



KEVIN CAMPBELL: PIONEER IN FINDING FAMILIES FOR YOUTH IN CARE

Close-up

Kevin Campbell has served children and families as a human service administrator and director for more than 20 years. As a director at Catholic Community Services of Western Washington State, he helped create Family Finding, a practice that reconnects children with lost biological family members by utilizing Internet-based search technology. In 2005, he was appointed vice president of strategic planning and service innovation for EMQ Children & Family Services, a nonprofit agency in Campbell, California, dedicated to transforming the lives of children with serious emotional difficulties.

Today, Campbell serves as an independent technical assistance provider and has provided training and consultation for the California Permanency for Youth Project, working in 14 counties to strengthen permanency planning practice. He also has provided technical assistance for the National Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice and Permanency Planning at the Hunter College of Social Work in New York City, and travels extensively throughout the country, training child welfare staff and community partners in the Family Finding model.

VOICE: *What led you to create Family Finding?*

CAMPBELL: I was working with Catholic Charities in Washington State and we were challenged building teams of support for young people in foster care, especially those with severe behavioral and emotional problems who had had many failed placements. I was charged with building the teams that would create permanency plans for these young people.

I happened to hear a National Public Radio report about the International Red Cross and its family-tracing strategies that help reunite families separated by conflicts and natural catastrophes. After more research, I learned that the Red Cross' strategies were developed in response to the Geneva Conventions, which ensured the basic human right to know the fate of missing family members. This work was called the Restoration of Dignity. Simply put, before peace can be restored, families of the missing must be promised by the government that

efforts will be made to discover the truth about each missing person. Without this promise, lasting peace and economic and community re-development will not happen in affected states, communities, or families.

In the project sites where I worked with some of the loneliest and longest-waiting young people in foster care, I found a haunting similarity. The families of these youth had no idea what had become of them, and the young people knew nothing of their families. They had not forgotten one another and they were not healing.

This discovery led me not only to family-tracing techniques, but to an effort to work for the restoration of dignity for the families and young people in foster care. To accomplish this, we do two things: tell the truth to families and young people about what has been happening and offer each family member a chance to help.

VOICE: *What are the essential components of Family Finding?*

CAMPBELL: There are six major steps in the process:

- *Discovery*, where we identify a minimum of 40 family members of the child;
- *Engagement*, when we contact and engage family members who know the child best or who have an historical perspective of the family;
- *Preparation and Planning* involves meetings with the parents, family members who have been identified, and others important to the child to plan for the future of the child;
- *Decision-Making* takes place with the young person, the team, and the social worker to determine how the child can be integrated safely into a relationship with one or more family members, and what emotional and other supports need to be in place in order for that child to achieve a lifelong connection with the family;
- *Evaluation*, when we determine if there's a thoughtful and resourced plan to achieve legal and emotional permanence, with a timeline for completion and at least a Plan B and C; and

“I LEARNED THAT THE RED CROSS’S STRATEGIES WERE DEVELOPED IN RESPONSE TO THE GENEVA CONVENTIONS, WHICH ENSURED THE BASIC HUMAN RIGHT TO KNOW THE FATE OF MISSING FAMILY MEMBERS.”



- *Follow-up Supports*, when there is an enduring plan of support – including support from family and the community – for the young person and adult family members.

VOICE: *How does the process actually work?*

CAMPBELL: In the discovery phase, we examine the case file, and there almost always is at least one name – either a parent or relative – which offers us a start. With the Internet tool ussearch.com, all we need is the mom or dad’s name, a birth date, if possible, and one address where they’ve lived in the past 24 years.

The search will bring up other family members and anyone with whom the parent has lived in the last 24 years, which often includes family members who have made efforts to help others by providing housing when young adults faced homelessness. We identify one person on the maternal side and one from the father’s side, if possible, who have somewhat of a historical perspective on the family, for example, a grandmother or great aunt or uncle.

We don’t give them a lot of details at first. For example, we might mention the first name of the child’s parent, but we engage this person by saying something like, “I’m worried about one of your family members, and I think you might be able to help.” We ask targeted questions that help us ascertain that we have the right person and, most of the time, we’re able to connect with someone who is aware that there is a youth in the family who had an experience with the child welfare system and, almost always, they want to help. Admitting our concern

for the young person now and in the future is part of telling the truth to family members.

