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**Rachel:** [00:00:00] in attempts to support a lot of different teens that were reuniting back with their families, we found that many lacked a lot of supports. Just by nature of the process, when a case is closed through the state a lot of the different resources are also stripped away or pulled.

we started off with doing a lot of different community events centered on joy in connection, and then continued to expand to building out programs for deeper levels of impact and connection, providing different life skills supports, and also offering mental health resources Thanks for joining us for Fostering Conversations. I'm Amy Smith, your host, and today we have Heidi Naylor who is the Director of Retention at Utah Foster [00:01:00] Care as our co-host.

**Heidi:** Hi. Welcome. We're excited to have you with us today. Like Amy said, my name is Heidi Naylor I'm also a foster adoptive parent, and I have children that participate in activities through Common Thread.

**Amy:** Our guest today is Rachel Garrett. She is a Utah foster parent as well, and most commonly and famously known as the founder of Common Thread. So introduce yourself, Rachel. Thank you for being here with us.

**Rachel:** Oh, thank you both for having me. , it's really fun to be on a podcast with two people. I really. Love and enjoy being with. My name is Rachel Garrett and our family is a foster family. We primarily taken teens and have loved on a lot of different kids the last few years.

In 2022 started Common Thread, which is a nonprofit organization that works to serve teens, 12 to 18, who have been impacted by foster care. And we provide different events, resources, and programs.

**Amy:** it is a phenomenal organization. I remember I [00:02:00] came to the. Very first event you ever had

**Rachel:** did. You

**Amy:** because I had a teen in care at the time and I think there was 10 or 15 kids there, and now you are serving hundreds of kids. So it really is incredible to see the good that you have created it, it truly blows my mind.

So thank you for all that you're doing for the community. It truly is amazing.

**Heidi:** Can you tell us a little bit more about why you started Common Thread?

**Rachel:** Yes. So I, in attempts to support a lot of different teens that I had within our home that were reuniting back with their families, we found that many lacked a lot of supports. Just by nature of the process, when a case is closed through the state a lot of the different resources are also stripped away or pulled.

And so we found that. I. wanted to continue to love and. support these kids and wanted to create a community that Better understood their needs and their specific realities and doing so just started to reach out to the community about different [00:03:00] opportunities from pottery and different games, paddle boarding, those type of things. And people just came outta the woodworks are like, we want this too. And we have been seeking a community as well.

And so it just exploded And now we're three years in and it's really transformed as we start to address, we have a team board, which Heidi's. kids Have actively participated in and we try to close to. the pulse of a community that is teen led and so we started off with doing a lot of different community events centered on joy in connection, and then continued to expand to building out programs for deeper levels of impact and connection, providing different life skills supports, and also offering mental health resources because as we know that's a really difficult resource.

For many families to find accessible, and so that's something that we just really wanted to provide and everything we do is free to the community and teens, and it's been really beautiful to see this unfold and to build connections with so many amazing young [00:04:00] people in our state.

**Amy:** It's May, it's National Foster Care Month, so that's obviously our focus, but I know that Common Thread accommodates and caters to teens in all different types of circumstances. What are the circumstances that a lot of the teens in that are participating in these events and what type of circumstances are they coming from?

**Rachel:** Yeah, we do like a different application survey for all the teens who. participate in the program and Over 85% have been impacted by foster care. So that's a majority of the teens that we serve. We also open it up to similar lived experiences , because we found that there were many kids who had similar home lives and or similar circumstances relating to experiences with abuse and neglect, different elements of poverty or ostracization within the community.

And so we wanted to not exclude those teens who. didn't have the support from the state, but actively needed some resources. So those are some of the teams that we also support. And we are, yeah, just trying to be [00:05:00] as inclusive as possible.

**Heidi:** One of the things that I think Common Thread does so beautifully, both for those that serve on the team board, but also those that you just serve, you guys naturally mentor those kids and so you are another safe adult for these kids and it creates more trust in adults and, helps them create more felt safety.

It's a beautiful thing, but you guys also teach them leadership skills, how to advocate for themselves. It's a beautiful thing that you're doing with the youth that have the opportunity to be served by you.

