

## HONORING, UNITING, AND CELEBRATING FAMILIES

### AN EXTREME CASE LEADS TO A RENEWED BOND BETWEEN FATHER AND SON

#### A Family Engagement Specialist's Story

A memorable family reunification recently occurred following very tragic circumstances: a 12-year-old Arizona boy was left in the child welfare system for 9 months after the murder of his mother and suicide of his stepfather. Casey Family Program's social worker Kimberly and I contacted the boy's birth father in Chicago and learned that the pair had visited each other infrequently. Initially, the Department of Child Safety did not see the birth father as an option, citing recent usage of marijuana and a lack of previous involvement in past years, but it soon became clear that this father was committed to proving himself as a parent.



From the very first phone call, it was apparent that this was a father who truly loved his son, Quan, and would walk through fire to be with him. His efforts at change stood out to the court and to his son. I first met him in person during a trip to Chicago for a family group conference and family reunion. The Casey social worker and I were greeted by more than 300 family members with open arms and treated as family—a welcome that had been facilitated by this birth father prior to the reunion. It was clear that he was viewed as a leader within his family, and he effortlessly incorporated his son into a large extended family that had not seen him since he was a baby. It was evident to us this was Quan's home.

Before the reunification, this birth father did everything Casey and the Arizona Department of Child Safety asked of him. He completed parenting classes and substance use treatment in record time—never missing an appointment. He took advantage of every service or bit of advice offered to him. He reached out to Quan's therapist in Arizona for tips on how to support his son through grief and loss. Further, the father worked to maintain his son's relationship with half siblings in person and over the phone. He called into every court hearing and talked with Quan by phone every single night—encouraging him to be strong, focus on school, be kind to his foster mother, and to look out for his siblings.

After the Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children agreement was approved and Quan was placed with his father in Illinois, dad focused on his son's well-being. He got him involved with an African-American young male group, started coaching his basketball team, and worked with teachers and a school counselor to ensure that Quan continued to process his grief. The father also kept the memory of his son's mother alive by sharing stories and scrapbooks.

I spoke with the birth father recently to follow up and find out how they were doing emotionally and with daily life. Dad said things are going well and he is in touch with his son's teachers regularly and is often surprised that he is the only dad that shows up to parent-teacher nights. He shared a story from Christmas, saying it was a blessing to have his son home. Quan said it was the best Christmas ever and told his dad that he was "MAD." The father was confused and asked his son what he meant. Quan replied, "Dad, this Christmas was amazing! You are the best! You are M-A-D — you are Mom and Dad!"

Learn more about the foster care services provided by Casey Family Programs at <http://www.casey.org/>, the nation's largest operating foundation focused on safely reducing the need for foster care and building communities of hope for children and families across America.



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