeting

Are you interested in learning more about how you can transform the lives of children in need through foster care or adoption?

Take the first step by attending one of our monthly Information Meetings, where an Arms Wide Coordinator will talk through the process of fostering or adopting from foster care and answer any questions you may have. Visit armswide.org/events for more details.

Share and Connect Fuel Our Mission

We are always seeking new ways to share our mission, and we want to expand our connections in the community. Would you be willing to connect us with your workplace, place of worship, or another group? Invite us to send one of our team members to talk more to your network about how they can transform lives through foster care, adoption, kinship care or post adoption services. If you are interested in helping us share our mission, please contact Development and Marketing Coordinator, Emily Person, at eperson@armswide.org.

Stay In The Loop Follow Us

Arms Wide Adoption Services posts updates regularly! Stay in the loop by following us on social media [@ArmsWideTX](https://twitter.com/ArmsWideTX) and visiting our blog at armswide.org/category/blog. You can also register to receive our online communications at <https://www.armswide.org/get-our-newsletter/>

Fort Bend Post Adoption

Arms Wide serves nearly 1,000 children and their families annually through the post adoption and post permanency programs. One of those is the Fort Bend Post Adoption Program, which provides therapeutic resources and bonding opportunities for families in Fort Bend County.

Ballgames are a favorite activity among families! There were all smiles in the box suite when families enjoyed a Sugarland Skeeters baseball game this summer, especially when the Skeeters' Swatson dropped in for a visit!

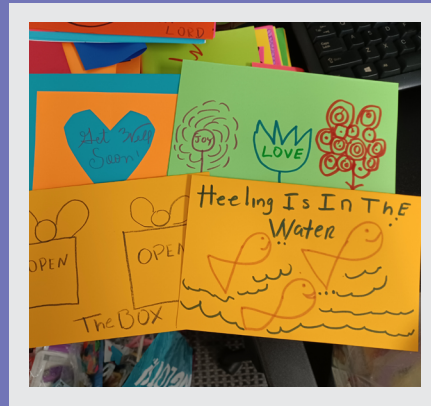
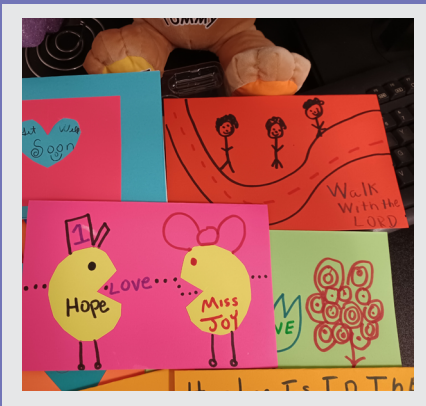


Celebrating Cynthia

This November, we celebrate Cynthia Couch as she retires from Arms Wide Adoption Services. She has been with the organization since 1997, and we will miss having her as our **Post Adoption and Post Permanency Supervisor**. Here are just a few highlights from her long list of accomplishments!

- Helped shape Houston's original **Post Adoption Family Preservation Support Group** for over 20 years
- Coordinated **Mother's Group** (a support group for adoptive mothers) and parent training for Spanish-speaking families
- Supervised Arms Wide's expansion to **Post Permanency Services**, programs supporting kinship families

Cynthia has dedicated the past 36 years of her career to youth mental health services. Thanks to Cynthia, thousands of children and families have received the support services they need to thrive. **Thank you for all your contributions—and congratulations on your retirement, Cynthia!**



Every holiday season, our kids give back. Children and teens in the Fort Bend Post Adoption Program have a tradition of decorating greeting cards for veterans and serving them a holiday meal. Our kids love sharing their creative talents through their artwork!

MSR Houston Charities Drive for Kids

MSR Houston Charities' inaugural [Drive For Kids](#) event in September raised over \$27,000 for Arms Wide Adoption Services. Dozens of high-end sports cars purchased charity parade laps, and spectators got to take in the beautiful cars up close in the exhibition center. Thank you to Houston's car club community and all participants who raised funds to support the children and families we serve! Mark your calendars for Saturday, September 24, 2022 to join the fun for the second annual Drive for Kids event.





It Takes a Village

Black children enter the foster care system at a rate of more than twice that of their peers. They face unfair barriers to permanency, and as a result, often experience more negative outcomes than other children.

