

## Episode 16 Foster Care Transcript

Jack 0:29

Make sure you follow us on Facebook or Instagram as fostering the future podcast, Or check us out on our website at fostering the future [podcast.org](https://podcast.org) This is jazz, and I am here with Kat, and today we have a special guest, Nicole, who has had such a surreal experience since becoming a foster mom, and we are so excited to have her here to share about it. So Nicole, let me ask you a very serious question. What is your favorite drink at Starbucks.

Nichole 1:03

I love a venti nonfat Chai extra on no phone, no water. Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, no water, no water, extra water in the sky that dilutes it, and I like the stronger flavor. It's

Jack 1:26

so interesting because when I may try it at home it's so much stronger. This is so mind blowing, we can just end the episode I feel like I've literally, I don't know what to say to that. Tell me how long you've been a foster parent, and what that looks like in your home.

Nichole 1:44

I have been a foster parent for approximately 18 months, and I currently have six kids in my home, I am a single foster parent, and I've had, I think, approximately 17 Kids in the home, since I started fostering Wow, you see 17 I have Houston busy. You know there was obviously some shorter term placement play. I mean Well, 17 kids, it was definitely no. Wow, she said yes, a lot this year I have said yes, a lot. That policeman loves you, oh they do. I've kind of feel like I've become kind of the person that gets called for kind of specific things might be a baby that has some extra needs, or a team that has a reputation for being a little bit rough, but the kids in my home right now range from eight months to 17 years old.

Jack 2:48

That's pretty incredible. Can you tell us what your first experience with foster care

Nichole 2:53

what I, for my entire life, have wanted to adopt and I always thought that that would be through private adoption, I didn't know really anything else, I remember trying to convince my parents to adopt when I was like 12 years old. I tried to convince them to do an exchange student program to bring a kid. And I don't know why. I have no idea why, and then I learned about the guardian ad litem program, and I kind of started my journey there, I never ever thought I would be a foster parent, my mindset was, I would be become

too attached, and I couldn't handle the heartbreak and

Jack 3:40

that is something that you hear so often from people who are giving you the reasons why they don't want to be a foster parent. And isn't it funny that once you're a foster parent like, That's so like the last thing you need to worry about like, is real, there's really so many more challenges than that and, you know, not that that's not a challenge but,

Nichole 4:00

but my perspective changed, that is not what's important. I am an adult and I can handle the heart, emotion and I know how to grieve in a healthy way, those kids don't and they deserve to no attachment and love, and it's kind of the only thing that I can give them, even if it's just for a short amount of time, give them someone who's willing to have their heart broken for them. Yeah,

Jack 4:22

well okay so you were, you decided to become a guardian ad litem. And then, what was it that pushed you into wanting to be a foster parent,

Nichole 4:30

I just saw not gratefulness, honestly, and I saw some really great homes, but I saw some homes that I was like, I can do this, and I can do this better not knocking anyone, but it just made me realize that I could do it. Yeah, and I could do it I had a little bit more education as a guardian ad litem and you know a little bit more trauma training and I learned about that and I learned more about attachment, it just seemed kind of like the next natural step, kind of in that journey.

Jack 5:04

Well it's interesting because something that we've talked about before on the podcast is how a lot of people are like, Oh, I'm not that type of person I can't be that type of person that's not me as a foster parent I think it was when we were talking to one of the foster parents where we said, it doesn't take anything special, like there's nothing extraordinary about me other than I'm willing. And I have a heart for it. And I just said yes, you know, you don't have to be, you don't have to have superpowers to be a foster parent, you just have to be willing to offer your home and your love and your family, you know, so you as a guardian that later saw, you know I can do this, I'm seeing these homes, this is definitely something I'm capable and drove you.

Nichole 5:48

Yes, and I learned how to advocate, and I had learned how to find the proper resources through all of that, and it just kind of made sense. I have a legal background professionally, and then I had gained knowledge in the dependency system through the guardian ad litem program, and it just seemed to make sense and be the next natural progression. Now, from the moment the thought entered my head until I signed up for PVC was a full year, I gave myself a lot of time, I didn't really talk with anyone about it I kind of just thought about it within myself. Can I do this, am I capable. Am I ready, and then about a year later, that I started talking to my family about it because I knew that as a single person I couldn't do it alone, and I was going to need my immediate family support,

Jack 6:43

you talked a little bit about your experience as a gal and what that how that contributed to your decision to become a foster parent and how that gave you a lot of experience in the dependency system can you give us a little more information on your other experiences a

Nichole 6:58

guardian ad litem, I have been guardian ad litem now for October will be four years, I still have my very first case that I'm working and I essentially did all the things that case management should have been doing for last week, I didn't find that to be. Yeah, so I just found a doctor, and found different specialists and started getting records which I knew how to get records from my professional career. And I really just didn't take no for an answer from anyone. So I had that case, and then being a newbie. We emails come out. I thought that my Kim has sent this email to me and was like asking if I would take Lauren kids and I was like, how do I say no to this. So I took on two more siblings, and I am still in contact with them as well. I have not taken on any new cases, because I still have both of those cases, as well as being a foster parent,

Jack 8:10

the fact that you are a single mom, foster mom with a full time career, and all the advocating that. I know that you're doing for your kids, I don't know how you also have time to volunteer with the guardian ad litem program because that is a lot of work.

Nichole 8:25

It is so much work, but it is so worth it because I've really been able to help families, and I've really learned a lot about communication for myself having really hard conversations or bio families or foster families and relative caregivers, it was really a great entrance into fostering because you have to have really hard conversations, and you have to have them politely and I can be a little blunt at times. So I had to really learn how to kind of soften my delivery and it really, really helps me grow and I have such great relationships with these

families. I really really enjoy it I say that I will, I hope anyway so I will always kind of be a part of their lives as they, these little ones continue to grow, so

Jack 9:16

that's really cool and I know that when we talk to Trisha. She was telling us about her kids that are growing up and, you know, in their late teens and 20s and she still connects with them, and my father was a guardian ad litem and, gosh, it's probably been five or six years since he's been a guardian ad litem but he's still, I didn't know about this until I found out from the kiddo when I met him when we got brought him on a family trip and he let me know that you know my dad bought us some nice birthday presents and Christmas presents every year and, you know obviously my father's maintained that relationship with them, because he was taking them on a trip with us and you know it's really neat and, you know, to be honest, that was one of my first experiences with the guard with the foster care system was watching my dad advocate for kids as a guardian ad litem and hearing the stories and, you know, I think they were you know my program is. I love the volunteers who work for the guardian ad litem program I think that they have a great compassion for helping kids, and improving their lives. I'm very in awe of people who volunteer their time in that way because I know in addition to it being a lot of work, it can be very frustrating to work in that in that realm so so frustrating,

Nichole 10:31

because even though you have a very big voice as a guardian ad litem. Sometimes you still can't get what you think and what you're advocating for is in the child's best interest, done, because there are so many other aspects of the case or other things going on, so it can be incredibly frustrating. I have the best cam in the world, and she's been amazing and very helpful, and as a foster parent in Pascoe I am a guardian ad litem in Hillsborough so there is no, there's no overlap in my job,

Jack 11:07

sometimes we have no caseworkers or the others transition in caseworkers and I have no way to help families and kids because I don't have a lot of resources, as a therapist, there's not much I can do for biological families but you can see the need, and it's been really rewarding to work with guardian ad litem because they have the resources that I don't. And even when there's no case management, we can work together and fill that gap, and that's been really rewarding. And we can do that in ways that I can't do alone. What makes the job, much more rewarding. So can you tell us a little bit about your job and how helps you to understand the legal process in the dependency care process.

Nichole 11:48

So I have been in the legal field for 14 years, or almost 14 years. I started out as a file clerk, and kind of worked my way up with some awesome attorneys, I've been a paralegal for the past several years now I'm a litigation trial paralegal so I have been in court, worked jury trials prepared for jury trials, manage cases from start and obviously under the direction of the attorney and have their direction, interviewed witnesses or been a part of depositions or preparations have access to legal research tools, I have learned a lot. I know a lot. That sounds

Jack 12:31

like such a great person, If they would bring your agenda worst day we volunteer. I lay like detective agency after this.

