



P R E S I D E N T ' S P A G E

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Loving your Neighbor: Foster Children

The call came in through our home phone about three in the morning. To be honest, I didn't hear the phone ring, but started to stir when I heard my wife say, "Sure, we will have a bed ready for them when you bring them." I quickly realized that "we" would become foster parents to "them" (turns out there were two children—a brother and a sister).

Earlier in the night, these two children were fast asleep in the back seat of the car driven by their mother's boyfriend (their mother was in the front passenger's seat). The boyfriend was speeding through Montgomery on the way home to Florida. He was pulled over by the police and illegal drugs were discovered. The boyfriend and mother were arrested. The children were transported to the police station and DHR was called.

While my compassionate wife was on the phone with DHR, she told me later that she was horrified at the thought of these frightened children waiting in an intimidating place with strangers wearing police uniforms. In her mind, they immediately needed some love and a warm bed. Once they arrived, a gangly 12-year-old boy and a precious eight-year-old girl became part of our family. The next day, all of my kids enveloped them and continued to do so until they departed a couple of months later to go live with their sweet grandmother.

I never thought I would be a foster parent. In fact, long before I became a foster parent, I remember meeting **Roger Pierce**, a lawyer in Auburn who was a foster parent and a great role model for me. After hearing his story, I

ividly remember thinking, "I would never do that." Why? A number of excuses flooded my mind:

Troubled kids in the house may upset my other children. I would become too attached and it would be hard to let them go. Foster kids have "issues" and I won't know how to respond. And finally (and sadly), these kids aren't my responsibility.

Fortunately, my attitude began to change. As many of you know, my faith is important to me. When I read in the Bible that pure and undefiled religion is to care for orphans and widows, I was convicted. My wife and I are far from perfect, but we possess the capacity to love and care for both orphans and widows. We have been blessed to be the foster parents to 35 children. I say that not to boast, but to make the point that if Joy and I can do this, the odds are very good that you can too.

I realize that not all of you are able to become foster parents, but, as lawyers who are leaders in our state, we should be a leading proponent of caring for children in the foster care system. We are called to be advocates for the public. Who needs a greater advocate than innocent children? What profession is better at advocacy than lawyers?

You may not be called to be a foster parent, but there are other roles where you can make a difference. You may decide that you can be an effective and engaged guardian ad litem for these children. Or, you may decide to go through DHR foster care training for the purpose of providing respite care (short-term relief) that provides some short relief for long-term foster families. Even if you cannot do the training, I hope you will consider mentoring a child who is void of much parental guidance. At a minimum, you should financially support charitable organizations that care for orphans.

All of these ideas may sound strange to some of you. After all, you are already busy with your families, your work and your leisure activities. I am asking you to consider stepping out of your comfort zone and sacrificially loving these children.

Two Alabama lawyers who answered the call to serve foster children are **Judge Angela Dawson Terry** and **Jennifer Sellers**. Independent of one another, these lawyers gathered new suitcases (usually when a child comes into our home they have all their belongings in a pillow case, duffel bag, mesh bag or worn-out suitcase) and filled these suitcases with necessities. Their efforts have positively impacted the lives of these children. Judge Terry describes the "Suit-grace Initiative" like this:

The "SuitGrace Initiative" has been one of the most rewarding projects of my legal career. The "SuitGrace Initiative" is a project to provide age-appropriate luggage with suitable personal items and "luxuries" for each foster child in our county. I first started thinking of this project when I attended a conference in spring 2015. It was at that conference that I was shown a book by Ashley Rhodes-Courter, *Three Little Words*. She was a former foster child in Florida and the book was her memoir. Repeatedly in the book she references her belongings being in garbage bags for a move. She referred to feeling as useless as the

items in the bag. Later in 2015 I was on a panel for a conference and had the opportunity to question two ladies in their mid-20s who had aged out of the foster system in Jefferson County. I asked them if a suitcase would have meant very much to them. My thinking was we do not need to expend time, energy and resources on this if it is not consequential to the actual foster child. One told me she still had her suitcase and matching cosmetic bag she received when she was 13. They confirmed my thoughts that somehow these suitcases add much needed self-esteem and worth to the situation.

The Lawrence County Children's Policy Council approved the project at our September meeting. At that time, we had 25 foster children in Lawrence County. A committee was comprised of the director of the Policy Council, Dr. Jerry Armor; the director of the Lawrence County Department of Human Resources, Corey Williams; a representative from Mental Health, Shannon Cassidy; Chief Juvenile Probation Officer Karen Lang; and Pastor Stephen Bennfield of the First United Methodist Church in Moulton. We estimated that \$50 per child would cover the bag and the personal items to be included. Within a month we had bags, contributions, and commitments for all 25. Some donated the suitcases. Some gave \$50. Some took a particular child to provide the bag. Some of the children's lawyers became their suitcase sponsors.

We were interviewed by the local paper which gave us great publicity. I spoke to every organization and church that requested I come speak. I went as a representative of the Policy Council with the statistics and information I had on foster care in general and Lawrence County foster children in particular.

As anyone who works with the foster system knows, it is fluid. Since our original list, we have added a teenage boy and an infant girl and had one released from custody to go into state mental health custody. Our Policy Council was incorporated as a non-profit in 2012, so it was in an excellent position to be the umbrella for this project. As Juvenile Court deals with children otherwise before the court, a Children's Policy Council is to benefit all children within the particular county from birth to 19 years old.

I plan to ask Judge Terry and Jennifer to take this initiative statewide. I hope that you will participate. Through this small gesture, maybe you will be further encouraged to engage to an even greater extent. Our profession of advocates must advocate for the one of the most vulnerable groups among us, foster children and orphans, in spite of the risk and sacrifice that it entails. As individuals and as legal professions, I think that we know that there is greater joy to give rather than receive. All of us have been the recipients of the warmth and generosity of others. Let us pay that forward.

(For more on the "SuitGrace Initiative" and Judge Terry, see the December 2016 *Addendum* at <https://www.alabar.org/assets/uploads/2014/09/12-Addendum-December-2016.pdf>) ▲