**Rachel:** Oh, thank you. And as you both know, just the teenage stage, the demographic is pretty transient. And also, is under supported in some different areas by nature of the age, and so yeah, it's been really beautiful. Like Heidi mentioned, to be able to create a space. We really, that's one of our biggest goals, is a safe space where they feel that they can be themselves and that they can connect with that safety, build that trust and connection with adults and others in the community. To potentially [00:06:00] just, give different opportunities and experiences. I still remember like the first year one teen I overheard talking to another teen and was like, this is, I didn't realize adults could be nice and was just like blown away. And it was just, and it, again, it was just one of our team members who were supporting them in something.

We did an outdoor movie and, but to that point, it just being able to provide kids with additional safe adults.

it's huge

**Amy:** Yeah, it really is. And I think something that's really impressive that you guys do is you guys provide trauma-informed training to all of your volunteers. So will you talk a little bit about that? Like why is that important to be providing that to your volunteers? Why do you guys. US do that.

**Rachel:** That's a really great question. Before common thread started, I actually went back to grad school and studied child and adolescent development with an emphasis on trauma. I think by nature of just working with teens for the last decade as a high school teacher and a casa, and as a foster parent, I wanted to better understand the impact of trauma on our [00:07:00] brains and behaviors. I found it just so critical for retention and for true connection with the teens to be able to be trauma-informed, to understand how our previous experiences in life impact the different behaviors and or forms of communication. And when we offer these trauma-informed trainings to volunteers, not only does it set up the volunteer first.

Better success because they have a better understanding coming into this. But also we're supporting the teens in ways that they absolutely deserve to have that support and to have that understanding because it's just, it's critical with behaviors to ensure that we know how to deescalate, to ensure we know how to support, we know how to honor a child's identity.

And those elements are just so critical for creating a safe space. So the trauma-informed trainings, I think have been pivotal for creating these events that we have really high retention rates for it, just like the kids can feel it and see it and the kids also can feel and see it when it's not there.

So that's just something we're always really mindful of.

**Heidi:** One of the things along those same lines is you [00:08:00] talk about using appropriate language surrounding foster care. Why do you think that's so important?

**Rachel:** I think it provides a lot of dignity and respect for these youth and families that we work with, and we have this opportunity to connect with Every single one of these kids that have been impacted by foster care did not choose this, and so we're really careful on. Not leaning into this as their identity or this is like a chosen identity for themselves.

So instead of saying foster kids, we'll say kids impacted by foster care, this is one thing that has happened to them, but it's not who they are. it really makes a big difference when we are using empowering language that feels like it's strength based and recognizes that dignity and respect.

So we're really mindful in advertisements and how we talk about these different elements. And to the teen board is so wonderful in vocalizing these different elements as well because it's it's important. It's important how with any outreach we do in the community too, because there's different stigmas and stereotypes.

And so by modeling [00:09:00] this, when we talk to other people, that they can understand that too. And hopefully that ripple effect will continue so that we can do better at talking with respect towards a lot of these individuals.

**Heidi:** What kind of experiences have you had where people that are less familiar with foster care say something uninformed? And how do you encourage youth to advocate for themselves in that way? I.

**Rachel:** Ooh, that's a really good question. I would say I have been in like the a public. Setting who doesn't have a lot of familiarity with what we do will come in with preconceived ideas of what foster care is or what the kids have experienced. And or make assumptions like if a teen comes with an adult, , it's really easy for people to fall into this narrative or this, like a typical family dynamic, but being mindful of oh, the adult that's bringing this.

This teen or is connected with this teen may not be biologically related and, or there's a lot of different dynamics of relationships. I've had to have many different conversations with individuals of just being mindful because it does put people on the spot and can provide a lot of discomfort.[00:10:00]

But one thing I like to do, like with this example for the adult. With all the teens I've had in our home as I, and that's maybe one privilege we have with working with older youth that they are able to vocalize for themselves. But like building that relationship just so that there's that full transparency.

It's I'm wanting to be here for you and I want to give you that power of like, when I'm in your spaces with your friends, you can decide how, or what my title is or what my connection to you is and I always default to. what they Want and what they feel most comfortable with. So a lot of times in settings, people have no idea our, literal connection.