Nichole 12:43

It's great. I mean, I love it, I get to be a detective at tags for my job. It is awesome and I get to talk to really cool people because smart people and I would never be able to talk to people that need help, you know, you think about litigation and you think about like big ticket litigation, so most of my litigation is commercial litigation so big companies and things like that but at the end of the day, like there's still a person behind that big company and they've either lost something or something was taken from them, and so be able to advocate, alongside the attorney to kind of figure that out and play detective and figure out creative ways to get things done or strategize,

Jack 13:34

like real life living TV show students

Nichole 13:39

that what we're talking about yesterday so many people ask that. I do love that show. And I've never been back before get to become a friend. You know I just there's some aspects of it I mean you don't go, you don't file a lawsuit and you're not in court within 24 hours like that doesn't happen. That's totally dramatize for TV. I mean, these cases are like drawn out with a year two years like, Sound like that, Erin Brockovich, maybe a little bit closer to that at times it can be a little bit closer to that at times, and then sometimes it's super mundane and everybody would think my job is the most boring thing in the world, so you start

Jack 14:17

in 2020 as a single person with no kids. I did, and that changed really quickly, and did. Can you tell us how your family changed after you became licensed as a foster parent,

Nichole 14:31

so the minute I became licensed as a foster parent. Two awesome little kids moved into my home. The following morning, I did have contact with the prior foster parents and the kids so I did have a normalcy visit the weekend prior, which I don't think happens a lot, so we actually had, or they had a transition to my first foray was with a transition where they got to come, we had phone calls for about a, I think about a week, then we had a normalcy visit, and then they moved in the following weekend. And so I went from single going on vacation to the Bahamas, kind of, doing whatever I wanted to, now I have two little kids, and that first weekend, I have awesome friends, They were bringing over this and close clothes and shoes and one of my friends came over and was like doing my dishes. Why, because my house was like,

Jack 15:44

now also friend,

Nichole 15:46

I've known her since high school. I mean, I just, she was like, what do you need, and I was, I was like, I've got to put all the clothes away and stuff because they went to school, I had to go, you know into school right away. It was a Saturday, schools on Monday, I had been working it was working from home that day. And she's like, well I'll just come over and she like came over and did my dishes and like help with the kids clothes away and

Jack 16:06

so a lot of support, and I still do. I just want to ask you about one thing that I've heard you say before. And when I heard it, I thought, you know, I wish more people looked at it like this and I've never looked at it like this before, and I think a lot of people who are single, are very intimidated by the idea of becoming a foster parent without having another person there with them, but there's something that you have said that made me think, Oh wow, that is an incredible perspective about decision making. Can you share that with our listeners Sure.

Nichole 16:42

So I think one of the coolest things about being a single foster parent is, I don't have to consult with anybody. I can make the decision that I think is in the child's best interest alone. And while that might be intimidating to some, I find so incredibly empowering because sometimes an outside voice dampens your internal instincts, and your gut instincts, and I'm really big on following my instincts, I love being able to make decisions on my own, sitting within myself. I also make decisions with a guardian ad litem mindsets, it is always what is in the child's best interest. Now as a parent, I may not want to do it,

because it's not the easiest thing. But I still tend to fall back on that manifest best interest of the child and that is kind of what rules my decision making process, even if it's super hard on me. That's pretty incredible

Jack 17:46

and I just think when, when I had heard her said it say that, I thought, gosh, what like what like a freeing thought, you know to if you're a single person you don't want to be a foster parent because there's not someone there with you. Well hey, so we're there with you, you get to do this, no one's gonna tell you know I know a lot of women who want to be foster parents, but can't because their husbands aren't into it, like you get to make this choice on your own when they call you about a kid you don't have to consult with anybody like these are great reasons to consider being a single foster parent, And I definitely think it's got to be harder to not like you have to have a good support system which it sounds like you do, but obviously without Jack daddy I couldn't do this, definitely made made an impact on me when I heard you say that that, that I really think people more single people who are interested in fostering should consider that,

Nichole 18:35

yeah, I mean, it's not to say that it's easy. Sometimes it's hard, but I have a sister who's amazing, and I can bounce things off of her and she will tell me I'm crazy in a heartbeat if I need it. I have friends that I've made through this process that I can reach out to, I have my family and my immediate family my mom, my dad, my brother, my sister in law who are all incredibly supportive and all have their own perspectives on this, and you have varying degrees of trauma informed parenting knowledge or very traditional parenting knowledge depending on, but at the end of the day, I tend to sit with myself, make the decision, first, and then ask others opinions, because I don't want my opinion to ever be swayed by what somebody else has to say because at the end of the day, I know myself best I know my kids best I know my home best I know my schedule best, and it's really my decision to make. If I make a decision and it makes it harder on me. Well, it's my decision to make, and I made it, or I didn't, and I can't blame anyone.

Unknown 19:42

I can yell at myself.

Nichole 19:45

But I find that to be so empowering. There's a lot of freedom and, and that there is that perspective came to me while traveling. My grandmother passed away a few years ago, and I was completely devastated, still am and moments and it was three years ago, A friend of mine who was working overseas, invited me over he was in Paris, and I, your

friends just

Jack 20:15

have a flight buddy. Get in. These friends. Why don't we have friends like Paris. And

Nichole 20:28

I've known him for years. He was there for work, he knew my grandparents, and he knew how close I was to them within a few days of her passing away, I bought this ticket to Paris. And I went to Paris, and for 15 days, I went there and I went to Prague, which was like my dream destination and I went, we went to Switzerland, and I was in Paris most the time alone because it was working and I was, I went to Prague alone. I was so free. I didn't have to make a decision with anybody. I walked around these cities with no phone service, I would like map things out, that is kind of when my perspective change, and I realized I was standing in the middle, but in the middle of the bridge in Prague was all the seats and the statues that are on it. The name is eluding me literally just sit in the middle of it and it's like, this is so empowering, and I don't ever want to travel with anybody ever again. Because this is the best thing ever. I even don't have to like ask what someone else wants to do for lunch you like find what you want to eat for lunch, can you eat. I ate croque madame, and Vaughn shout, every single day for lunch at various Cafe is very relatable, freedom and now there's a ton of freedom in that, and that is really I know that's kind of like a tangent, but that is really what changed my perspective and really showed me how empowering being alone, it can be or or making decisions alone not being alone I'm not alone I have, you know, families, and dogs and fish. I mean there's just

Jack 22:09

something about like having to wait on the decision of someone else, you know, and like, like what are we doing what are we doing, we wouldn't do this like, it's exhausting, it is and I had I've had a moment like that too, you know like when Hurricane Irma came I had this moment of like I don't know what to do I don't know what to do, like, kind of waiting on someone to tell me what to do because I was used to telling someone telling me what to do all the time finally was like, we're leaving. We're leaving at five in the morning, this is what we're doing, and I had a totally different kind of thing but that perspective of, like, I'm actually in charge, and no one's gonna tell me what to do. In fact, I haven't enjoyed being told what to do. In the past, and I'm the boss of this place, so I couldn't leave there's a ton of freedom and that

Nichole 22:53

there is so much freedom and you know I mean with six kids now I'm definitely not making decisions by myself when you have teenagers like they're telling you what do you want oh



like a four year old tells you what they want, again like everybody's very

Jack 23:08

opinionated my four year old is a boss of me too.

Nichole 23:12

Yeah. Oh man, he is a Spitfire, and he's got loads of personality, and definitely bosses all around.

Jack 23:25

Let me ask you a question, Nicole, after your family groups so quickly, something happened in 2020 that affected all of us, and you know I was like, the whole world was in a panic, and all of our lives change, probably forever. I don't think any of us will ever look at your Mac's the same. All of this happened, and I can't imagine how this was for you because I know how it was for me, and I had been apparent for years, and I also was not a single parent, so can you tell me how this was for you when the world shut down, and you had just recently become a mom of how many did you have at that time,

Nichole 24:06

I had two and then I had taken another foster baby, so I had three, three and at least one

Jack 24:13

of them had some special needs, parent at this point for six weeks, six weeks, and then the world shut down, and the world says and you have them full time full time

Nichole 24:24

learning. Oh yeah, yeah, good, good, I just want to clarify. It was, it was trial by fire for lack of a better expression, kids went on spring break, we're gonna go to Disney World, the world's everyone back school again, this whole elearning thing came about, and I'm like, computers, I had everything that they needed for their rooms and all that stuff, I didn't have a bunch of extra school supplies or any idea what this thing was going to look like and I was and I was trying to learn how to get yours so I can teach you learn and so work and it was really, really, really hard. There were lots of therapy appointments that then all turned to telehealth, you had to do. Yes, which meant now that I was doing the therapists work while they weren't directing me, Amazon was delivering to my house, multiple times a day so I could like it all the tools that I needed for the therapy appointments, and for the E learning, and for the school. One of the things that sticks out for me is like we couldn't figure out where the kids were going to do school apps. At this point, I was like, I'm not giving up my loft, that's my office. And that quickly changed within like a weekend, I'm like,

this isn't gonna work, so I like rearrange my bedroom so there's a lot of furniture rearranging also during this time that we would move like into my entryway, we thought that was a good place and like that didn't work and then we were upstairs and like that didn't work because we were up and down the stairs all day long and that was difficult, and then finally we were like, well the dining room table is now just school, and thankfully I had my mother who was incredibly supportive and she was there every single day, and she took on the incredibly arduous task of teaching not only my kids, but my nephew, and helping with all the things. Wow, all the things.

