Dear Reader,

In this newsletter’s ‘Ohana Connections Corner the story is one you may already be familiar with. It’s the account of Fred Van Cleave, a former foster youth whose life was forever changed by a single year with his foster family, the Brennans. (Lee Cataluna wrote about Fred and the Brennans’ reunion in the Star Advertiser on 12/13/11 as did Paul Brennan in January’s RAC newsletter.)

As Resource Caregivers and service providers, it can sometimes be hard for any of us to know if we’re really making a difference in our foster children’s lives. This is particularly true if the time spent is fleeting or the child continues to have challenges that seem insurmountable. Even with our best efforts, the answer isn’t often clear or clear-cut.

Those of us on the RAC newsletter committee chose to continue with this story because it is a strong reminder that kindness has its own power – a power that can ripple across time and distance. Though Fred only lived with the Brennans for a year, that year etched into his heart and mind an understanding of what a family could be, and values that were important to him. It was a lived reality he clung to over and over again through some very dark times.

We may never know who the Freds are in our lives – those children we may lose touch with but whom we’ve touched deeply. Those of us on the RAC committee want to thank all of you for the tremendous kindness and “gift of belonging” that you are giving to the children in your care. Your efforts can and do make a difference.

Aloha and mahalo from all of us at RAC.

The Gift of Belonging
By Wilma Friesema

Fred was as alone as any eight year old boy could be. His mom, Thuy, an immigrant from Viet Nam, was dying of cancer. His dad, Frederick, originally from Mississippi, had disappeared when Fred was three. There was no other family Fred could turn to. During his mother's final days, he slept on a cot in his mother’s hospital room, clinging to her as she clung to life.

Fred and his mom were no strangers to hardship. Prior to his birth in 1972, Thuy had lived in war-torn South Viet Nam. She was doing administrative work for the army when she met Fred's dad. They fell in love and moved to Hawaii in 1969. Thuy became a naturalized citizen in 1978.

As a single, immigrant mom, Thuy worked hard to make ends meet. Fred, a bright young boy, attended five different elementary schools as his mom struggled to find a stable home. Thuy was fiercely protective of her son, but she couldn't shield him from the precariousness of her circumstances. Despite the ups and downs, however, they always made it, they always had each other.

Breast cancer was one obstacle they couldn't overcome. Thuy fought the disease for three years, undergoing chemotherapy and a mastectomy, but in the end she couldn't win. The night she died, Thuy’s nurse took Fred home and kept him until he entered foster care.
Fred had been in two foster homes before he was placed with the Brennan family. Those early foster experiences were painful. In the second home he noticed the foster children were treated differently than the biological children. He felt unwanted and like an inconvenience, which heightened his loneliness and isolation. Overwhelmed, his pain and sorrow came out sideways in difficult and destructive behavior.

It was a local minister who first asked the Brennans to take Fred in. The boy was a terrible, disruptive ten year old, Paul Brennan was told, but one in need of male figures in his young life. Paul, and his wife Dottie, had four sons; their home was bursting with boy energy. Paul and Dottie had no foster care training, but what they did have was a loving family and a desire to respond to a child in need. They hoped it would be enough.

It was clear there was much Fred could learn from the Brennans. He had been an only child living in the city. The Brennans lived in the country; their four boys were athletic and active. Fred had never gone on a hike, played basketball, ridden a bike, or had siblings to drag him into new adventures. He had never sat at a dinner table with so many people with so many opinions. He had never known the rituals and unspoken rules that kept family life humming. What Fred soon learned, however, was Paul and Dottie praised and disciplined him like he was one of their sons, like he was part of the family.

The Brennans had their own learning to do. Sometimes Fred had intense outbursts, at home and in public places, that were outside the realm of Paul and Dottie's experience. Sometimes the Brennan boys thought their foster brother was treated with favoritism, and they begrudged having to share their possessions and parents. While those moments were fleeting, the Brennans repeatedly had to step outside of their comfort zone to integrate Fred into their family.

