

Defying The Odds

"I want foster kids to know that although you will feel different, there is a light at the end of the tunnel."

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Take the First Step Contact Us

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 and contact us at **713.681.6991** or through our website at **armswide.org** to get started. An Arms Wide Coordinator will talk through the process of fostering or adopting from foster care.

Have you adopted a child or assumed permanent managing conservatorship of a child in Texas foster care? We can also provide support for you! Our permanency support team provides case management, respite care, support groups and more to help your family thrive.

A Year in Review 2023 Impact Report

Last year, we made big strides in expanding and evolving our programs to meet the needs of children and families. Since our beginning in 1977, Arms Wide has matched more than 2,300 children with safe, nurturing permanent families and supported thousands of families through our permanency support programs. Read our 2023 annual report at **armswide.org/about-us/newsletters**.

Share and Connect Fuel Our Mission

Have a story to share? We are looking for foster and adoptive families to speak about their Arms Wide family and journey. We are always seeking new ways to share our mission.

In addition to sharing your story with us, we also 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 and adoption.

If you are interested in any of these opportunities, please contact Communications and Development Specialist, Nikolai Robinson, at nrobinson@armswide.org.

Stay In The Loop Follow Us

Arms Wide posts updates regularly! Stay in the loop by following us on social media @ArmsWideTX, visiting our blog at armswide.org/category/blog, and registering to receive our online communications at armswide.org/get-our-newsletter.

Fun in the Sun with our Permanency Support Programs!

Our Permanency Support programs were hard at work this summer hosting recreational and supportive events to Post Adoption and Post Permanency families in the Greater Houston and South Texas Regions.



Families in the Greater Houston area were invited to events at the Sugar Land Space Cowboys (top left and top middle), Houston Zoo (top right), Sloomoo Institute, and more!



Families in the South Texas area were invited to a day at a go-kart racetrack (above) and a beach day (below), which both included workshops for parents and caregivers.



Defying the Odds: The Merlo Family



When a youth we served reaches out to connect with us, we are overjoyed and excited to hear how they're doing. Recently, Michael Merlo, whom we served through a child-focused recruitment program for older youth in foster care, wanted to reconnect with us and share his story.

Michael was almost a teenager when he first entered foster care. Because of the sheer amount of youth in foster care in Texas and an ongoing shortage of foster families, he had to spend a couple of years living in youth shelters before he was connected with

a foster home. Unfortunately, his foster family wasn't interested in adoption, so Michael knew he had to create a plan for himself for when he turned 18.

“I thought I was going to be on my own, so I told myself I had to do whatever it takes to be successful and not just become another number you see about foster kids,” said Michael.

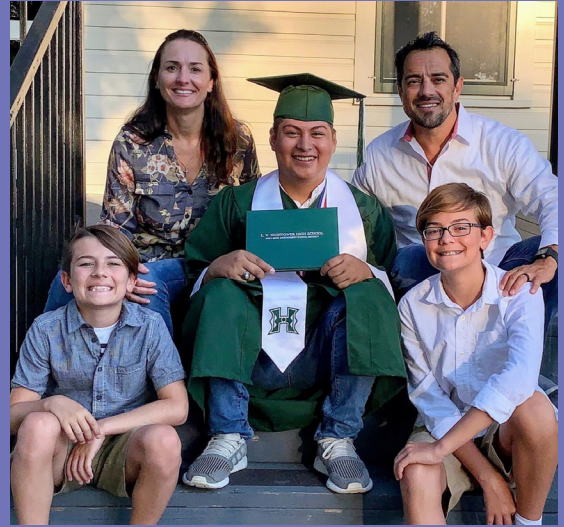
He knew that youth who age out of foster care without a permanent family have the odds stacked against them. Only half of these youth will have a stable income by the time they turn 24. Less than 3% of them earn a college degree. Twenty-five percent of these youth experience homelessness, and within two years after aging out, 25% have been incarcerated.

So, Michael's plan was to enlist in the Army. He had heard that not only does the military provide stability and discipline, but also a family and “brotherhood” he was seeking.