Jack 26:26

There were a lot of things. Like, I remember thinking, Okay, I mean I set them up with their computer and they'll be good, but it was like every two minutes they were like, they would run into me and be and be like, my teacher needs, or I need to do. I don't understand and it really wasn't like, okay, as long as you have the technology to connect your hands off like I had to be very hands on and I was running from one table to the next. Yeah, and you know and then their sounds were competing with each other and the teachers were saying, hey, I can hear your other class sisters class in the background, I had to separate them. I mean it was, it was a lot and I can't imagine having going through that as a new mom working full time,

Nichole 27:10

it was hard. I mean, not to mention the fact that like, there's no toilet paper, there's no paper towels and now you're all open 24 Seven. By desks, anywhere, they don't exist. You can't find chairs like it was, it was definitely interesting it was

Jack 27:26

like it was the most ridiculous thing ever, like the toilet, and especially like when we go somewhere there would be like a quota on how it's delivered. If you found somewhere with toilet paper, and it was like a wall, and I'm like one row. Okay, first of all, I've gotten like eight or nine kids I don't remember what at the time, three of them are girls who use a whole roll every time they go to the lake was roll isn't gonna last it day by house, and, like, I feel like that should have been considered how many kids are in your house before you say one roll, like when you can find toilet paper once a week. So, needless to say we had to adopt the European way and I told the kids I'm like, Listen, you got to stop using too much toilet paper, or, like, we're good, we're gonna run out, and you're gonna be in the backyard and I'm gonna have to hose your bikes down, and if you don't want your buttons down in the backyard, like limit the amount of time preference, I think, you know, between, like scaring them with having to get naked in the European way which actually all, I just had three girls were unified, and one of them, you know, she calls me saying I'm really

upset because I don't have a bad day in my mom's house like she needs a bad day, I can't do this. Yeah you it was a nightmare. There was one day that I was standing in the kitchen listening and I could hear all three teachers all three kids, and I wrote down every insane thing that was absolutely unbelievable that it happened within about 15 minutes and I filled up like an entire piece of paper, and I still have it. But looking at it makes me hyperventilate, but it was like not even believable stuff that either kid said teacher said that happened like Go get your mom because all I can see is your ceiling that your pants. I mean, the most ridiculous. This was actually the night this was like an hour before my brother passed away last year, I know you remember the meme I sent you, I don't know if you know there's my brother passed away like right after COVID started. And it was like a shock like he called me, and he was, he was feeling weird and shaking, he what he was describing to me sounded like a panic attack, but it also sounded a little different, and you know people in my family that have panic attacks are trying to tell him like, it's not versus what you feel, but that doesn't sound like what you're having. I feel like you need to go to hospital and he's like, I'm not going to hospitals where people can COVID And then I got a call the next morning that he had passed away. That night, though, right before, like after I got off the phone with him. But before you know the morning when I found out that he had passed away, I read this meme on something, it was this woman telling the story, her son was in a class, and she walked in the room, and she had that big heavy COSCO towel on. And she was naked the whole class saw her and it was like, it just went on and on and I laughed so hard I like peed myself, that was like one of the hardest days of my life for sure. And I kept going back to that meme, because I wasn't able to laugh anymore. When I read it, but it kind of brought me like It distracted me a little bit. Right before everything in your life changed. There you go, Okay, I knew I needed some therapy. Yeah, so it was not I mean I remember very clearly because I read it over and over so many times it's been a crazy year and a half, so crazy, crazy for you too, so it was very. Speaking of which, Nicole, yes, you have gone through an experience that I wouldn't wish on anyone in your first year of fostering, but I will tell you that before I ever met you, as a foster mom I read a newspaper article about you. And when I read it at the time, the only thing I knew was what I read in the paper, and I was like, Oh this is so weird. It sounds like something nefarious is going on you know, like I wonder what actually happened, and then I forgot about it, as people do, and went on about my life when I met you, and realize that you were that the person that the article is referring to, I was like okay, I just met this woman, I feel a certain way about her and now I feel like I need to figure out what really happened because there's, like, there's this is something does not matching up, and one of the things that was shocking was that in this newspaper article you're you were named your full name and as foster parents like were afforded a certain amount of confidentiality, not just to keep ourselves safe but to keep all of the kids in our home safe. When, when I realized it was you and I looked back at the article that night, I thought in a very different way, and felt

pretty crappy about myself for having like assumed anything about somebody that I've never met. And, and now that I've met you the first thing I noticed was, oh my gosh they put her full name in it, like there were a number of other details that were, you know concerning either article implied that you were, you had used some back channel to rip a child away from his bonded placement. It definitely made a lot of assumptions so I know that you haven't been able to speak about this publicly, I have not seen faces been open and you have been, you know, deposed, a number of times about

Nichole 32:43

it and I followed every single rule, yes, that we are supposed to follow as foster parents, every single confidentiality has been kept. And between my job or sitting on the bar grievance committee, or any of the other number of things that I do guardian ad litem, I hold myself to a fairly high ethical and moral standard, and so I have not been able to speak, and I have been quiet,

Jack 33:09

and I feel like your silence is not only incredibly curious, as a parent and as someone who's aware at all in the legal field, because you know there's no like we can talk about our foster placement options, especially publicly, but especially to the media, you know your story's been told by so many other people that you know I felt like the right also to share your experience, and maybe clear up some of the confusion that people like me who were casting judgment on you without knowing you at all, that I know you like I'm like, oh, gosh, I feel like a church now that I ever thought something that various was going on but

Nichole 33:48

that's what the article that article that's the way it was written, that's what was put out there, I mean I couldn't

Jack 33:54

really do anything about it. The media loves to hate the system on DCF and judges on foster parents yes it's something that the media loves to do,

Nichole 34:03

and in this situation, it's so inappropriate because I had the best experience with DCF and with less using, and I have nothing bad to say and I hate every time I see this horrible article or news story that cycles through the news, I think we all know that the system you can be improved, and that it is broken, and that the people that are working in it are the people that I have come across and that I have worked with are incredible. They've been supportive. They were the only people I could talk to these people that I didn't know that

worked for the system, or the people that became my support, because they were the only ones I can talk to. They've probably didn't want to hear me venting or upset, but they were so supportive, there's a few people that were incredibly supportive. I mean he can't possibly be talking about read. Definitely not talking, and I don't even know if I can name them, I wish I could, and I don't know that I should without their permission. But they so deserve to be recognized, because they are incredible people, and they were incredibly supportive. They were incredibly supportive to all sides too. They weren't just taking my side or anything like that, they are so appropriate and so professional, and I wish the media would portray that,

Jack 35:31

well it's unfortunate that, you know, because everybody has to be confidential, that the people that are probably on the more ethical side of things aren't going to have their story heard and the silent ones. Yeah, I think that one of the really important things in child welfare, is that it's important to have lots of different voices, because if we just had one voice, it probably wouldn't be the best thing for the child. And so it's good that you know the people involved were supportive to everybody involved, because I'm sure that sometimes my voice is wildly incorrect I'm sure sometimes I'm making an incorrect assumption, which is why I'm glad there are lots of other people involved in shirts like checks and balances. We all have our own perspective, When you bring all the way says together exactly then we can get

Nichole 36:20

closer to each other, it really has to be a team, collaborative effort, I work that way and professionally. It's really the only way to work, what can you share with us about what happened. I was matched during PPT.

Jack 36:37

So just to be clear for people in the US who might use different programs or people who are in foster parents PPT is a training program that foster parents must complete before becoming foster parents, so you were in the foster parent class, and they asked you about to accept a placement,

Nichole 36:52

Yes, the conversation begin there regarding a sibling set, and I have a completely open, fostering profile so when you begin fostering, you can kind of set parameters around the ages of the children and many other aspects, sending them a little less appropriate life in some ways, credibly inappropriate, but nevertheless, you can set those parameters, I had no parameters, my only parameter was no children with animal abuse because I had dogs

in my home who are older and that was kind of my only, no, no, so it was approach, ultimately, two of the siblings of the three siblings that moved into my home, and I was told that the third would be moving in, because there's always a push to keep siblings together and care and to reunite siblings in the same home, if at all possible, And I was willing to do that, I thought the two would move in, and then the other one would do then within a week or two, the sibling saw that as well. And it was really hard for them to realize that their brother wasn't moving and just yet at this. Those like subtitles. Yeah.

