

# News from the Circle

## CIRCLE OF HOPE: A Birth Mother's Network



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The Circle of Hope is brought to you by a growing group of dedicated women and the National Organization on Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.



### HOPE FOR WOMEN IN RECOVERY SUMMIT HELD IN RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

On July 20th and 21st NOFAS hosted "Hope for Women in Recovery Summit: Understanding and Addressing the Impact of Fetal Alcohol Exposure" in Raleigh, North Carolina. The event brought together women in addiction treatment, addiction professionals, state agency representatives and policymakers to educate them on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) and to facilitate the creation and enhancement of state systems of care for families affected by alcohol-related birth disorders.

North Carolina was the third state selected to participate in this FASD pilot project funded by SAMHSA's FASD Center for Excellence. The summit model targets the highest-risk women for having children with FASD as well as the systems that serve them and/or their children. The summit is designed to educate participants on FASD, the importance of obtaining a diagnosis and where to locate diagnostic services within a state. The summit also serves to increase the number of treatment centers that address all aspects of FASD prevention, identification and treatment modification. The theme of the summit was empowerment for women; the majority of the summit presenters were members of the Circle of Hope (women who had drunk during pregnancy and have children with FASD). They are all nationally noted speakers on FASD.

This year's Summit marks the third and final phase of this exciting project that served to begin the dialogue between families and agencies on how to work together to address FASD.

Congratulations to all who participated.

## CHILDREN ARE A GIFT

By Julie Gelo



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*Mother to 13 children.....50 years old.....traveling and speaking around the country..... If anyone had even suggested that this would be my future reality 15 years ago I would have told them they were out of their ever-lovin' mind. But that is exactly what my life currently is.*

In 1987, after having a dating relationship for 5 years I married my husband, Lynn. This union blended our two families of three children each, giving us a family of six children. In 1990 we moved our family from Minnesota to the state of Washington where I became a house parent in a shelter for teenagers. In 1991 we became licensed foster parents to two teenage brothers with the disillusioned belief that since we had pretty successfully raised our own six children we could do this also. We believed that all you had to do was love them enough and provide them with all the opportunities that had been denied them in the past and these children would be eternally grateful and grow up to be upstanding citizens and contributing members to society. Man, were we naïve.

Within two years our home had burned to the ground, I was being called to the school on an almost daily basis to intervene on behalf of the boys, my marriage was on the rocks, and my three biological daughters were threatening to run away. Nothing had prepared us for the challenges of raising two young men with histories of severe physical abuse, a totally different culture than ours, learning disabilities, and developmental delays....and no one had even thought of the effects of prenatal alcohol exposure. I was feeling like the most helpless, hopeless, and ineffectual parent alive. But at that point my daughter, Jessica, brought home a packet of information from her high school about Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and so began our journey of education, diagnosis, appropriate interventions, and advocacy. That was truly the turning point in our lives. It offered us the reality

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of the reframing process and we went from seeing these boys willfully disobedient to being disabled. We finally understood that it wasn't that they "wouldn't" do things but rather that they "couldn't" do them.

In 1993 our biological children were mostly on their own so we started to add to our family with more foster children. Over the course of the last 13 years we have fostered a total of 22 children with the joyful result of adopting four of them and having permanent guardianship of three others. It is those seven children who are currently in our home and who bring my legal total of children to thirteen. My stepchildren are Kelly 37, Tari deceased at 20 years of age but she would be 36 now, and Dan who is 33. My biological daughters are Faith 32, Jessica, 29, and Briana 26. They have given us 9 grandchildren so far. They have all openly and lovingly welcomed into their sibling ranks their four adopted siblings, Michael at 15 and his half-sister, Tessa who is 12. Then we have also adopted Brandan who is 9 and his first cousin, Cayenne who is 5. The three brothers that we have in guardianship are Theadore who is 20 and in guardianship as an incapacitated adult, Ricky who is 13, and Nickolas who is 9. All seven of these children have been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or another Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

