

For foster children in need of permanent families, **Ken Mullner** is one of their biggest champions.



DAVID KARAS

ADOPTION STORIES: Ken Mullner, head of the National Adoption Center, stands in front of a quilt featuring art by children the center has worked with.

By David Karas / Correspondent

PHILADELPHIA

When John Thomas and his wife, Jane, were looking to adopt, they initially were searching for a child between the ages of 3 and 5. But as they found out about the challenges for teens aging out of the foster care system, as well as the fact that some siblings are split up, their plans changed.

“We learned about the unfortunate statistics of what happens to children who age out in the system: Homelessness, addiction, incarceration and mental health issues,” says Mr. Thomas in an email interview.

After conducting many online searches and attending an adoption event, Thomas and his wife adopted three siblings who had, at various times, been separated while in the foster care system. When they joined the family in 2009, Jonathan was 10, Alaina was 13, and Isaiah was 14.

“We saw a sibling group that had spent most of their young lives in the foster system.... [T]here was pain, and there was

heartache,” he says. “They had already lost two of their siblings to another family.”

To him and his wife, “They just looked like a natural fit for our family.”

Today, the two parents consider adopting the trio to be one of the best decisions of their lives. And they credit the National Adoption Center, a nonprofit based in Philadelphia, with making the connection.

Founded in 1972, the National Adop-

Ken Mullner is ‘focused and committed to connecting children to forever families in a world and culture where most step over or look the other way.’

– **John Thomas**, adoptive father of three siblings

tion Center works to expand adoption opportunities for children living in foster care and to serve as a resource for families and organizations that seek permanent homes for waiting children. Its mantra – “There are no unwanted children ... just unfound families” – drives its activities.

The center doesn’t have legal custody of any children but instead works as a matchmaker, connecting youths in the foster care system who are eligible for adoption – meaning their parents have had their rights terminated – with prospective families.

The center’s executive director, Ken Mullner, knows well the challenges that these youths have faced.

“They have all suffered significant abuse and neglect, and they have all suffered an extraordinary amount of trauma in their lives for being taken away from their biological parents,” he says.

Mr. Mullner, who previously led the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, has been at the National Adoption Center’s helm for 14 years. And he’s only the

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second executive director for the 46-year-old organization. Mullner succeeded founder Carolyn Johnson, an adoptive mother of three who launched the organization from her kitchen table with a wooden recipe box that contained cards detailing children, prospective families, and matches.

Some 23,000 families created

Fast-forward to the present day, and the center counts some 23,000 families created through its various efforts. Its size has also soared, with an average annual budget of \$1 million. At least half of its funding comes from contract work with governments, and the rest stems from fundraisers and donations from businesses and individuals.

“I think the biggest difference is the use of technology,” Mullner says in discussing how the center’s programs have evolved.

‘Most kids want a bicycle for Christmas. Our kids just want a family.’

— **Ken Mullner**, executive director of the National Adoption Center

“It has really changed the entire landscape of adoption.”

The nonprofit created the first website featuring snapshots and biographical snippets about waiting children, a model that others have since replicated.

Mullner himself adopted his youngest daughter in 1997. He recalls the steps his family went through.

“As somebody who adopted at around that time, [the internet] would have made a world of difference,” he says. “We were going to the library; we were trying to read up on a lot of things. We were advertising in magazines like *Soap Opera Digest*, hoping that a woman who was expecting would give us a call.”

The center continues to leverage the internet to help pair waiting children with permanent families, hosting AdoptMatch, a free service to link prospective parents with an adoption agency in their area based on the characteristics of the child or children they’re searching for.

In addition, the nonprofit hosts events to bring prospective parents and children together. Events have been held at ballparks,

bowling alleys, and campgrounds, among other places.

And the news media can play a role in making connections, Mullner says. The center regularly works with media outlets in the Philadelphia area to introduce a waiting child to an audience.

Such a blend of strategies is critical to addressing the many children in foster care, the number of whom has been growing in part because of the opioid crisis and the termination of some parents’ rights, Mullner says. “After going down steadily in the 2000s, we are now in our fourth consecutive year of having an increase of kids in foster care,” he says.

The center has also worked to help children who can have difficulty finding permanent families – older children, those with differing abilities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. And the organization has conducted outreach to potential adoptive parents in the LGBT community, which Mullner says has been underserved.

At the end of the day, he says, it’s about trying to make sure that every child’s yearning for a loving, supportive family is fulfilled.

“Most kids want a bicycle for Christmas. Our kids just want a family,” he says. “The most basic thing of all is to have a mom and a dad, or two moms or two dads. It’s just such a basic need of a human being, and I cannot imagine growing up without parents.”

A connection to Wendy’s

Mullner credits the dedication of the center’s sponsors and partners, Wendy’s being one of the most prominent. The fast-food chain has long had a commitment to the issue of adoption in honor of its founder, Dave Thomas, who was himself adopted.

Anthony Romeo is a Wendy’s franchisee in Pennsylvania’s Bucks County, as well as the sitting president of the Philadelphia franchise co-op that includes some 142 restaurants across southeastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey, and northern Delaware. The co-op’s sales of \$2 Frosty key tags, Mr. Romeo says, have alone enabled the group to contribute about \$100,000 a year to the center.

Romeo, who is also a member of the center’s board of directors, cannot say enough about the work of the nonprofit.

“The Center is instrumental in coordinating matching events for prospective families and children in need of adoption,”

Three groups helping orphans

UniversalGiving (www.universalgiving.org) helps people give to and volunteer for top-performing charitable organizations around the world. All the projects below are vetted by UniversalGiving; 100 percent of each donation goes directly to the listed cause.

■ **Nepal Orphans Home** (<http://bit.ly/NepalOrphan>) attends to the welfare of children in Nepal who are orphaned, abandoned, or not supported by their parents. Take action: Aid older participants in the program as they use tailoring skills they’ve learned to make school uniforms for children (<http://bit.ly/UniformsNepal>).

■ **New VietGens** (<http://bit.ly/VietGens>) backs the young generation in poor areas of Vietnam. Take action: Make a donation to pay for food and health-care items for disabled orphans (<http://bit.ly/VietChild>).

■ **Achungo Children’s Centre** (<http://bit.ly/AchungoChildren>) gives food, clothing, education, and medical aid to almost 500 orphans and other young people in rural Kenya. Take action: Help provide food for the center’s youths (<http://bit.ly/AchungoFood>).

he says in an email interview. “What truly sets them apart is the targeting of children who would be considered more challenging for permanency.”

Romeo also speaks highly of Mullner.

“He’s worked tirelessly in hiring the right people, building a modernized organization and listening to new ideas on how the Center can grow,” he says. “I’ve had the privilege to attend many [of the nonprofit’s] events and Ken is always at the forefront of the involvement.”

Likewise Thomas, the adoptive father, characterizes Mullner as “constant, timeless and persevering.” He further describes the leader as “focused and committed to connecting children to forever families in a world and culture where most step over or look the other way.”

Thomas worked in corrections for some 25 years. He notes that he’s seen what happens to children who are lost in the system.

“Having a place to call home, no matter what, is something every child deserves,” he says. “Most of us take for granted that we have family we can call to celebrate or cry with as things occur.”

■ For more, visit adopt.org.