



News & Events

[About Us](#)
[Open House Schedule](#)
[News & Events](#)
[FAQs](#)
[Testimonials](#)
[Contact Us](#)
[Partners](#)
[Caregiver Resources](#)
[Home](#)

The story behind Bells of Hope

Bells of Hope

Ringling in a Brighter Tomorrow for CT's Waiting Children

By an adoptive mom

The idea for **Bells of Hope** came to me early last spring. I was working on ideas to increase adoptions in CT and kept coming back to thoughts of my son's brother, now 19, who had never been adopted. For ease of writing let's call him Justin. Justin was never adopted and aged out of foster care. I had tried to adopt him but, as a single parent of four boys (3 adopted) I was not considered an appropriate resource for him. He needed more than the social workers felt I could give to another child. Truth be told I had the same fears although I did come forward and offer to be a resource for him. I met Justin when he was 9. He was a handsome young man living in a group setting. I would bring my son, his brother, to visit him often. And I also often had him to my home for the day. Our whole family came to love him and consider him a member of our extended family. At one point when Justin was hospitalized a social worker called me from the hospital, you see Justin had told her that I was becoming his adoptive mom soon – and he had our phone number memorized which made it easy for her to believe him. That situation nearly broke my heart. Here he was in the hospital, vulnerable and lonely and reaching out to me. The social worker at the hospital and I had many long talks about his future. She counseled me to continue as his “beloved aunt” because, she said, he needs a consistently loving adult in his life and if I were to ignore the wise advice of the social workers he could end up with no one – a disrupted adoption and feelings on both sides that might not heal well enough for our relationship to continue.

Well, Justin was never adopted. When he turned 19, his worker found an aunt to care for him temporarily while the state looked for a transitional program to accept him so that he could learn life skills. After having lived in congregate care for so many years he would need some help navigating the world. He had never had an allowance, his own room, regular chores to learn from, increasing

responsibility and freedom to explore the world from a safe place, the ability to make mistakes and learn while being loved by his family – the way typical teens do in homes with their families. So, he was vulnerable to making mistakes once released into the world. Justin did not stay with his aunt long. He found family rules confusing and stressful. He could not figure out why his aunt was angry when he ran up a cell phone bill of over \$150 for ring tones! So, he ran away. He found a gang to join – his new family he told me. He says they accept him and value him.

The last time we saw Justin was Christmas Day. He spent the holidays with us. While doing his laundry during his visit razor blades fell out of his pockets into my washer. He said he needed them for protection on the streets. My heart broke. I hope he's okay. I think about him all the time. His little brother misses him and worries for his safety. We hope he will call us soon to let us know he is okay. We hope he will find someone to help him transition away from the streets and find a better life for himself – one he can be proud of. The truth is: far too many teens in foster care age out of the system. Nationally about 24,000 youth “age out” of foster care every year.

*Teens who are emancipated from foster care have higher rates of incarceration, unemployment, homelessness, and dependence on public assistance than non-foster youth. In fact, one in four will be incarcerated within two years of leaving foster care; one in five will become homeless at some point after age 18. Moreover, many studies have documented a bleak outlook in education as well: only 58 percent of foster youth who aged out of the system had a high school degree at age 19, compared to 87 percent of non-foster youth; and less than 3 percent of emancipated foster youth over the age of 25 earned college degrees, compared to 28 percent of the general population.**

In fact, many studies show that approximately 50% of all youth who have been in foster care will become homeless at some time in their lives. I do not want to think of someone I love becoming one of these statistics. And I do not want to think of all of the other children who age out of foster care and make up these statistics. That is why I came up with **Bells of Hope**.

“**Bells**” was shamelessly stolen from Special Olympics. Back in 1995 when the Worldwide Special Olympics Games were held in New Haven my son, a Special Olympian himself, was asked to do the honor of ringing the bells in our church to mark the Opening of the Games. He was so excited and it *was* exciting! Church bells rung all over CT at the same time as the Games opened. What a beautiful sound! And we felt a part of something larger than ourselves. My son was so proud to be asked to ring those bells. So I thought why can't the bells be rung for foster kids? Surely this is a worthy cause. And wouldn't adopted kids get a kick out of being the “bell ringers?” So the seeds of **Bells of Hope** were born. Others have helped to tweak the idea and help bring it to fruition. Some towns will issue a proclamation declaring the day the official **Bells of Hope Day**. Some congregations will hold candlelight vigils while the bells ring. Others will simply ring the bells. But everyone will hear them. My goal is simply to get folks to think about the kids – and hopefully a few will come forward to adopt or become foster parents - because these kids are our kids – our CT kids - and at the very

least they deserve a few minutes of our time on a Sunday in November.

Please visit the www.FosterAdoptiveMission.org website for a listing of the bells ringing in your community.

Taken from **Youth Aging Out of Foster Care by Sharon Landvoy*

[Return to Events](#)

[About Us](#) | [Open House Schedule](#) | [Events](#) | [FAQs](#) | [Testimonials](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Partners](#) | [Home](#)

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