



## Kinship in Action

*An adoptive family tells their story of how ASCI's Stepping Into Families™ program helped them keep two siblings together and provide them love and permanency.*



The McCleery family

Throughout its 25 years of programming, A Second Chance, Inc. (ASCI) has always paid special attention to the needs of older youth, many lingering in congregate care settings. In 2012, ASCI established their Stepping Into Families™ (SIF) program to formalize a process where kinship care caseworkers “step up” their commitment to making sure older youth in care achieve permanency with family, knowing that family is critical in preparing youth for adulthood and setting the path toward future success. What makes SIF unique is a more intense concentration on adolescent needs, recognizing the kinship dynamic of working with teens and a more intense concentration on permanency options for older youth.

It was through SIF that Brayden McCleery met Child and Family Services supervisor Lisa Marino, whose commitment lead her to go considerable lengths to reunite him with his younger brother Tyler – she was determined to make a kinship connection. After being in a group home, reconnecting with his brother and moving into a family home filled with acceptance and love has changed Brayden’s life forever. In his eyes, family means “togetherness.” His family is his safe zone.



Toby and Brayden

This is not surprising considering the importance of maintaining sibling relationships, both in childhood and over the course of a person's lifetime. According to the [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#), "For children entering care, being with their siblings can enhance their sense of safety and well-being and provide natural, mutual support. This benefit is in contrast to the traumatic consequences of separation, which may include additional loss, grief, and anxiety over their siblings' well-being. Siblings have a shared history, and maintaining their bond provides continuity of identity and belonging."

When Brayden's now-adoptive mother Kate McCleery got the initial call about Brayden, she and her husband Toby were overwhelmed by the daily struggles of life—after all, they already had five children (three biological, two adoptive). However, with Lisa's help, the fear of taking on another child faded, and they soon grew into their roles as Brayden's caregivers.



Brayden McCleery

"A Second Chance employees are facilitators," Kate says. "They facilitate relationships. They make relationships happen. When you have relationships and people are emotionally invested

in each other, then you have success.” Lisa helped make sure the family’s bond with Brayden thrived by making sure his needs were met.

“His heart shines through. He makes you want to work harder for him,” Lisa says of Brayden. It took time and patience, but the two have built a strong, unique relationship where Brayden has someone to listen to his needs, feelings and concerns. “Sometimes just talking is what you need to do,” Lisa says.

According to Brayden and Kate, Lisa is more than just the McCleerys’ caseworker. Brayden believes that if he had not met Lisa, he would still be in congregate care. Luckily, Brayden was meant for a brighter fate. He was officially adopted by the McCleerys on March 25, 2019.

Kate and Toby received Permanent Family Recognition at this year’s Pennsylvania Permanency Conference for exemplifying the compassion and grace needed for successful permanency. Their home is full of second chances, do-overs, a willingness to try new things, unconditional love and plenty of smiles and laughs.



The McCleerys at the 2019 Pennsylvania Permanency Conference

Brayden’s advice for teens who lack permanency as he once did, is to not give up and to try harder to succeed in life. Brayden never gave up, and in the end, he was reunited with his brother and gained a family. With the help of ASCI, a devoted caseworker, his reunion with Tyler and a loving family, Brayden has found his forever home.

*Stepping Into Families™ is an effective approach to transition children out of congregate care to either reunify with their families or be placed with kin. It recognizes the importance of establishing relationships in order to create a system of change where there is interagency dialogue and collaboration that addresses the complex needs of youth involved in congregate care.*