VOICE: *How successful are you at locating family members?*

CAMPBELL: In every case, we have come up with family members. I tell my teams that they should identify a minimum of 40 people and that has happened 90 percent of the time. We’ve found as many as 300 relatives for a child through our searches.

“WE DO TWO THINGS: TELL THE TRUTH TO FAMILIES AND YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT WHAT HAS BEEN HAPPENING AND OFFER EACH FAMILY MEMBER A CHANCE TO HELP.”

VOICE: *How do you know when it’s safe to connect the child with the relative you’ve identified?*

CAMPBELL: It’s not as simple as identifying names and then connecting people to the youth. It’s very much a step-by-step process, with evaluation at each phase. We have carefully thought-out scripts for social workers who engage in Family Finding, and we offer minimal information until we’ve confirmed the status of the first contact, which, as I mentioned, is usually someone who’s been around long enough to have a big-picture view of the family.

This person may not end up as the family member who provides permanence for the

child or who makes a lasting connection with the child, but he or she may be able to corroborate information from others in the family who voice a desire to be committed to the child. Finally, I recommend that a planning meeting be held with family members and others before introductions to young people are made. So, we have criteria that must be met before we engage the youth with the family member, which is the same as any responsible child welfare practice.

VOICE: *How do you follow up to evaluate the efficacy of the program?*

CAMPBELL: I let all the jurisdictions where I’ve worked know that they need to do their own evaluations. CBS News’ *60 Minutes* program took a list of these jurisdictions and went back to some of them four or five years after their training. Twenty-five percent of the youth were reunited with their families and another 50 percent have maintained relationships with their birth families.

Not surprisingly, the rates of young people who end up living with their family are deeply affected by the amount of time and resources that are available to support the family and the youth in the process of achieving permanence. Some providers have sustained rates of 75 percent when they have been supported to build dedicated teams; whereas social workers overloaded with traditional caseloads and responsibilities often have only been able to achieve a rate of 25 percent of young people moving home. This is not a reflection of a lack of expertise or caring, but more a question of lack of time and resources.

“The families of these youth had no idea what had become of them, and the young people knew nothing of their families. They had not forgotten one another and they were not healing.”

“THIS DISCOVERY LED ME NOT ONLY TO FAMILY-TRACING TECHNIQUES, BUT TO AN EFFORT TO WORK FOR THE RESTORATION OF DIGNITY FOR THE FAMILIES AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN FOSTER CARE.”



or extended families who would come forward if we called them, told them the truth, and asked for their help. After working with teams in more than 40 jurisdictions, I am convinced of this. I also know that when you provide child welfare workers with the tools and support necessary to work with youth and their families, those young people can be part of forever families.

The remaining challenge is the basic reform of the child welfare system away from a focus on long-term placement and away from unproven treatments that not only fail to help many young people significantly, but also use up budget resources that could be reinvested in prevention and intervention supports.

VOICE: *What will it take to see change happen?*

CAMPBELL: ussearch.com is amazingly efficient and effective, but I would trade any Internet tool for a supervisor that had the knowledge and desire to do this work. The supervisor, more than any other person in the string of people involved in child welfare cases, is the one who has to understand and support the process of finding family members for every child in care. Supervisors who fully support their teams in this work – who make working with families their number-one priority – will change the system.

VOICE: *Can you describe an example of how a child's life was changed dramatically through Family Finding?*

CAMPBELL: There was a 16-year-old youth who had been living on the grounds of a psychiatric facility in California since he was 8 years of age. The young man's mother was deceased, and he only knew one uncle, who had been in and out of prison. Our team found a lead in an earthquake notification file in the service provider's records at the hospital. We called the person in the file and, through him, located family in Oregon. We began the outreach process, and months later the youth was visiting with family and beginning to build those relationships. After 19 months, 32 family members came together for the planning and decision-making process on behalf of this young man.

There are four possible adoption plans moving forward, and no matter which one is selected, each of these relatives will have specific supportive roles in his life. So, this youth went from being the most endangered person in the psychiatric unit for eight-and-a-half years, to working at a youth center for the past nine months, going to school, visiting family in Oregon and, most important, having the sense of belonging that is so crucial. In addition, the agency working on this case reported to me at the beginning of this year that, since using the Family Finding methodologies, 13 out of 20 kids went home for the holidays. Before Family Finding was introduced, the number was just three out of 20.

VOICE: *What is your vision for change in the child welfare system?*

CAMPBELL: Most young people in the custody of America's foster care, probation, and mental health systems have caring and capable family members within their immediate