It was the depth of his loss, however, that affected the family the most. As a close-knit unit, they had never experienced having their world turned upside-down in one fatal moment. They never knew the deep ache and shock waves that such a traumatic loss could create, but they witnessed it in Fred. It was especially visible one day when he was late for lunch and nowhere to be found.

“Fred, Fred, where are you?” they yelled, inside and outside of the house. They were about to give up when Paul finally thought to look in the attic. There was Fred, sitting with his mother's pictures and dresses, completely lost to the world, crying quietly, privately.

From that point on, the Brennans tenderly and respectfully embraced Fred’s grief. Paul offered to take him to visit to his mother's ashes, if ever he wanted. He did ask, several times, and each time Paul put aside what he was doing and drove Fred to the Moiliili temple.

Paul accompanied his young companion to the entrance of the temple, but always let him be alone at his mother's memorial. “Take your time,” he said, “I’ll be right here if you need me.” He never pressed Fred to hurry, and afterward, on the ride home, never pressed him to share how he felt or what he had said to his mother. Paul saw it as a grieving boy's private, sacred time.

While Fred was living with the Brennans, Child Welfare Services located his father, Frederick, in Mississippi. After much communication, DHS granted dad’s request for his son to fly to the mainland for a month-long visit. The agreement was for that limited visit. Paul flew with Fred to Dallas to put him on a plane to Mississippi. He told Fred, in no uncertain terms, that he would meet him at the LA airport in a month's time to take him home.

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In the LA airport Paul waited with growing apprehension for the very last passenger to debark. No Fred. The Brennans, devastated, called the authorities, but despite their efforts Fred was never found.

Frederick had ripped up his son's return ticket as soon as the plane landed. Being an itinerant con man, he took his son on the road to avoid detection. For three years Fred and his father moved from town to town throughout the South, with Frederick drinking heavily and running scams on unsuspecting homeowners who hired the charismatic contractor. For Fred it was a living nightmare.

Fred was fourteen when his father abandoned him by the side of the road in Texas. Alone, again, he found his way back to Mississippi and was taken in by a friend's family. They were helpful, but they weren't his legal foster family so he lived under the constant fear of his father's return. He thought of the Brennans often — he continued to hear their encouraging voices in his head — but the time with his father had taken its toll. He, stubbornly and shamefully, wouldn't reach out to the Brennans until he felt he was all right.

He finally dialed the Brennan's number on a New Year's Eve, twelve years after he had boarded that plane in Dallas. He was 23 years old. When Jason, the youngest son, asked, *Who is this?* Fred answered, “This is Fred, I'm your brother.” Jason cried out, “Mom, pick up the phone! It’s Fred! It’s Fred!” The family was ecstatic. Their lost son and brother was finally found!

Last December Fred came home to the Brennan's and Hawaii for the first time in nearly three decades. It was a joyous and tearful reunion for everyone. Now 39, Fred’s been married for 14 years and works as a hospital billing administrator in Mississippi. It's been a long journey back to the family, but one he's grateful to have made. Fred says many positive things about life with the Brennans: they gave him the attention, energy, and structure which he desperately needed; they gave him a security that nurtured him and allowed him to thrive; they taught him the value of hard work, honesty, and creativity; they modeled what a healthy family could be.

Most of all, he says, the Brennans made him feel he belonged. Not only did they treat him like a son and brother, they accepted him for who he was and what his life experience had been. For a boy unanchored by loss, the Brennans had been an island of stability and a haven for a tender, motherless child. They had given him more than a roof over his head and food in his belly. As he likes to say, they gave him his *Year of the Family.* It was a year that helped birth a man of thoughtfulness, integrity, and compassion.

It was also a year that changed the life course of a family. After Fred, the Brennans took in twenty more foster children. Though they could never predict how things would turn out for the children, they always felt it was a worthwhile endeavor. Paul frequently says, “When you say yes to opportunities, good things can happen.” Their experience with Fred has taught them just how true that can be.