Arms Wide Adoption Services launched [It Takes a Village](#) in May 2021 to disrupt this disproportionality. Through this initiative, we are identifying nurturing, culturally competent families to parent Black children in foster care in our community through fostering or adopting.

We are also creating a community to educate the public about the need for foster and adoptive families for Black children. Our **It Takes a Village Advisory Committee** helps us engage with members of the community to share the message of the needs of children in care and identify support resources. **It Takes a Village Parent Mentors** help guide other foster and adoptive parents in meeting children's cultural needs. Through family engagement activities like our recent Family Game Night, foster and adoptive families enjoy each other's fellowship and build a support network to lean on throughout their foster and adoptive journeys and beyond.

Join Our Village

Support our initiative to disrupt the disproportionality of Black children in foster care.

- *Open your home to a child in need through foster care or adoption*
- *Be part of a community network that provides resources to empower Black children and their caregivers*

Together, we can improve outcomes for Black children in foster care in our community. Email info@armswide.org to Join our Village.

The Pelt Family Spotlight, Part II: We Are Jordyn's Village

The Pelt Family Spotlight Part I (Spring 2021) featured their first adoption journey. Andrew and RaKeesha Pelt first came to know Arms Wide through RaKeesha's sorority sister, who had a good experience with the agency. After much prayer and thought, they decided adoption was best for growing their family, so they adopted Cameron in 2020. But their journey did not end there! Part II of their Family Spotlight features how they adopted a second time and created Jordyn's Village. Andrew and RaKeesha will also serve as foster parent mentors for Arms Wide Adoption Services' [It Takes a Village](#) initiative to support other foster and adoptive parents..

A Change of Plans

After adopting Cameron in 2020, Andrew and RaKeesha knew they wanted him to have a sibling. What they didn't know was how quickly that would happen! Although their original plan was to wait to adopt another child until after Cameron was older, their plans were upended at an Arms Wide holiday party.

At the holiday party, Andrew and RaKeesha were sitting down with Cameron when an Arms Wide staff member introduced them to baby Jordyn, who was in foster care at the time with another Arms Wide family. RaKeesha felt then and there that she was meant to be Jordyn's mom. After that day, Andrew and RaKeesha started the adoption application process again.

"Originally, we wanted to wait until Cameron was a certain age," RaKeesha said. She offers advice to anyone in a similar situation: "Be willing to throw your plan out the window!"



Creating Jordyn's Village

Adoption journeys are complex and winding. It takes time and patience while the courts determine which path to permanency is going to be best for the child. During times of uncertainty, Andrew and RaKeesha sought strength from their support network. "We relied on family, friends and faith: we knew it would work out how it was supposed to," RaKeesha said.

Ultimately, it was decided that Andrew and RaKeesha were the best family for Jordyn. They made weekend visits to Jordyn's foster family and slowly started bringing Cameron along so the future siblings could get to know each other. In November of 2020, Jordyn joined the Pelt family permanently.



Jordyn's adoption was finalized in July of 2021. Because of the pandemic, the adoption finalization took place on Zoom with over 70 friends and family members in attendance. "We were so relieved and happy," RaKeesha said. Those 70 friends and family members who stood by Andrew and RaKeesha throughout their entire journey are now—as the sign in their yard indicated—Jordyn's Village.

Advice for Future Adoptive Families

Andrew and RaKeesha want to encourage future foster or adoptive families to make the leap to change a child's life. "There is never going to be the perfect time when finances are in place and the house is perfect. Especially in these times: life is fleeting, so go with your gut and ride the wave." Just as Andrew and RaKeesha found strength in their Village, they hope others find the same. "Understand it is a roller coaster, and there are going to be highs and lows," RaKeesha said. "Surround yourself with people who are going to support you."



Meet K'Vonnta

K'Vonnta is 13 years old and in the 8th grade, and he has been in foster care for his entire life. In the past, he has been hesitant about adoption as a permanency plan because of fears of being rejected, but he is now open to the idea of meeting a loving and patient family. K'Vonnta has said “At first I may be nervous and shy to meet an adoptive family but after getting to know them I hope they would like me”.