Cat

How old were they,

Nichole

six and seven, she might have been five, almost six but they knew their brother, one of the biggest things I want to clear up from that article is that they absolutely knew each other, not only did they know each other. They lived together for 10 months, and then for reasons, things that happened in the various homes that they were moved there was a space issue basically there was nothing nefarious about it I don't want that to people, same business areas. There was a space issue in that home, then they were no longer living together for 10 or 11 months, they live together, and so the older to Heather baby Sorry to interrupt. How

Jack

old is the youngest child.

Nichole

He is for now. Okay, so

Jack

a quarter of his life, he was placed with them.

Nichole

Yes, he was placed with them. Upon coming into care at two months, and then less than a year, so yes. From then, it didn't have a lot of consistent contact for about a year and then there was more contact more frequently, but it was still inconsistent visits were inconsistent they missed their brother, they didn't know why their brother left, they weren't told that he was leaving, there was a lot of trauma, around him leaving, and so the fact that they were going to be able to be with Him and live with him, it was like, especially my oldest one, that

became his focus and his drive and his everything he wanted his family back, it was his family it is his family,

Cat

siblings belong to each other siblings belong.

Jack

I've seen kids come into care where there's an older especially brother, they will sit there and ask your rent already to buy my brother I need to buy my brother, my brother, my teen girl had a younger brother as well. It was like a consistent verbalization of hers. I need to find my brother I need, I just need to talk to him on the phone I need my brother I need my brother, when two kids are both in foster care, in the same system. Under the same circuit, how, how is it that they're not able to find each other I don't know how that happens so often we

Cat

get we saw the last, I mean, there are times when we have to but if we can keep them together to these kids they have the right to one another, and as you both know i mean I'm like preaching to the choir, these are the longest relationships we have like long after we're gone, race, kids have each other that 8090 years old.

Jack

Yes, you're waiting for this child to come to your house yes your two that you have are anxious, they're eager to make it happen what what it what goes next,

Nichole

then I find out that we have to have something called a sibling separation staffing, had no idea what that was, or why we were having it or what was going on, it's some sort of procedure that had to occur for multiple reasons. Essentially, this staffing had to occur to determine whether the children could be adopted, separately, they hadn't been legally separated as siblings or administratively separated as siblings, within the system. After a child has been in a placement for a certain amount of time, it kind of triggers this sibling separation staffing to occur, and there are other siblings, in this case as well, it was more complex than just the three, the committee, it's an independent committee made up of guardian ad litem DCF and it's all independent they're a case management, but it's nobody that's associated with the kids and their case on a day to day basis, that committee ruled that these siblings could not be separated, meaning they must be adopted. Altogether, they could not be adopted, separately, so from there I thought, now he's going to move right, not so much. Not so much. From there, we had a court hearing, wherein we

all asked guardian ad litem program, case management organization or state attorney, and myself, made a request for the three siblings to have a spring break visit that would last for an extended period of time. The judge ordered that, and then the siblings were allowed in my home, all together for six days that separation at the end of spring break was terrible. They were all crying, they were all screaming, nobody wanted to leave each other, of the three. It was the most amount of time they had spent with each other in such a long time. It was heartbreaking. It was heartbreaking. I have no other word for it. At that point, I asked for video calls. Now at this point the world had shut down, literally, the world had sets out and I think the only thing open were grocery stores, pharmacies, there were video visits that were put in place for Supreme Court enter orders kind of dictating multiple things within the court system, and one of the things that they ordered had to do with dependency and video visits were to take place in lieu of in person visits because of the pandemic, and to keep everybody healthy and safe. At that point, we had one phone call, no more contact was allowed. So at that point I had to reach out to case management, go to the state attorney, and we had to get a court order for visits specifically to occur video visits to occur. In this case, even though the Supreme Court had already put an order out ordering it, we had a court date, all of a sudden, there was an agreement for video visits, and there was communication stating that there must have been a misunderstanding. Meanwhile, I had documented everything in writing. I had every text message, email, every communication, requesting visits that were consistent, but there was a communication that stated there must have been some misunderstanding. You know, I don't. We definitely can have video visits, no problem, from their case management got involved, and there was a schedule that in place for video visits, I don't think that all of them in the beginning were supervised, I was having some major concerns about what was occurring on these visits, and so the visits and became supervised by case management at my insistence and requests, so they continue to be supervised by someone, a guardian of vitam case management, every single visit to ensure that they were occurring appropriately motions were filed in courts motions to intervene with foster parents do not have the right to do so because we're not parties to the case. Right, correct. We are not parties to the case we are participants, and that doesn't mean that we don't have a voice, that doesn't mean that we cannot speak, is the biggest misnomer, for me in the system, we do have a voice, and we have a voice by working as a collaborative team with the guardian ad litem with case management with therapeutic interventions. They are our voice, our communications with them, our voice, and if you work as a team, you have a voice, it may not physically be your voice that is spoken, but you have a voice, there are emotions that were filed to intervene. That did not happen, that was shut down again because we are participants not parties, we don't even have the right to file the motion to intervene, right, technically, that's why I was confused because that's not something that there's a legal maneuvering that people use like opening up with Jace outside of the



dependency case so now we're falling under case number that is no longer a dependency case. So there's various legal maneuvers that people use to try to get these things to occur under however when you file a case like that, when there is an open case in the court system, you have to file something saying that there is a related case within the jurisdiction. And so it triggers the clerk to let the judge know that now there's this related cases filed. So typically, these cases are then heard in front of the same judge, and now this happens across the board, not just independency. It happens across the board in various court cases, when that motion happens, then there became opposition to the motion for placement, which were filed foster parents do have the right to be heard those hearings, so when those motions are filed and there is a hearing foster parents have a right to be heard, and the judges will absolutely hear you out who's

Jack

filing those motions. So the state is filing the motion, so the change assistant state attorney yes I also motion saying someone is opposing us. Not that they're opposing those files that

Nichole

they're going to change placements. Right, so they're changing placement, it may fall under the statute that because a child has been in a certain placement for a certain amount of time, then that triggers, you have to follow that child is placed here for x amount of time means we must file and make sure there's no opposition. Now the only opposition there really could be is if there was a guardian ad litem, who is a party to the case, or, you know, case management, or state attorney who represents them, who is a party to the case but nobody else has the option to intervene there, but foster parents do have a voice and are allowed to speak at these hearings and they can you know say that they don't agree with it or, then they are here the reasons why they don't agree with it, this is all happening these hearings are coming up, and then the articles are written

Jack

as if the court isn't stressful enough, right, there's your name across news articles all over the place.

Cat

The media even find out,

Nichole

I mean I have my suspicions, but we don't know for sure. I don't know for sure so I could speculate, but I don't think that that is productive productive right. I don't know for sure,

the media is alerted.

Cat

So I just want to like send in, and mention that I read the articles, and there are some things that the articles, talked about that I want to give you a chance to discuss until this point, you haven't really talked about these things, due to confidentiality and the legal status of your kids cases so the articles, discuss a few things in particular, first of all they talked about how you have a history of working closely with the child welfare system, both as a guardian ad litem and having close connections with the child welfare system and how it's almost kind of like a nefarious thing, talked about how he were single, that you own your own home in Pasco County, even mentioned the city she lives in into the city mentioned your full name. Yeah, which is so not kosher for a foster parent, when we're in court. Often we're not even supposed to be referred to as our any part of our name, but the caregiver or the foster parent, and said that you were unemployed. The article said that the child in question which was the youngest child was bonded to another person that foster parents at the time completely the children, meaning the youngest child and the two other kids that they didn't know each other, that the youngest child was four years after the two older kids and that that's why they didn't know each other, but they didn't have a relationship and so can you speak to any of those things,

Nichole

all of those things. Okay, so your first point, I am a guardian ad litem the wonderful that I gave the newspaper was that I proudly served as the guardian ad litem, I still do, it gave me zero connections. We are in different circuits, I am a guardian ad litem in C 13, which is in Hillsborough County, I am a foster parent in C six, which is made up of Pasco and Pinellas I knew no one here in this area and your

Jack

guardian ad litem volunteer right, that is not to be an employee so you don't, you know, I know a lot of guardian ad litem volunteers, and they don't even know the other guardian ad litem volunteers, let alone

Cat

like across searches in the same county.

Nichole

Yeah I know, I know I know a handful of them, simply because we've been sitting at round table meetings together. If not for that. I wouldn't know them at all, we've worked independently we work on our cases or volunteer and work on our cases, I don't know the

other volunteers, even, even in that circuit. Let alone in a different circuit.

