

The Kids Am

Stories of Courage and Hope

By Anne Cassidy



Care packages from her "surrogate mom" bring a smile to Ariene Goltz's face. "Now I don't feel alone," she says.

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Arlene Goltz wasn't used to pleasant surprises, so when she received the box with a return address from Maryland her first semester away at college, she didn't know what to think. Arlene grew up in foster care and was accustomed to doing things for herself. She certainly wasn't used to getting care packages. She couldn't believe it when she opened the box and out tumbled a brand-new backpack, school supplies and other goodies. There was a letter too, full of details about a woman named Juliet Smith, as well as a host of motherly questions: "What do you like to eat and do?" "Do you have enough sweaters and blankets to keep you warm?" "Let me know what you need."



Caring about Arlene is easy for volunteer Juliet Smith: "She's like a daughter to me."

It might seem a small thing, this homemade, heartfelt gift, but it meant the world to 19-year-old Arlene, now 20. She worked so hard to rise above her troubled family life and earn good grades as she was shuttled from one foster home to another. The first person in her family to graduate from high school, Arlene had scoured the Internet looking for scholarships and loans in order to attend college. That's when she stumbled upon the Orphan Foundation of America (OFA), an organization that gives college scholarships to orphans and foster children. Arlene hadn't realized that OFA volunteers also send care packages to students. Now this woman she had never met was letting her know that someone cared. Suddenly she felt like all the other kids on campus. "I was shocked to receive the package," Arlene says. "All I could think was, *Wow!*"

Arlene was so excited to get the goodies that she wrote Juliet a thank-you note and enclosed a picture of herself. Juliet put the picture in her wallet and wrote back. The friendship blossomed from there. Every month Juliet sent Arlene a package—it might contain cookies, a book, new pajamas—and Arlene sent news about her friends, her classes, school dances. The packages brightened her days, she says, and made her feel less alone. Before long the e-mail messages were flying back and forth. Juliet was impressed with Arlene's pluck and gratitude, with her strong principles and high goals. "I think about her all the time," says Juliet. "In many ways she's like my daughter."

There are many paths to caring. Some are grand, others are as quiet as a note to ask, "How was your day?" Those gifts can mean everything to young people who have no parents, or none they can count on, but who are trying to make something of themselves just the same. Every year about 25,000 foster children turn 18 and age out of the system. Often they are left without any adults to turn to for

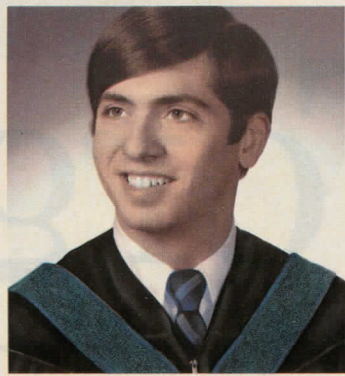
emotional or financial support. Two years after leaving foster care only 50 percent of these young people will have graduated from high school and less than half will be employed. Only 17 percent will pursue post-secondary education—their ticket out of poverty—and nearly 40 percent of these will drop out within two years.

It's as if these kids are orphaned twice, first by their parents and then by the system. That's what Joseph Rivers thought. An unadopted foster child who put himself through college, he founded the Orphan Foundation of America 20 years ago to help other parentless young adults. Since Rivers's death in 1990, OFA's work has been carried out by his foster sister, executive director Eileen McCaffrey. McCaffrey came to realize that it's not just scholarships that keep foster youth in school; it's encouragement and love. It's someone to inspire them when they're discouraged, to recommend them for a summer job—in short, someone to act like a parent. So in 1996 OFA began to match young people with caring adults who remind them to get some sleep and visit the dentist, who listen when chemistry class seems unbearable, who are concerned whether they flunk a test or ace it.

That's what Juliet Smith did for Arlene. Care-package volunteers don't get any special training. They just respond from the heart. So Juliet learned Arlene's favorite color (blue) and her hardest subject (statistics). Little by little, she also learned about her past. Arlene's parents divorced when she was very young, and by age 13 she was in foster care. It was a difficult life for a sensitive young girl. Her grades dropped; she was depressed. One foster mother told Arlene that she would end up as a pregnant high-school dropout living on welfare. "I got so upset when she said that," Arlene remembers. "But I told myself, *You'll see where I am in ten years.* After that day I spent hours sitting in my room studying." Arlene proved the woman wrong. "I made A's and a B the next semester," she says proudly.

Anne Cassidy is author of "Parents Who Think Too Much" (Dell).

Photo: Tom Smart/Getty (opposite page).



Orphan Foundation of America's Eileen McCaffrey continues the legacy of love her foster brother, Joseph Rivers, began 20 years ago.

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Then fate smiled. Her final foster placement was with Larry and Diane Nielson, a couple who raised six children of their own and treated Arlene like their seventh.