But I think it's beautiful. I think it gives them that power back in, in places that they haven't had much say.

**Amy:** And I think there's such variety too. So I think it is important to let the kids choose. How do you want this to look and be? I've had kids that are like, don't say I'm in foster care. Just say you're my babysitter. Or some kids are like, I'm in foster care. This is my foster mom. I'm like, [00:11:00] Hey.

So I think it's really important if we can give these kids a voice and to give them the space to let them choose. And I will say more times than not, they are not announcing that I'm their foster mom. They're saying, Hey, this is Amy who I live with, or my friend or my babysitter, and I'm, that's great.

**Heidi:** I've never had a teen say that I was their babysitter.

**Amy:** I had two school age kids, and they told me, when you pick me up from school, do not say I'm in foster care. Just say you're the babysitter.

**Heidi:** Rachel, how have you found that teens would like you to introduce them?

**Rachel:** Oh, that's so interesting. Yeah. Every teen is different. Amy talked about different personalities and I've even had the same teen, say oh, this is my mom. And then in a different setting with their friends that don't know that they've been in foster care will say something totally different this is.

This is like my friend or someone who loves me. Like [00:12:00] just I've seen like one team even share different elements, like depending on the situation that they're in, because it does reveal a lot of information really quickly depending on what you choose. But oftentimes I'm like a bonus parent or bonus mom.

So sometimes it's just Rachel this is Rachel, I want you to meet Rachel. And I'm like, that's great.

**Amy:** Yeah. I

**Rachel:** Obviously, aside of, aside from medical appointments, it's,

**Amy:** True. Yes. That's probably the only place that, yes, you do have to say what

the facts

**Rachel:** How are you connected here and legally is this.

**Amy:** Yeah. Yeah. But that is a different environment. But that is a good. I would love to talk about what are the stigmas? And misunderstandings, I deal with a lot of misunderstandings from family, from friends. When people find out we're a foster family, they ask in my opinion, ridiculous questions.

Like, how do you not know the answer to that? Or, but I would love to talk about maybe some of those, because I think, as it's foster care. Month, it would be good to just educate our public a little bit, and I'm sure you do a ton of that education through Common Thread [00:13:00] and through being a foster parent and all of the other amazing places that you support.

What are some of the main uninformed perspectives that you've seen?

**Rachel:** I know that there have been some negative stigmas that, for example, for foster families that they are doing this for monetary reasons or there's some other outside motivational factor outside of just supporting and loving these kids.

Or sometimes people associate with a chaotic environment and like, , is everyone okay in the house? How many people do you have in your house? Like just it's abnormal family dynamics and, I think that this goes across the board with any sector, right?

The negative examples travel a lot faster and farther than the positive ones, and so sometimes it's just helping someone reconstruct what foster family looks like and be like, oh, you can be this age of some like this. Like you can live in this circumstance and whatever, and

**Amy:** you can be single, you can be married, you

**Rachel:** yes, yes, yes, yes,

**Amy:** [00:14:00] actually need.

**Rachel:** zero kids, multiple kids you can have. Yeah, exactly. So I think just reconstructing that idea of what it looks like and like in a positive, healthy, beautiful way,

I found to be really impactful.

**Amy:** What have been the things that you've seen? I will I'll get it a lot. When I was taking older kids oh, they're probably so troublesome, or They're so naughty. And like you already said, it's not their fault. They're in foster care.

From my experience, a lot of these kids are quite self-sufficient because .

They've had to survive.

What have you seen, as far as like taking these older kids and what are the dynamics there?

**Rachel:** Love older kids. Like I love teenagers, and we get so much pushback. Even when we were first licensed and started taking in teenage placements, people had a lot of outside opinions and criticisms and some things are really valid. I think it was like there's some good intentions, but for our family, it has been so beautiful to see.

The connection with some of these older teams, with our younger kids, we do have a nine and a [00:15:00] 7-year-old. And so just seeing their connections together, it's been so fun to be able to, just to connect with different personality types, different interests. I've learned a lot of different hobbies that I would never have embarked on by nature of the teens we've had in our home.