Cat

So your close connections didn't give you any clouds. Absolutely.

Nichole

Absolutely not. The only thing that the guardian ad litem program the program gave me, is education, trauma, informs knowledge, experience and assistant experience in the system and experience advocating for children, and that's it,

Jack

and all of those are very positive things that we should all hope to have more of,

Cat

right, or you change jobs somewhere in the middle of this,

Nichole

I did so, I mean, like, I'm sure, and I, we all know millions of other people. I mean, COVID hit, and I was laid off just like many other people. I had been at my firm for a long time, and it happens, what I couldn't speak to them and I, what I wasn't willing to speak to was that I had another job immediately, and I was questioned profusely about this job and about this place and to which I answered. I am a licensed foster parent in good standing and licensing requires us to fill out, financial affidavits and they require proof of our financial standing, and there are very strict sense of rules around those things, but we're

Jack

also gonna presume that someone who's a foster parent or an adoptive parent will never change jobs or never get laid off, like kind of ridiculous. I mean, we even spoke on the podcast might, the morning after we received our first foster placement, which was like, We got licensed, while the kids were on their way to our house and we still had two classes left, they were waiting to move the kids on that day. As for the time where they got the call saying that our license was finally official official, And then the next morning, Jack daddy goes to work, and comes home with this look on his face that I will never forget, and he had been laid off, he was able to get a new job, you know, he received a severance that loss of job never affected us financially because we were receiving we were continuing to receive income from his job until he started receiving income from his new job, you know, as far as foster care is concerned, you know, it doesn't matter if you change jobs as long as you demonstrate that you have the financial stability, you're fine. So for this to even be brought into question

Cat

the information was private, it was private

Nichole

and it also presumes that nobody has a savings account, you know like it presumes so much, it really kind of, frankly disgusts me about this particular reporter to presume such things, How do you not give someone the benefit of the doubt, or just the possibility that there are other things out there. It was pretty disgusting.

Cat

Well, the same reporter posted a picture of the child and the article. So the child didn't have privacy, either. That is correct.

Jack

Yeah, with all the details given in the article and having granted it was the back of the kid but listen, if I saw the back of my kid in a picture I know it was the back of my kid. Yeah, completely took away your confidentiality and the child's confidentiality facilities confidentiality, like that article, blows my mind. Yes, it took so much away,

Cat

so the article talks about the kids, that there was a big age difference between the kids can you send us a relationship no relationship.

Nichole

Yeah, which is probably the thing that aggravates me the most about the article, because it's so untrue, they have a relationship, they live together. From the time the youngest was sheltered until he was a year old in foster care, so there were times where visits were not consistent, but they know each other, they had visits, they had visits with biological family, there were relationships with biological family, extended family biological extended family and siblings that were occurring. They knew that this was their brother. He knew that these were his siblings,

Jack

but even if they didn't have a relationship and even if they hadn't lived together, they're siblings, they have the right to have that opportunity, they do and I know people who grew up in foster care, and here they are as adults and they don't have relationships with their siblings because that wasn't afforded to them while they were in that process. So, the fact that it's hard to get adoptive homes for sibling groups is hard to have one person say, You

know what, I'll take, I'll take all three of them. So to have that, it's just kind of like, protect this with your life, and, and support this and honor this and let these kids have each other. Yeah and so to for this article to come out and try and you know dispute that they you know they hadn't lived together, or what have you that it takes a lot of

Nichole

way, they tried to use the media as a tactic to persuade public opinion, which would maybe that in turn, persuade the court. How do they work out, while the kids are together.

Cat

So real quickly. What's the age difference between the youngest and the other two.

Nichole

They are, There's a three year age difference between the youngest and the middle and then a five year age difference between the youngest and the oldest,

Cat

the exact age difference between mine, and I don't think that's very far at all.

Nichole

No, the boys wrestle relentlessly in the home, I mean, they are so happy to be together. They constantly say especially the little woman. She is so family focused, is probably the one thing, the one piece of credit, that I will give the other foster parents, she definitely instilled family, and taught to bond and attach, because if she had not given him that gift, he would not have been able to move on and bond and attach so quickly and move on with really no problems at all. That's fantastic so that the three siblings are together and they're doing well. They're amazing. Nicola was the catalyst that brought her four year olds to the motion to change placement, because the parties to the case, felt that it was in his best interest to be with his siblings, the prior foster parent wanted to keep the child, the youngest child in her home, without the siblings, because of the length of time that he was in her home. The department couldn't move him without court intervention. So, the state. Then there was a motion that was filed. And that motion, ultimately led to an evidentiary hearing or testimony was given, and then judge rendered his ruling, and with that ruling had him coming to my home, and reuniting with his siblings, and that's when the transition started, that's when the transition started, That was a year ago, that prior foster parent was still trying. There was, there was an application for adoption. So when there's an application for adoption, it has to be explored, and then that application for adoption was expanded to include all three children, and not just the one tile, after,

Unknown

so after the pm live she said okay I'll take all three of them if I can have them back.

Nichole

Correct. Okay. And just so everyone is clear, she was asked multiple times to put those siblings together, this wasn't a new question, This wasn't a new fact pattern. This was the case, all along,

Cat

because in Florida, it's the goal all along for siblings to be together because siblings belong together more than they belong to any body outs, that is correct. Can you tell us what the law says.

Nichole

So, the law says that any biological relationship is the relationship that should be explored. When a child is in care. Now that could look like a parent, an aunt or an uncle a cousin, some other biological connection, but if there are siblings in care. They are to be placed together at all costs. Now that does not mean the cost of the child's mental health or safety. Okay, when it is safe, the children should be together. And in this case, there were zero safety concerns when the children should have not been together, they were simply not together because there was no more room in the foster home, where they were initially placed together, just just tragic I mean we talked about all the time, just desperately need more foster homes. Yes, I mean and this is simply because there are rules that at the age of one. Yeah, a child can no longer sleep in a crib, foster parents room. Yeah. And there. That home was full. So, my gosh, rights, and I don't know what the circumstances are surrounding that they might have really really knows, right, I don't know. But, that is why they weren't together.

Cat

I'm so glad you're on the other side of this, oh my god. Me too. Me too.

Jack

It's my understanding Nicole that there was some legislation put forward to try and prevent this situation from happening again, where siblings were trying to be put together over, removing a child from a bonded home. Can you tell us more about that state bill,

Nichole

yes it's Senate Bill 80, and I think it's Senate bills SB 80 And that bill was starting to be written during the court proceeding because they brought it up, You know that it was

happening and it was in legislature and they were working on it and there were iterations of this bill. It has recently been passed, but that Bill has been through so many rewrites and iterations that the goal of removing that sibling relationship on a layer of importance, ultimately is still in the bill that sibling relationships still exists siblings still take priority siblings still take priority. Now, there are some things that give foster parents voices in a certain way, with that bill and I'm sure. Several foster parents are rejoicing over that so yeah, I personally don't feel that it's necessary, because I know how to use my voice, and I don't need to use my physical voice to use my voice, and so I don't believe it's necessary, I believe it's going to cause a lot of issues, and a lot more delays in permanency because people are going to utilize it for reasons that may not be in the child's manifest best interest. But at the end of the day, these siblings are together, and with that bill in place, I still believe they would still be together,

Cat

I mean that is always the best interest of the child for them to be with siblings,

Nichole

you know there's something else that's been brought up multiple times, that no transition occurred. And that is the biggest lie, nobody would know this, but I think it needs to be known there was a transition, it lasted for an entire month after he moved into my home, there was a plan. It was followed. There were therapists involved and therapists were monitoring, each and every visit that occurred between the child and the foster parent, and the therapist, determined, when the visits were no longer therapeutic for him. I did not make that decision. I was not allowed to make that decision. It was in the hands of the therapists, the day that the court ordered he moved to my home. I called my therapist and I had him ready, and he was available immediately to immediately begin working with the child and he was already working with the siblings. There was a long transition, it occurred, it was therapeutically driven. And it was important that there was a transition for him because he wasn't at home for a time period.

Cat

That's really, really amazing. And because that's a big difference between no transition. Huge difference often there really is no transition Yeah, very often, that's a really healthy transition. I think so.

Jack

I think so. And I mean, the bottom line here is, You were leaning onto the experience of therapists. Yes, you were following their direction you were following case management's direction you were following license and license direction. There was nothing nefarious

going on. You were just, you were asked to take a sibling group of three, you said yes. And you proceeded and that resulted in this article defaming you sharing all this private, confidential information.

