



Helping Ohio families stay connected

A sense of belonging and identity are at the heart of efforts to support families in Ohio.



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- SHANNON DEINHART
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER
KINNECT



Little Theo isn't shy with his affection. He happily baby-tosses a ball to a visitor, hugs and kisses his 2-year-old cousin and calls after his big sister when she's out of sight. He willingly lets himself be scooped up.

Buckled into his high chair, he's too young to understand how he is related to everyone in the kitchen all digging into cheeseburger soup and freshly baked crescent rolls. But it's clear that he is dearly loved. How Theo found his own seat at this family's table is a story about kinship and the power of belonging.

Kinnect to Family

When staff at Cleveland-based Kinnect define kinship, they speak of belonging, connection, bonds, identity and love. These values are at the heart of the nonprofit's work as it seeks to prevent children from entering the child welfare system and to reduce the time children spend in it if they are removed from their homes. Among the many services Kinnect offers are family search and engagement, kinship and adoption navigation, support for youth in or after foster care, and training to create an affirming culture for LGBTQ+ youth.

Its Kinnect to Family program has helped 3,000 families with an intense family search and engagement service that promises to provide dozens, even hundreds, of family and close kin connections for youth entering foster care. Even if they aren't a placement option, they might provide transportation or just want to stay connected to help in another way. The average is 150 connections per child.

"They're always amazed," says Shannon Deinhart, executive director and co-founder of Kinnect. "Often, a young person has been told there's no one."



Before starting Kinnect in the early 2000s, Deinhart was a social worker, placing children in foster care and preparing them for adoptive families. But the number of children adopted was tiny compared to those who were waiting. Additionally, they found that the young people they worked with either had or wanted to have connections to their birth families.

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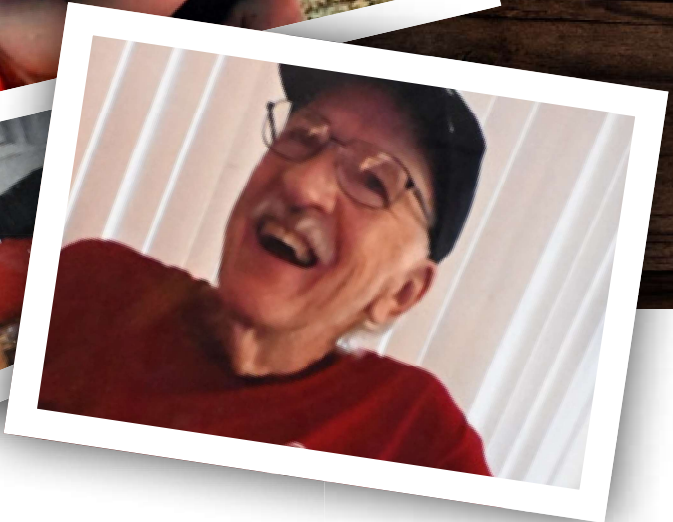
Knowing your roots

Jessi Ganyard and Samantha Miller had wanted to grow their family for a long time. When they first met, Miller's daughter, Amaya, was just 10 months old. Now nearly a decade later, they thought their opportunity for Amaya to have a sister or brother had passed.

That's when their best friend told them her cousin was going to have a baby but couldn't raise him because of her own life struggles — would they consider caring for him? The couple's hopes were high, but the baby boy initially went to an unrelated foster family. Then Kinnect to Family staff completed a genogram, or family



Theo's grandfather — and namesake — made sure the toddler was included when he handed out golden dollar coins to all the grandchildren at a family gathering. Keeping those family bonds is key to his new parents.



diagram, that mapped out all the baby's connections. It included relatives and close family friends. The couple's names were on it, and with the blessing of other relatives, baby Theo joined their family. Just over a year later, they are finalizing his adoption.

"He completed our family," says Ganyard, 30, who runs her own dog training business. She is especially grateful that Theo will grow up knowing his three siblings, who are being cared for by other relatives, and his extended family of cousins and grandparents. "I think knowing the family helps keep that culture of the family," she says.

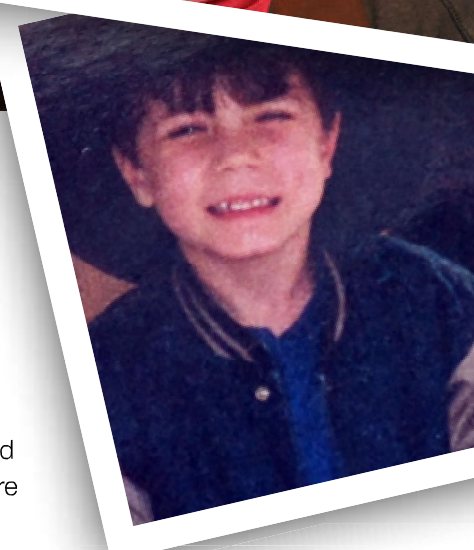
"The more people that love him, the better," adds Miller. "I always think it's important to know the roots you come from."

'I don't know who I would be'

Keeton Byerly vividly remembers his grandfather teaching him to drive a stick shift at 16. The teen repeatedly forgot to release the emergency brake in the black 2002 Hyundai Elantra that his Grandpa Lowell bought him. Stickers soon appeared in the car that read, "Take the brake off!" They were reminders not only of what to do in the car but of a grandfather's dedication to the grandson he was raising.

Byerly, now 29 and a part-time employee with Kinnect's Youth Navigator Network — a resource for young people who are in or have experienced foster care — shares the story as he looks through family photos that include his grandfather, who took him in as a toddler. Byerly's mother struggled with substance abuse, and his father was absent, so he moved in with his grandfather in Springfield, Ohio, where they lived until his grandfather died when Byerly was 17. After his grandfather's death, Byerly lived with his step-grandmother into his early college years.





"He was the person I saw when I woke up, the last person I saw at night," says Byerly, now recently married and hoping to start his own family in Columbus. "He cooked me breakfast, got on me about my grades. He was my everything."

Young people being able to stay with family rather than with strangers gives them a sense of who they are and where they belong, he says.

"If it wasn't for my grandfather, I would have been in the system. I would have been put up for adoption," he says. "If my grandfather wasn't there for me, I don't know who I would be."

These Ohio families' stories illustrate the "why" for Kinnect, where staff work with both formal and informal kinship providers to help them find the right resources. Through partnerships with the state and Ohio's 88 counties, Kinnect is a hub that helps families access the services and supports they need.

"My advice to other states who want to emphasize a kin-first culture," says Kristi Burre, Kinnect's director of strategy, "is don't wait. We don't have the luxury of waiting. There are kids right now who need ... to find their family members and to help them understand who they are."



Keaton Byerly holds close to a childhood gift from his grandfather. Goldie the bear now rides in the back of his white Toyota Camry, a link to his grandfather's love of driving and their road trips together.