While working with his Arms Wide case worker, Michael expressed that he wasn't looking for adoption at this point, as he had already set his sights on finding family and stability with the Army, but he agreed to be connected with an informal mentor, Josue. A year and a half later, Josue would become his father.

"When I met my dad, I thought he was really funny, nice and well-rounded," Michael told us. "I remember thinking, 'I want to be like this one day.'"



Through this mentorship, Josue offered life advice, guidance and support. Josue and his wife Jessica ended up adopting Michael at 18, and he gained loving parents and brothers not a moment too late. Because of this newfound family, Michael had a home and family to go to when he finished with the Army. He is now driven by a strong sense of purpose, has completed his time in the Army and is starting college to eventually become a nurse. This drive also led him to reconnect with the team at Arms Wide.

"I decided that the best way I can give back to my community is to do anything I can to help parents choose to foster or adopt, as well as help the kids choose if they want to be adopted or mentored."

Michael emphasized that even when kids are in a good home, being in foster care comes with challenges that other kids don't have. Regular activities like riding a bike and going to a water park must be reviewed by a case worker first, and spare time for other hobbies may be taken up by meetings, therapy appointments, and other potential state requirements. He hopes that his story will inspire kids experiencing foster care to persevere.

"I want foster kids to know that although you will feel different, there is a light at the end of the tunnel," Michael said. "You don't have to follow the path that people are telling you to, you can make your own."

If you want to join Michael in supporting youth experiencing foster care, learn more about the process to become a foster or adoptive parent on our website at armswide.org. You can also turn to page 7 to learn about upcoming fundraising opportunities that will benefit the children and families participating in our programs. Any gift, large or small, will help make a difference.



Empowering youth pursuing higher education

Studies have found that only 3-4% of youth who have previously experienced foster care obtain a four-year college degree, and 2-6% receive a two-year degree. With the help of the David and Jacque Holland Scholarship Endowment and the Arms Wide Endowment Trustees, we are able to support youth who wish to continue their education at a college or university.

This year, we were privileged to provide more than \$50,000 in academic scholarships to youth who have experienced foster care and who were adopted through Arms Wide or one of its predecessors, Spaulding for Children or the Christian Child Help Foundation. We are so proud of the recipients and all of their achievements. Against all odds, these students excelled in their education and demonstrated that they are upstanding members of their communities.



2024-2025 scholarship recipient Trey G.

Caring Community



Ascend Performance Materials donated backpacks chock-full of brand new school supplies for children in our programs.



A local crochet group with Spring Branch-Memorial Library donated beautiful handmade blankets for children in our programs.



The 3rd Annual Drive for Kids was a thrilling success that benefitted Arms Wide and Child Advocates.

Support children and families this fall



Save the date for Tuesday, November 12, as Arms Wide participates in Coastal Bend Day of Giving, a 24-hour charitable challenge which will benefit our programs serving families in the South Texas region. All gifts will be doubled up to \$24,000! Early giving is available this year, beginning November 4.

Visit www.coastalbenddayofgiving.org to support Arms Wide!

On **Thursday, November 14**, Arms Wide will host our beloved annual All In For Adoption Texas Hold ‘Em Tournament at River Oaks Country Club.



2023 Tournament winners Joey Kieval, Daniel Mayerfeld and Babak Roozbeh



Each game played supports Arms Wide’s mission of transforming lives of children in need of safe and nurturing permanent families.



All In for Adoption co-chairs Trace Williams and Steve Kennedy



Rod Martin, Annie Richardson, and co-chair Reese Henningsen



Emmanuel and Arva Dearborne



Co-chair Luke Cone with Gerrit and Brittany Van De Graaf

Purchase sponsorships and tickets to this exciting event at www.armswide.org/all-in-for-adoption



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

Give While You Shop:



Preserving & Fulfilling Families

Over the last 47 years, Arms Wide has matched more than 2,300 children with their forever families. Meet a few of the newest Arms Wide families below:



The Payne Family
April 2024



The Elksnis Geisler Family
August 2024



The Bowers Family
September 2024