Fate smiled again when Arlene entered college and got to know Juliet, who urged her to apply for an Oliver scholarship, the most prestigious award the Orphan Foundation bestows. But Arlene said no, she wasn't good enough. She was haunted by the old message that she would never amount to anything, the kind of message OFA tries to erase. Juliet kept encouraging Arlene, and her persistence eventually paid off. Arlene applied for the \$5,000 scholarship and won it, along with a trip to Washington, D.C., for a week of leadership workshops and meetings with lawmakers and the First Lady. Most important, she finally met Juliet Smith. Winning that scholarship opened doors for Arlene, who attends Utah State University.

Eileen McCaffrey revels in success stories like Arlene's. But she doesn't relax. Her small Reston, Virginia, office is filled with volunteers who read scholarship applications, match students with mentors and help however they can. McCaffrey is a tireless fund-raiser—OFA gave a total of over a million dollars to 300 students last year. But she doesn't overlook the human side of caring. She often has a needy student sleeping at her house or eating chicken soup in her kitchen. She knows how complicated and tenuous a human life can be, especially one on the threshold of adulthood. "Every one of these kids is just hanging on. Their lives could fall apart so quickly," McCaffrey says.

One of the greatest threats is a health problem. Most foster children don't have health insurance. After they've aged out of the system at 18, they spend every penny on tuition, books and rent. When an emergency strikes, they have nothing and no one to turn to. McCaffrey can recite horror stories of illnesses untreated. Were it not for OFA, Tracey Jarvis, a 23-year-old student at St. Leo University in Florida, might have been another sad tale. Last spring Tracey noticed a lump in her back. By the time she went to the doctor, there were several lumps. Tracey had no insurance and was forced to go to a clinic that provides free treatment. After a couple routine tests she received no diagnosis and didn't

know what to do next. She was worried not just about her health but about her finances too. "I tried to apply for Medicaid but was told, 'Sorry, you're not a single parent,'" Tracey says. "I'm a fighter, but sometimes I wanted to give up."

Tracey hasn't had an easy life. When she was 14 years old, her mother was the victim of domestic violence, dying at her husband's own hand. Tracey has been in and out of foster care since then. Fortunately, she lives in Florida and, at the time, was still eligible for assistance through that state's subsidized independent living program, which provides financial support to former foster kids to help bridge the gap between foster care and adulthood. The coordinator for this program knew about Tracey's health problems and also knew she had a scholarship from OFA, so when she ran into McCaffrey at a meeting, she mentioned Tracey's condition. That was all it took to put McCaffrey into action; she immediately called Tracey to offer help. She continued to call every few days to boost Tracey's spirits, all the while searching for a volunteer to help her get the medical assistance she needed.

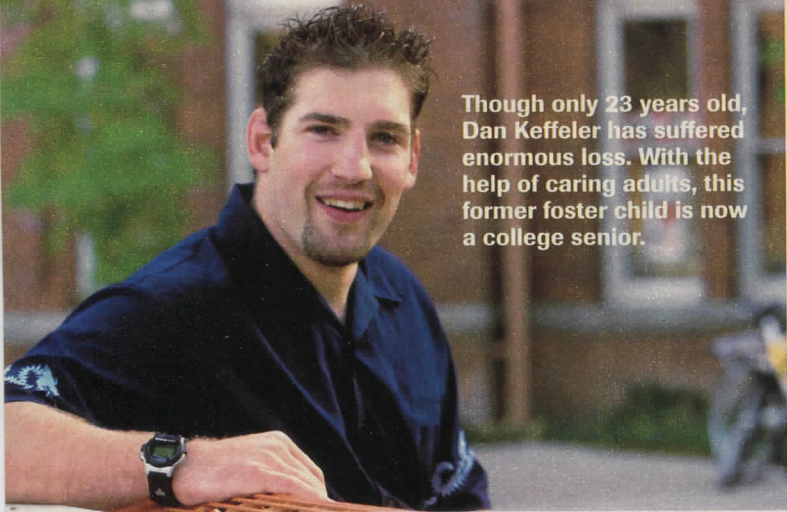
The volunteer she found was Jennifer Kasper, M.D., a physician and professor of pediatrics at the Boston University School of Medicine. Jennifer mobilized all her resources to aid Tracey. After meeting on the phone, Tracey sent Jennifer copies of tests and medical records. Jennifer reviewed these and consulted other physicians she thought might be able to help. She knew how easy it was for someone without money to slip through the cracks.

While Jennifer was trying to find a solution, Tracey caught a break. Through a friend, Tracey was able to locate a doctor who agreed to treat her at no cost. She was diagnosed with fibromyalgia and received medication. Even though her good fortune came by way of a pal, Tracey is grateful to Jennifer for her help. It was uplifting to know that someone was out there fighting for her as a parent would. Tracey is amazed at how people have rallied around her, and thankful that she doesn't have to wage her battles alone. The one thing that might have derailed her and made her drop out of school—a medical crisis—didn't happen. She knows she can go on. "A lot of people say it's remarkable I've come through what I have, but I look at it as a choice I had to make. I knew that I didn't want to live the life my parents had. So I've chosen the opposite situation."

Not all needs are as dramatic as Tracey's, but young adults depend on their parents in countless, everyday ways. The Orphan Foundation tries to replicate a parent's involvement. One of their newest ways is the "e-mentor" program, which is based on e-mail communication and matches students and volunteers according to need and expertise.

