

ROBERT G. LEWIS

Exploring and developing our promise of a permanent family for every child.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? ©

FEBRUARY 2003

VOLUME 4, ISSUE # 4

TOPIC: "FORCING ADOPTION ON EVERY EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD"

IDEAS: PERMANENCE IS NOT ABOUT FORCE AT THE ELEVENTH HOUR, IT'S ABOUT EDUCATION AND NUTURE, SELF-DETERMINATION AND RESPECT. WE HAVE TAUGHT THE CHILDREN IN CARE THAT THERE IS NO ONE "OUT THERE" FOR THEM. WE CAN TEACH THEM OTHERWISE AND EMPOWER THEM TO MAKE IT REAL, EITHER IN OUR CARE OR OUTSIDE IT.

DISCUSSION: One "child advocate" lawyer recently dismissed permanence for teens as a crazy scheme to "force every eighteen-year-old to be adopted". That lawyer, as well as those who are mounting an effort against the growing imperative of permanence for every child, including every teen, is working in a child welfare system that relegates "permanence" to a peripheral, non essential service provided by others, rather than a vital component of the safety and treatment of every child in their care. A nurturing family connection is the stuff of what we do for children and youth in child welfare, whatever else we are doing.

We have taught youth to say: "I'm too old to be adopted". Their hesitation and uncertainty about risking a connection are the appropriate response to a risky world out of their control. Perhaps it's time to teach the more accurate fact that no one is too old to be adopted, nor too old to make a family connection. Those who wish to protect children and youth from being forced into families can teach youth instead how to develop and nurture their own family connections and then support them in their choices. Youth educated and empowered to find and develop their own families usually do. Our challenge is to transform our own disbelief into positive action.

Harry made his choice. In the care of a large, well established treatment program he had learned a number of things very well. Despite the checkered past that lead to the treatment program he could juggle a full time job and community college and do it well. Beyond that, Harry reconnected with his grandmother and an uncle in the city. Grandmother made clear to him that he would have to help support the household if he came to live there. Some of Harry's full-time pay would go straight to grandma. Harry was ready to go, but the program balked. In assessing grandmother as a "gold digger" they did nothing to prepare Harry and his chosen family for the challenge of deinstitutionalization that would most likely come. Was Harry better off staying in the program, saving his money while attending college instead of moving into the city as the staff argued?

WHAT DO YOU THINK?