Some love to skateboard and I learned to skateboard and longboard and others love Bad Bunny and different music. And I've like really explored so many different elements also culturally as well. And when you talked about sometimes the deviant behavior, may the emphasis with regards teens.

Honestly, like the best kids ever, like just truly to the core, the best kids, so amazing and have had such difficult life experiences that most adults would never even be able to relate to and are still doing their best and trying so hard. And I think we just need give so much more grace and compassion than judgment for this age group, because truly like some of the best people in the world.

**Heidi:** I have a great example of a teen [00:16:00] doing it, that very thing. There was a woman who. Lived across the street from us who was elderly and she was very lonely. And once a week, my teen that was in care would go over to their house at six o'clock in the morning and cook breakfast for them

and sit and eat breakfast with them before they went to school.

These teens are so empathetic. They see the needs out in the community and around them, and because they haven't always had their own needs met, they step up in a way that is so beautiful and people don't give our teens enough credit.

**Amy:** Yeah.

**Rachel:** Heidi be.

**Amy:** Yeah. I love that. That is so awesome. I think, a lot of the foster parents, I know that foster teens , we're all in the same boat. I laugh at myself because I said, send me all the teens. And the teens started coming and then two babies appeared and two babies didn't leave. all the teens laughed.

I am in the camp of older kids. There. So much fun. And they are. They're really good kids and they can communicate, and they can say

**Rachel:** Yeah.

**Amy:** Which [00:17:00] is also painful. Rachel we're talking before we started, like the emotional toll that fostering takes on you. It's very hard to learn these kids' stories and to hold that for them.

And it is hard. It is unfair what they're going through and, but being that safe place I think is a really cool opportunity that we get to have as foster parents and as volunteers with Common Thread. And yeah, I love that so much. I was gonna ask Heidi is it okay if we touch on the money about the stigma of foster care?

Is that something

**Heidi:** In the state of Utah, it costs you more to board your animal overnight than a foster parent gets reimbursed for. For care in a day. Daycare, most people pay more in daycare on a daily basis than a foster parent receives in reimbursement. And that's the thing. They also don't understand monies that come in the state of Utah is a reimbursement.

And so typically the child has been in your home for four to six weeks before you receive your first payment and [00:18:00] you're paying out of pocket for all the things that child needs at during that time. And it's always crazy to me that people think. At least in Utah that people do it for the money because there is not money.

I've always lost money being a foster parent. I hate to admit that out loud, but

**Rachel:** I have too. Yeah.

**Heidi:** I've lost money being a foster parent for every child that has been in my home. And I willingly would do that over and over again for everything I learned from the kids that were in my home.

**Amy:** Yeah, I just think that's an important stigma to break, and I think as foster parents realizing you do not do this for money, that is absurd. And for people that are not foster parents, your donations and your support actually really do go a long way. Like I. most of the kids I've taken are crisis kids.

They're coming with nothing. I am buying them an entire wardrobe. I am buying them shoes. Most kids I've had come with zero shoes on their feet.

**Heidi:** underwear, school supplies. Yep.

**Rachel:** Up on all medical appointments, all those different [00:19:00] elements that, yeah.

**Heidi:** and kids that are ethnically different than you the hygiene supplies cost more money, hair costs more money to get done there. Those donations that people step up for our teens don't realize what a huge impact it makes. Or even for our foster families, I had the experience, we have seven adopted children in our home.

And as a family of nine, even going to the movies was cost prohibit for us. So if someone donated movie tickets and we were able to go to the movies, people don't realize what a big deal that was. I, it was a amazing and provided opportunities for our family that we wouldn't have had otherwise.

**Amy:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Rachel:** So all go together. Like oftentimes families have to just like splice and dice according to the financial burden, so that's very cool.

**Amy:** Rachel, are you willing to share, what have been the most rewarding moments as a foster parent and what have been the most rewarding [00:20:00] moments as running Common Thread?

**Rachel:** As a foster parent, I think just getting to love these kids like I. They have changed my life. So the teens that have lived in our home and have changed their family's lives so fundamentally, I still to this day am pretty heavily involved with a lot of the teens that we've had in various capacities.