It's through the e-mentoring program that Dan Keffeler, 23, an OFA scholarship student, got to know retired University of Washington professor Tom Lovitt, Ed.D., an expert in special education. Dan has struggled with a learning disability since elementary school, so Tom used his specialized knowledge to help Dan, critiquing some of his college papers and suggesting useful Web sites. Just as important,

“ I believed I could achieve something with my life. ”



Though only 23 years old, Dan Keffeler has suffered enormous loss. With the help of caring adults, this former foster child is now a college senior.

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he and Dan also chat about football. "I try not to be too much the professor," Tom says with a laugh. Now that Dan is a senior at Central Washington University and interested in a sports business career, Tom is keeping his eyes open for job possibilities at the University of Washington. "Summer jobs often come from your parents or their friends. That's something foster children don't have," Tom says. "Dan is motivated and has a lot of drive. I hope he knows that he has a network of support."

He does, thanks to Tom and other loving adults in his life. It hasn't always been that way. By the time Dan reached high school, he had lived through a lifetime of heartaches. Dan's parents divorced when he was three years old and his mother died when he was 12. After his mom's passing, he became very depressed. "I felt a lot of pain, anger and confusion in response to my mother's death," Dan says solemnly. "I basically believed I had two options. Plan A was to keep on living. When I saw that my siblings were experiencing the same pain, I decided not to give up on life. At that point, no more Plan B." Dan was split up from his siblings and lived in a number of different foster homes, including some with drug and alcohol abusers and one in a halfway house for inmates just out of jail. Despite it all, he kept a positive outlook. "I always believed I could achieve something with my life," Dan says. But the odds often seemed insurmountable.

Dan was about to begin his senior year of high school when he was placed with foster parents Stephanie Garlich and Jeff Ried. They were different from the other people he knew. A well-educated, professional couple, their background inspired Dan. He welcomed their help filling out college admissions forms, and when he went off to college they paid for his health insurance. They deny that they inspired him to pursue higher education—they say he always had that drive. But the couple certainly encouraged him.

When Dan first came to live with Stephanie and Jeff he didn't want a close relationship; he had been a loner for years and had gotten used to being that way. Then he crashed his car during a snowstorm. "When I saw where Dan hit his head on the windshield, I burst into tears and was really upset," Stephanie recounts. Dan wasn't seriously hurt, but he could have been. Suddenly Stephanie knew she was playing for keeps. She and her husband wanted this young man to make it in life. Dan was flabbergasted

that people would worry so much about him. But he became noticeably closer to Stephanie and Jeff after that. He began to share more of himself with them, and he began to wear his seat belt, too, joking with his foster parents that it was because of them that he took the time to do it. The couple knew they had broken through to Dan.

One of the hardest things about foster care, Dan says, is that "whenever I would leave a foster home it was almost like I didn't know those people anymore. I'd walk past a former foster home and not be able to walk in the door." That isn't true anymore. Two years ago Dan helped Stephanie and Jeff move across the state. Though he lives on his own now, he visits them often. He knows he can walk in their door anytime. Their home is his home.

The Orphan Foundation draws its strength from the simple courage of strangers. These are not parents who dreamed about the future over their baby's cradles; they are not bound to these youngsters by blood or birth, but by responsibility. Their currency is not just money and time—though these are certainly important—but the message "you matter." And the young people they befriend are so thirsty for the message that many of them immediately try to give back to others who need it too. Even Dan, still in college, mentors a 10-year-old foster child. Because someone went to bat for him, he's doing the same for another. He's becoming part of this continuing chain of devotion, this quiet movement to help those who can almost, but not quite, help themselves.

McCaffrey knows that for every Arlene, Tracey and Dan there are thousands more foster kids who won't make it. She wants people to know that they can help foster youth by providing money for college scholarships, a listening ear or a simple care package. She also wants people to know that these are complicated kids: "They don't always say the right thing. They don't always say 'thank you.' They're often afraid you'll pull the rug from under them." In other words, they're vulnerable. This is why McCaffrey worked so hard to get Tracey the medical care she needed, why she marvels that Dan survived his foster homes, why she worries still about Arlene. Will these young people seize their one big chance or succumb to self-doubt brought about by years of abandonment and anxiety? McCaffrey believes they will make it because a few caring adults stepped in to act as role models, and did so with grace and gusto.

In its 20-year history, OFA students have attended Vassar, Stanford and MIT. They have gone on to careers in law and medicine. They now sit on boards that help other foster children. But most live unassuming lives, attend community colleges and enter ordinary professions. What's important is not attending a prestigious university or choosing a glamorous career, McCaffrey says. "We need productive citizens who can take care of their own children, who can join the PTA, who can contribute." These achievements may seem commonplace. But to those brought up on broken promises they are profound accomplishments indeed. This is why McCaffrey and the Orphan Foundation of America care so much about what happens to Arlene, Tracey and Dan. And why the rest of us should, too.

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For more information on the Orphan Foundation of America, visit its Web site, www.orphan.org.