Nichole

I just feel like it's the article, it's the comments below the article, community,

Jack

I have seen comments on Facebook, even from various foster parents talking about this specific case. And, you know, whereas some parties feel like they have all the information about it. And no way you can have all, you can't have all the information. The other foster parent can have all the information, the therapist can have all for all the information that we were talking about before and you need all of the voices, to show us the full perspective and the full picture right

Cat

and you have to operate within your role, which is something that you did like when you said, a therapist has to make that call. Yeah, you have to operate within your role like I feel like I'm often asked to make decisions that only a CPI can make are the only two CBI unit, something like that, you have to operate within your role. Yes, and it's really really unwise to move outside your role because not only is it unhealthy, but it's a boundary issue, and it's really wise and other people need to really take heed to that advice because you often bring stability to your own home, and I feel like it's you're operating within your own integrity to say this is my role I'm going to stay at it. So if I'm being asked is this child ready, I'm gonna defer to the person who knows best.

Nichole

Yes, it was not for me to decide. It wasn't. I mean, there were points of frustration, where maybe I wanted to decide one way or the other, but it wasn't for me to decide. I follow the guiding principle of the manifest best interests of the child, regardless of what I want, Despite what I want what I want or feel regarding that doesn't matter. The only thing that matters is what is best for the child and it is not my place in that particular lane to make that call. And I didn't make the call.

Jack

Well I'm just kind of blown away that, you know, this is your first year of being a foster parent. This is your experience and instead of running away screaming like 98% of the people would have done. You fought for what you felt was the best interest of these children, you are continuing to foster, you are continuing to see placements and hope and



advocate for other kids, and I just don't know a lot of people like you think.

Cat

Can you tell me, like, so you had really great boundaries during this whole process and that's something that I really admire about you. Can you tell me about some of the boundaries that you have that have helped keep your family

Nichole

safe, some of the boundaries that have been put in place are with communication with the team with me knowing my role, and knowing my place, my professional career, is very much a hierarchy. And I very much know where my place is, and this is no difference. There is a hierarchy. I play a role within this hierarchy, and I know my place. And by staying in my place and staying in my lane. That doesn't mean that I don't advocate, that doesn't mean that I don't use my voice, I have a voice, and I use it, so not being able to use my voice. During this time, was really hard. And that, I am incredibly outgoing and outspoken and not speaking was incredibly difficult, but it was what was safe. That is what kept my kids safe. So I did it. And as I thought for one second that it wasn't safe at this point, I wouldn't be sitting here speaking today either. It is safe now, because these kids are my kids now after 18 months of a long, hard arduous fight, they're my kids, and I can speak. And I won't be silenced, any longer because I was silenced for so long, was so many things that were so untrue. And I mean if I'm just being honest, it really sucks. I don't really have an eloquent way to put that neither. Yeah, I mean, you know one thing that I really don't know perfect but one thing I really try with the kids is to not have conversations in front of them. And I mean, Jeff and I have bunches of kids run around. So we know it's sometimes difficult to have conversations outside of their purview. So, I've found creative ways to do that for conversations

Jack

on the front floor right

Nichole

right right or I'm like speaking Spanglish, some people that know really

Jack

half the words gosh that's arduous right but then, then the older ones. I'm like,

Nichole

I know, it was pretty rough when I spell something one day it wasn't, you know anything bad or anything. He was like, did you just spell and I was like that's it, I was just, that's cool

is gone. So being very careful to not let my feelings, my emotions, my experience spill onto them. Now, my oldest one is very very very sensitive to my moods, and I'm kind of been paying attention to this over time, so I have to be really really careful to be very kind of even keel again I'm not perfect, if I'm snappy or if I'm short, you know, or even if I am just summer or am I'm feeling sad, which is all okay right and, you know, while I'm careful because they're so sensitive, I also feel like it's very important. I have to show them that I have emotions. I can't let them think that this is easy, more that this has been easy, or that nothing is going on, man, especially the nine year old. If he knew stuff was going on. And sometimes it was really hard for him, and he would get really upset, knowing that there, there were things that were going on but I couldn't tell him about it, and so my answer would always be. You are right. There is stuff going on. It's just something I'm not allowed to talk about.

Cat

It's such a beautiful picture of protective parenting.

Nichole

He deserved that he deserved to be acknowledged that he is what he was saying was acknowledged, and then me simply saying, Yes, but I can't tell you what it is like,

Cat

I see you, but you get to be a cat. Yeah, I get to be the mom.

Nichole

Yeah. Yeah, and you don't have to deal with the hard things, which kind of goes back to the whole reason I became a foster bear and

Cat

like, you don't have to be hyper vigilant. Right, so play, go right, Right, yeah. Boy, they are man.

Nichole

their experiences and the trauma and it makes them very anxious, so I've had to be careful of kind of keeping, I mean, even those boundaries within my relationship with him. Now keeping him out, but saying, Yes, I am sad or Yes, like I am really really really angry today has nothing to do with you. It has nothing to do with your brother, because that was the problem. You know everybody sees this article and sees a little boy, they have no idea

what the other two kids went through. I was the one who lives through that. They have no idea. The pain that those little kids went through, and they were already traumatized, every day, they asked for their brother. Every day they wanted him every day they asked if he was safe. They didn't know. And there was two months where I couldn't answer them, because I had no contact, they weren't afforded the simple humanity, of knowing that their sibling was safe, and this is at a time where like the world wasn't safe, right. And at a time where like, let's be honest, we're all still getting to know each other. I mean like, to be honest, so there's the anxiety of being in a new place, or, you know, still kind of figuring everyone out. And having that relationship. Now they know the peace of their heart is now, there's no longer communication with nobody saw them.

Jack

And there's the when you see the article you just see this foster mom and her sad face, holding this child right yes, but as we've you are saying in the very beginning, you knew that you could be the one to hold pain after you lose the attachment when they're reunified. That's why we do fostering is through unify them yes and you know there are times obviously both of us have experience where we've been able to adopt our placements, but that's not what fostering is no it's not every child that comes to your house, whether it's an adoptive placement or a foster placement or a temporary placement. We all know that anything can happen on any day, and no matter who tells you, can I tell you how many kids. I have been told, like, oh they're gonna be adoptable or Oh, would you consider adopting them. I feel like there's not a kid that comes to anybody's home that stays for any period of time where someone is telling you. Oh, this one might be, you know, a longer term or this one might be like you don't know even once the child is TPR, you don't know that that you're the adoptive placement for them and there's not there's a family finding in place even outside family finding there might be other siblings somewhere right. There's so many, there might be a friend of the family, you know, so to get so worked up over a placement just because somebody had told you that you could fill out an adoption form for them right is a little.

Nichole

I don't feel comfortable with that often times these relatives or non relatives that know the family come forward, post TVR, right, because they are not comfortable being involved with the family. So you're right, you never know, you don't know Yeah, I held my breath, every step of the way until I was in the courtroom in front of Judge Starnes like I didn't even know they

Jack

were doing in person hearings, you got an in person adoption hearing

Nichole

I special requested the judge incredible, and the inverse and, and it was awesome. There was no limitation to how many people were there. Oh wow. Everyone was represented, licensing, the kids therapists, my close COVID Bubble prior state attorney. Wow. Guardian Ad Litem guardian ad litem camp guardian ad litem attorney. It was awesome, it was awesome, it was, it was,

Jack

I mean I feel like any adoption is a magical moment right yes like I can't even talk about some of them because I'll just cry like to have gone through what you've gone through to get to this point, I just I can't even imagine the but were you in attendance. When my second foster care adoption happened, I was very ill, they asked me to speak to some points, and I am so mortified when I watched the video, it was a very emotional case, the moment I laid eyes on him. It was that I've known you for 5000 years. I have always known you, you're part of me. Like our insides are mesh like this is my son. And, you know, that like to think back and when I get placements, I can't imagine thinking that of the placements like these are kids that I'm helping reunify with their families, but when I met that kid, it was like it was like, oh there you are. There you are, and know the feeling well, yeah. And so, so knowing having that feeling about that child going through what was it two and a half years, about baby Jack yes baby I was actually there for that I thought you were talking about the other one but yeah that was a really hard couple of years so it was because it was it was hard for a lot of reasons but it was just the uncertainty, even though I have certainty, and the fear, even though I had confidence, you know, to get to that point in the courtroom when they're saying it's done, you don't ever have to worry about this kid being your kid anymore like he's yours. You can leave now you don't have to have visits every so many weeks you don't have my gosh and different people ask me questions, you don't have to submit every medical paperwork like that's just on you now like that. I can't imagine what that must have been like for you after the insane experience of all this code on top of COVID, like losing our minds over COVID You were in the middle of like a media frenzy, becoming a bomb for the first time I mean that's a lot. And to get you through that like, I don't know I'm just kind of blown away by you but what, what were your supports how good were those that supported you and that were really key to having you able to come through the other side, because I'm telling you a lot of people that have run.