One specifically like daily, still pretty involved. And when you're talking about doing it for the money, I'm like, no. No. Like this just could not be further from the truth. But with , this one specific teen who has very little family support and maybe the first teen and person in her whole family for all generations to graduate from high school.

That's her goal. And I'm like, those moments are. really humbling and really beautiful. And they're coupled with so many other moments of so much repair of just like the up and down of riding public transportation. So she gets comfortable figuring out more creative solutions to [00:21:00] help her navigate some of those voids in her personal life.

But

**Amy:** I think that's important to remember. It didn't just happen because she came to a house and someone cared about her. There have been many steps

**Rachel:** So it's consistency and

supporting any teen who has trauma is it brings up a lot. And also I don't think we talk about the good. So I think that's where it came from earlier.

But similar to this, like either nights that I'm like crying, I'm like, are we all gonna be alive in a year? And then there's other nights that I'm like. Honestly, this is like the most beautiful healing work to witness us up close and it's sacred. So as a foster parent, I just am so honored. I get to love a lot of kids that I've connected with the last few years with Common Thread.

I, it's, I think it's just an extension of that to see kids, make friends and build confidence in something. And we just finished one of our first programs and we spent time with 20 teens for eight weeks. And to see the. Unbelievable. It was so cool to see the confidence and to see them [00:22:00] interacting and building some of those skills of connecting with adults and peers, which sometimes for teens, peers is harder by nature of just the, yeah, just there's a lot of, there's a lot of things to unpack.

But anyway, just seeing some of those that just, that healing I guess is the Common Thread of it all is just the healing is so sacred to witness and these kids are doing, and I.

**Amy:** Yeah. I love that. That's so awesome.

**Heidi:** the nation, one in three kids that enter foster care are queer. I think you have seen that same representation happen in , the teen community that you serve Also. H how can people step up for those youth and the youth that you continue to serve? How can they get involved with Common Thread?

What are ways to support our youth that maybe are little more marginalized?

**Rachel:** Yeah, I, one big element is we're always looking for volunteers who are representative [00:23:00] of the queer community by nature. For teens to be able see adults to see themselves in. So powerful. So anyone who has that personal connection and also is really inclusive, or as an ally, we absolutely champion those volunteers because it's so critical, particularly in a state where that's not felt in many social interactions.

One big thing with Common Thread is we always offer name tags and everyone's wearing pronouns because we're really wanting to be so respectful to support everyone's. Gender identities and their names too. Like in our programs we had different teens who were like, I really wanna be called this and people don't call me this, but can you call me this?

We're like, yes, absolutely. I guess circling back, Heidi, to your question, we're always seeking those volunteers who can be positive mentors for teens and provide that additional support in such a real and powerful way.

**Amy:** What is the best way, I know you guys have an Instagram and a website. Are those the two best places that people could go to learn more about [00:24:00] how they could volunteer or donate to your guys'? Program.

**Rachel:** Yes, our website is Common Thread ut.com. We have an Instagram page. We have a LinkedIn and a private and public Facebook page. We find that a lot of adults, parents, guardians, CASAs are foster families are on Facebook, so we have that option as well. If you don't do Instagram.

**Amy:** Yeah, and I think Heidi and myself can speak forever about how. Amazing Common Thread is we have personally have children in our homes that have participated in these events. I have volunteered at these events. I just, it's extremely , impressive and admirable, what you guys are doing and it.

I haven't seen many things that make as big of a difference as what you guys are doing. It truly is amazing. So thank you for all that you're doing for the community. I think you're touching more lives than you possibly even see. And it's just, it's really incredible and you're changing generations, not just these kids lives, but the generations to come, which is really hard to [00:25:00] do.

**Rachel:** Thanks to all three of you here, all three of you here, and your families have supported Common Thread in very intimate, personal, amazing ways, and I do love all of your kids. So thank you so much for caring about Common Thread and taking the time to connect your kids to this space because they're all forces in and of themselves.

**Amy:** Thank you so much, Rachel, for joining us on Fostering Conversations. To learn more about how you can help or get involved, head over to our website, www.utahfostercare.org.