K'Vonnta is a gamer, and he enjoys playing his PS4—especially when he has someone to play against! K'Vonnta also enjoys playing basketball and football, and he hopes to try out for his school team this year.

To get to know K'Vonnta better, email Arms Wide Adoption Services at info@armswide.org.

Community Giving

We are so thankful for community partners who invest in our children and families!



The Astros Prom Series donated dozens of stylish back-to-school outfits for our teen girls to help them look and feel their best for the new school year.



KPMG LLC is hosting a Holiday Gift Drive to support our children and families in Houston and South Texas for the holidays.



Ascend Performance Materials is leading a Gift Card Drive to bring cheer to older children and teens this holiday season.

Danielle Smith: A Voice for Change



Danielle Smith at her 2021 Prairie View A&M graduation

Danielle Smith, a recent graduate from Prairie View A&M University, dreams of transforming lives of children by improving the child welfare system. After being adopted from foster care through Arms Wide Adoption Services (then Spaulding for Children) when she was 4 years old, she found herself with an adoptive family who loved her unconditionally and pushed her to be the best version of herself. Her internal strength and family support sets her up to use her voice for change to improve outcomes for children in foster care.

Strength from Family

Mr. and Mrs. Smith welcomed Danielle with open arms, and they continued to show up for her in every way throughout her youth. “My family allowed me, my stubborn self, and I to be myself and grow into the strong woman I am today,” Danielle said. “When I was first adopted, I gave them a lot of pushbacks, but they never gave up on me. I am so thankful for them for adopting me and giving me the love, care, and support that I needed and deserved.” The Smith family’s strength is rooted in faith, which has given Danielle the grounding to stay strong in adversity. As Danielle says, “God only gives his toughest battles to his strongest soldiers.”

Shining at Prairie View A&M

In May 2021, Danielle received her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology with a minor in Legal Studies from Prairie View A&M University. She is living proof that persistence and optimism come from the inside. “I am my biggest critic, and I really want to be successful as bad as I want to breathe,” Danielle shares. “Often, we forget how powerful our negative thoughts can be, so I began to only speak and think positively. I kept myself going, because I constantly reminded myself of how I was almost at the finish line.” Danielle has passed this finish line with flying colors, and with her bright future ahead, it is only one of many races she will win.

Bright Future Ahead: A Voice for Change

On the horizon, Danielle will take the LSAT and apply for Law School. She wants to be a strong voice for change in child welfare because she deeply understands the system. And she is already exercising that voice—she was a guest speaker at Arms Wide Adoption Services’ Fulfilling Families Luncheon on September 30.

“There is an overrepresentation of minorities in foster care due to many contributing factors like laws, family and parent disparities, and racism,” Danielle shares. She knows that most people don’t understand how significant this issue is, and she intends to use her voice to affect change. She encourages others to do the same: “Because the kids need you... to advocate to make change in the child welfare system!”



Ms. Smith shares her story with a full ballroom at the 2021 Fulfilling Families Luncheon



6925 Portwest Drive, Suite 110 • Houston, TX 77024
Phone: **713.681.6991** • Fax: **713.681.9089** • Toll-Free: **1.800.460.6298**

NON-PROFIT
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT #8327
HOUSTON, TX

Arms Wide Adoption Services' mission is to transform the lives of children in need of safe and nurturing permanent families. Arms Wide Adoption Services is funded by private donations, the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, and the United Way of Greater Houston.

Blizzard of Giving – Gift Card Drive

Gift cards are the perfect gift for teenagers! Each holiday season, Arms Wide conducts a gift card drive called **Blizzard of Giving**. Gift cards collected during Blizzard of Giving are used as holiday gifts for older children involved in our foster care, adoption, post adoption, and post permanency programs. Any excess gift cards are distributed and given to families in crisis throughout the year to help with emergency expenses. Gift cards from Target, Walmart, Amazon and Visa cards tend to be the most versatile and useful for Arms Wide families. If you want to send some holiday cheer to one of our families, gift cards can be directed to:

Arms Wide Adoption Services
Attn: Blizzard of Giving
6925 Portwest Drive, Suite 110
Houston, Texas 77024

To ensure we are able to provide gifts to our families in time for the holidays, the deadline for 2021 holiday contributions is **Friday, December 10**.

Thank you for your support and for making the holidays brighter for the children and families we serve!