Nichole

There were so many, so many the cam was a support. I found creative ways to make sure that we were still getting therapy and the kids therapist was a fantastic and he was so coming into my home. He was a saving grace for me. He, I will always in forever be grateful

for him, they are not seeing him now because you know sometimes it's just time to move on, but he brought them through it, man, he got them to where they are and we wouldn't be where we are without him, putting the kids in equine therapy using that utilizing that as a tool, and the person that does that for me, it's emerald M therapeutic writing and Miss Lisa is a complete and utter godsend, and her staff they're amazing, having them having my sister having my brother having my parents, my sister in law, having my little nephew, who would like always make me laugh and say the craziest things or wiggle his teeth and I hate what it was. And so he would like come up and be like TT Cole, and he was like, there's like, I was having like a hard case management licensing. And then, and then just having do

Jack

we share licensing specialist too, right, we do we do, he's pretty awesome. She is, she's a convener, a couple of weeks ago is what I love that. I saw her today actually receiving her visit for my chickens to record

Nichole

and having actually somebody who wasn't licensing and is no longer in licensing became an incredibly close support and friend to me, reconnecting with a high school friend who we had already reconnected and his wife, they're amazing, being able to just be myself with my sister, and then something else that was so amazing and so unexpected is a trauma informed therapist that I work with, she is. I don't even have words, she's beyond amazing. I did not want her, I wanted nothing to do with her. She was good. We talked about it, because I didn't make the decision to have a therapist. It was requested strongly suggested requested requires. Through all of this, I didn't fight it, but I was very guarded and we've, we've talked about it, she was like you were giving off the vibe that like I could be here but you weren't saying, and that's definitely me. And that's definitely was my attitude, and I was very guarded, she came back every week, we would take the kids on walks, or bike ride, while we were doing it. And I mean that just kind of shows you how brave, she is. It was never intruding and I'm not going to make this hard on you. What do you want to do, why don't why don't we, what do you want to do, why don't we go for a walk, and I'm like, Oh, we can do that, we can get out of the house, and walk while we talk. That was put in place by case management, and the department. And when that was no longer the department's responsibility. I had zero hesitation, and I have continued working with her, because these kids are working through trauma, I have to learn how to handle all of these situations, she is so helpful. I may have a broad idea of what to do, but she can give me an exact example of what I should do, based on my specific situation, it sounds like we all need her. You all leave her I love her. She's amazing. I want to talk to her earlier I told her I was doing this, I run everything by her. And she's just amazing and she's honest

and she calls me on my shit if they're fit to be called, you know, And I love it. It's she's incredibly supportive. So having all of those things and all of these people along the way, are how I got through it, finding other creative ways, getting How do I get all of the kids out of the house at the same time when there's kids that don't walk or can't ride bikes or whatever, I bought a bike trailer, I bought myself a bike. Put the littles in the bike trailer, put the big ones on the bike and fingers crossed and help.

Jack

Can you give me a word that you think people would use to describe foster parents, tough, how do you see the role of foster parents and child welfare necessary good foster parents, yeah asterik, we all get trauma fatigue from the secondary trauma. Are there certain things that you do for self care, first of all, I'm

Nichole

not afraid to cry because it's such a huge stress relief journaling, whether it's handwritten or typing dancing in the living room with the kids, like you know just random stuff or listening to certain types of music,

Jack

what are the biggest struggles that you see in foster care right now,

Nichole

not enough foster homes, I would say that's the biggest, and then not enough employees that are trained properly kind of across the board, I'm not just talking about case management because I feel like everybody dogs on case management. But really, I mean placement, they can use more help and how I feel like they could at times, you know, I think licensing kind of fluctuates with who they have their, so not just case management kind of across the board, I mean really more foster parents, but there's so much recruiting and how do you really recruit more foster parents, I always hear about this a lot, and I'm like, There's nothing you can do, if people don't have heart for it and people don't want to do it if people don't want

Jack

to own their home, you're gonna you're going to get a hard for it by experiencing it, by knowing somebody like an organization coming and telling you this is why you should do this is rarely going to make someone completely change their life to bring strangers into their home, right you know I always wonder about like those movies like instant family. Yeah, I think that brought a lot of foster parents said but I kind of love that movie. Also I haven't even seen it but I want to see my kids watch that movie like a million times

Nichole

every day for like three or four months. Yes, and I was like, Are we are we are we are we done with this. Do we understand, do we know all the words.

Jack

Oh my gosh I used to watch it but I often wonder if those movies like are the catalyst or if I think that one in particular, increased a lot of awareness and I think a lot of people became foster parents because of it. And I'm going to tell you like, I don't think I've seen many that were as realistic as that when I even there was a documentary on something recently last year, maybe the year before, about foster care, and I don't even think that documentary was as accurate. That movie instant family, I you know, when when you met the social workers, I knew a social worker that was exactly like the one it wasn't exactly like the other. And I really wouldn't want different characters in the foster parent class I'm like dude this is spot

Nichole

on. It's funny though because while the younger kids really enjoyed the movie, my 16 year old doesn't really really isn't really interested, is it triggering for him. I think possibly.

Jack

Yeah, you know the other movie that was interesting and I think I saw this with you was the superhero movie that's like for kids that want a bunch, have you seen Shazam. No, I don't see it yes I know what it is but I haven't seen it so I thought that one was really cute. It was cute, but I always wonder if that brings more, you know, foster parents, to the table. What do you think the community can do to prevent more kids from coming into foster care,

Nichole

I think people tend to turn a blind eye and don't want to be the one to make a call. And I think if a call is made, sooner rather than later, early intervention and resources in the put into place like Safe at Home or safety planning or things like that, versus waiting until there's a kid wandering the streets at 2am so much on December 8 And it's a crisis right. I mean I remember working at an elementary school when I was in high school, my senior year, and I remember a five year old disclosing something, and my colleague was, I was like, we're calling the abuse hotline, I mean even at 17 years old I knew what it was,

Jack

does not surprise me for calling and I didn't hear what anybody else said, yeah, she was like, Oh no, we have to run up by our boss and I'm like, No says, like, No we're not. I'm

calling, and it's confidential, and I don't care and I will disclose I will say I called because it was disclosed and it's going to be investigated, curious, so I think if people weren't so scared to intervene or call or turn a blind eye, or whatever. I mean, it's none of my business. Yes. I was driving on the way to Clearwater. One day, and there was a man walking. An older man, and he was kind of stumbling, you know grin parent age, I immediately picked up the phone and call 911 to report it, or on highway 16 year old says it's not our business. I said that's somebody's father, grandfather, family, and what if he's an elderly part of the elderly community that has Alzheimer's or dementia, and there's a Silver Alert out that we just haven't seen, Right, we call cureat. You call you care to care about humans, telling it. I think that's a great way to like it kind of blankets the whole show, because you have cared about these kids so much that it was about them and not you. It was never about me. And I just have to say, you know, I didn't have a foster situation when I was growing up in fact I didn't know foster care was when I was growing up, but, like, 18 months ago, we found out that we had a half brother my three, my two siblings and I found that we have a half brother that lives within vicinity of us for the last 30 something years like, now he lives very far away but, you know, there were times in our lives where he looked very close to us, and because we weren't gifted with the information of, you know his existence, you know, I mean we knew he existed but we didn't know he was, his identity, you know, we never knew he was there are times where he was in the same state or the neighboring state, and both he and my other brother were military and they were, you know, really close to each other and finding out that we had another sibling was such a gift than finding out that we lost almost 30 years with him he's 32, is like, that was so much grief. Yeah, because the way it makes you feel is that you have no value. They're not worth it. So when you say this person is important and he has value and he's someone's Dad, that's what you've done for these kids to you said you have value, you kids belong to each other, you're important,

Nichole

and it's not just them, it's not just the three siblings, it's 16 year olds, there is the 17 year old, it's that the eight month old, is every child who comes into that home. The biggest lesson that I want to teach these kids is compassion and humanity, if I can teach them that I have more than done my job. Teachers will educate them in ways that I cannot college will educate them in ways that I cannot, I can teach them compassion and humanity, and I can teach them that, through my actions, and through what they see, and through how I help people, because there may be these various kids that are in my home. And there's the guardian ad litem kids, but there's others. There's others that crossed my path, then I am like, Oh, do you want this, I can make a few phone calls, I can send a few emails, I can close the gap, and we can make it happen.



Jack

Well, to that point, you know, I had heard a story about your 16 year old, where he has a passion for gaming, and that's what he wants to do with his life. And that you like made it a mission to use that to connect with him. Yes, and you encouraged him scholastically as well.

Unknown

Yeah, can you tell us about that.

Jack

I mean he seems like a really cool kid I love him so I would love to hear more about that I

Nichole

love him so much, he is similar to how you were describing earlier just kind of that instant connection, I don't know why he just was, he came to me as a night placement, and I've never got him out of my mind, he is in my home, and we're going through that process, but gaming he loves gaming he loves to play video games, and he was struggling with school and I was trying to encourage him and trying to come up with ways to encourage him, and we had like reward charts, like all to do with gaming, you know, all kinds of stuff right. Anything to encourage him, but one thing that I don't know how I was able to pull off or do was I reached out to his favorite YouTuber who has let me get, let me see if I get his number right, I think he's got right now he's at like between nine and 10 million viewers, and at the time he had 8 million subscribers viewers or whatever it's called on YouTube. And then like, how am I going to get ahold of this guy, who like 9 million other people want to talk to you. So I went on every social media platform, and private messaged him and didn't really think that would get his attention because that's what everybody does. So I googled and googled and Googled until using your investor. Yes, until I found a business email for him. And it said to only use the email for, I don't know something, not what I was emailing him for. And I was like, gonna do it anyways. So I emailed him and he responded to me and what I was asking him for was a conversation with my team to help encourage him, and then kind of, if he could give them a little bit of advice on kind of how he got into it, and so he wrote back and said, I will record a video for him. Customize video and send it to him,

Jack

which is actually probably better than this. All right, because he gets played over and over

Nichole

here, so he responded. And then, I didn't get anything for like a week, and I was like, Hey, I

appreciate this so much. What do you guys shot me like four hours later in the middle of the night. And so, I was

Jack

gonna be he doesn't like that bright and

Nichole

he sent me the video and I was so freaking pumped, and when I told my team, he was kind of mad at me. So like the reaction was lackluster. Meanwhile, I'm like, literally jumping and screaming but I got this different thing famous YouTube guy to like send a personal video. and he was like, like, not a lot of response. Anyway yeah whatever. So then I started to. And then, when he saw it, he was like Can I see it again. Can you send it to me. And so it was super cool. That is probably something that I feel super accomplished about as a foster parent, other things too just creative ways of connecting and figuring it out. I mean I didn't know anything about these video games. Now I know things, I sit with him. Probably not as much as he would like, I think he would like for me to sit and watch him more, which I endeavor to do is so hard. I'm with you. I get it. I'm like, oh God. Now I find myself like retaining the knowledge that he has given me about it so like other people are talking about I'm like oh yeah, what about blah blah, and you know I'm a mom. She must be cool. I don't think she thinks I'm very.

Jack

I don't think he thinks I'm very cool, really all my kids would definitely my oldest son is very into video games, and one of the things that I really felt like was a positive experience for all my kids is we went on a road trip this summer, and we brought all, I think at the time we were just seven kids right because the baby hadn't been born yet so the seven of us went on a road trip we went to Georgia, we went to Tennessee we did like, you know, cool like waterfalls stuff, whatever. The, the one night at our Airbnb. So my son had brought a switch and you know the devices required to plug it into the TV. And so I thought, you know, we've got kids from age two to 11. And you know sometimes the younger ones and the older ones don't connect as well and sometimes, you know, to be honest, my 11 year old sometimes feels left out because there's a bigger age gap. And the middle ones hang out and the little ones hang out, and he's like the coolest freaky kid on the planet, but the other kids you're like I'd want to play with the baby doll over here. I thought it'd be something that could connect everybody would be to play Mario Kart because that's something even the two year old can pioneer. So we went to Walmart up in Georgia and we got this big poster board, and we made, like, like, you don't have to have, in, in basketball those charts were. Yeah, what are they called, like Final Four kind of stuff. What, like it's like a, an, an A on it goes to the end. Yeah. Yes, like like, it's like the Final Four charts

yeah there's, there's another term, but the chart it is, yeah I don't know. Anyways, so we've made it a big poster board chart, we put everybody's names on it and I talked a lot of game but I was bumped out in the first round. Every single kid was super engaged, and my son was like, he's still talking about that and that was months ago he's like hey, do you think we could do another one of those championships again obviously he won, but he almost lost and in that moment I was dying but, you know, that was a way that we can connect with all our kids and get all of them they connect with each other. Yeah, and even though. Well, to be honest I've kind of enjoyed Mario Kart I think it's kind of fun, you know, yeah, out of the games you can play, you know, I might have preferred to catch up on something or scroll my Facebook feed, but taking the time to connect with them in a way that really excites them totally worth it.

Nichole

Yeah, that we did something similar, not quite as PG it was with Mortal Kombat better about the serial killer. And so I hadn't played Mortal Kombat since I was a kid and I was like, you know, it's like play this. And so the 16 year old was talking all this smack I had never touched a ps4 controller. Since like there was a Sega Genesis, right, like I had those two. And so we're playing. And he's like, you know talking the whole bunch of game and of course he's kicking the little kids but they're having the time of their life, even the four year old is playing whenever he's kicking their butts and then I'm like, All right, it's my turn to play. And like, he's like, you're never gonna win and I was like, oh I'm gonna win this trade Tracy's. And then, we're playing, and I see him like he had been programmed codes which I didn't even like, and I still beat him. I don't know how God was on my side and he needed to be shown. So cake is amazing but it's times like that that are like super fun, or when we sit down and we like beanbags are all the living room and we're all like watching movie together and we're having like popcorn and, you know m&ms Are him and my nine year old and myself went to Gainesville a couple weeks ago and we never did time alone are like separate, you know yeah and so it was like 24 hours, but it was like the best 24 hours ever to like be away. Yeah, with them separately and we were there for a reason so we each got individual time as well, with each of the kids. So, stuff like that to keep them like

Jack

that and like we recently went and had a short vacation with four of my kids, and then the week after I just took three different kids, And we went sailing, and it was a really neat experience, especially because when you have a lot of kids there's certain dynamics that happen in the house. And in this particular situation, two kids who really struggle with each other, mostly because of a third child who is normally playing with one of them and then the other one is a little left out and then feels rejected and then projects, you know, so

having these two together and seeing them like best friends for the two days we were gone like, I can't stop I can't stop looking at the pictures from that trip, and seeing the big goofy smiles with their arms around each other's shoulders that's all fake because they've really struggled to connect so I think it's important also because I get alone time with various kids. When you take smaller groups and like my husband stayed home I saw him and I would, and then he had a great experience, having more individualized attention with kids that he normally doesn't because one of the kids I take is usually, you know, attached to the hip with him

Nichole

but Right, yeah, no having has been great. I took four of the six to Universal Studios, and even now was nice, but it's weird because I really missed having the other Yeah, even though it's like, you know, it would have been harder to have the baby, and, you know, the older one didn't go, because she didn't think she would, you know, have a good time with certain rides and stuff, and she didn't want me to waste my money because she's very kind and considerate. Yes, I really need to meet all her. I'm obsessed with them now but this was so, so yeah, even having that smaller group was great, but I found myself like also kind of anxious to get back to the other ones, I guess like a piece of me is missing. Yeah,

Jack

what are your goals, to make positive change in our community.

Nichole

My goals are to continue to advocate for the kids, and advocate for change in the system, when appropriate, within my lane and within my space, and that means partnering with the various agencies or licensing and placement and just constantly having a line of communication so if I have an idea about something and is communicated. They can run with it or not. Talking with other foster parents, because they have really good ideas, and generally talking to people that I know that they talk to other people that they know and that widens the scope of foster parents, or people that support foster parents, speaking out, communicating, and now sharing my story. And I think sharing my story and what I experienced in a positive way, can help the community as a whole, maybe it'll make other foster parents, not judge others so quickly. Maybe they'll take a second look, when they see an article or a new story, and not be so quick to judge. Maybe it'll make them think twice.

Jack

It is as a siblings and I keep going back to like when you first got licensed, and you were asked, Will you take these kids, they have a sibling, we want to put siblings together and

you just were like, sure, you didn't even know them. I didn't know them engaged and this fight. They didn't sign up for,

Nichole

I did not sign up please. I had no idea. I knew this was going to be hard. This is not what I was expecting, but I am so much stronger for it, and I know so much more, and I kind of feel like I can conquer anything at this point. There's a lot of talk of like foster parent burnout and things like that and all this is done is flame, my fire to keep going because I might be one person, but one person, changing one other person's life, or these three lives, they're going to go out and change other people's lives. And there's been 17 that have been in the home. Yeah, so there is this domino effect. And I sure as hell want to be a part of that. Thank you so much for being like, oh my gosh, thank you for giving me my voice.

Jack

Thank you for letting us hear it.