These last 13 years have been the most challenging, frustrating, difficult, painful, discouraging, heartbreaking, heart wrenching years of my life. But not because of the children but rather from the interactions with the systems of care and agencies whose lives my children touch. Our children have given us more joy, patience, laughter, healing, blessings, goals, education, understanding, learning opportunities, challenges for our personal growth and unconditional love than we have ever experienced in our lives. Out of need and necessity I have learned about Special Education, the IDEA, the ADA and 504 accommodation plans, adoption support, the state laws around foster care and adoption. I have also learned about tribal governments, the Indian Child Welfare Act, Special Olympics, the Multi-Ethnic Placement Act, cultural sensitivity and relevancy, grief and loss, the essential connections of human beings, and the importance of self-esteem. My children have taught me about modifications of the environment, natural and logical consequences, reflective listening, I-messages, social communication, sensory integration, and effective questioning, and less about time outs. I have learned about termination of parental rights, open adoption, and the court process. I have seen the possibilities of birth families and adoptive families working together for the children and the blending and merging of those two units when safe and appropriate. We have experienced the death of birth parents and the

subsequent questions of the children and the grief and loss that go with this life process. They also gave me the awareness, understanding, and courage to face the reality that my alcoholism may have affected my own birth daughter, thus I was able to approach Faith and ask her if she was interested in being evaluated at the diagnostic clinic. Faith was diagnosed at the age of 25 with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and I had to accept the truth of being a birth Mom as well as a Foster/Adoptive Mom of children with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders.

And I have formed a career. I have been the Family Advocate at the University of Washington for the Washington State Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Diagnostic and Prevention Network for almost 9 years. I train many disciplines of people throughout the United States and Canada on the subjects of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, Effective Advocacy and Self Care. And I have been given the opportunity to be part of the lives of these wonderful children who are upstanding citizens and contributing members to society and who fill my life with such joy. How can life be any better than to be the Mom of a child like Brandan, who says on a daily basis things like "you're beautiful" to me, his Mom, or says, "This is just the most beautiful day"?

Because of the gifts of my children I am eternally grateful for the reality of my life.

## A BIG THANKS TO THE SUMMER 2005 INTERNS!

This summer NOFAS was grateful to have 7 amazing interns! — Samantha Neuwirth, Erika Rogan, Michael Ybarra, Kristin Shelden, Lydie Ky, Erica Gitis-Miles and Sean Conner. Their help was invaluable during our preparation for the Women's Summit and the Circle of Hope Retreat. Without them we may still be preparing copies and putting together packets! NOFAS would like to wish them the best of luck upon their return to school or wherever their journeys may take them.

# FIRST ANNUAL CIRCLE OF HOPE RETREAT

By Kathy Mitchell & Kelly Raiser

On July 18th and 19th, NOFAS held the first ever Circle of Hope (COH) retreat in Raleigh, North Carolina. Sixteen birth mothers, including the founders Julie Gelo, Diane Malbin, Kathy Mitchell and Marcy Ten Eyck, gathered from around the country to form a cohesive group, that will be the foundation for the future of the COH. The two day emotional event was packed with brainstorming sessions to develop strategies to improve the communications from different regions of the country to NOFAS. Ideas of developing COH regions were suggested to help the COH become visible to women who may not know that such a resource exists to offer support and mentoring. A mentorship program is also something that the circle wishes to employ to help other women move through the grief and shame of having used substances while pregnant. Discussions regarding the current website led to the ultimate desire to have a site that is capable of COH member log-in.



This would allow birth moms and families to post events, ask questions and ask for help on a secure site that is only accessible via an assigned password.

Above all, the retreat was a sacred gathering of “Warrior Moms” that were able to spend time together, share their collective stories and connect with other women from all over the United States that had similar experiences. It was a unique experience that was both healing and empowering for all that attended.

Upon leaving North Carolina, the NOFAS staff left feeling energized to take the COH to a new level and to start immediately strategizing with the insightful input. Thank you to all the women who took the time out of their busy lives to join us. Every woman was an incredible asset to the success of this years retreat!



## ERICA’S STORY

By Erica Gitis-Miles



My birth mom started drinking when she was just 13 years old. She met guys in bars and brought them home with her. She was in jail all the time and I would have to go to a neighbor’s house until she got out. It was usually just a night or two. We were shut out almost completely from the rest of the family. When she wasn’t in jail she was at home drinking or sleeping. She neglected me severely and I was lucky if I got powdered milk to drink with some crackers. Since I had FAS and was at the time undiagnosed, I had some behavioral issues as well and would often get food taken away as punishment. While this story seems somewhat bitter and depressing, there is a point. My mother and I are still fairly close. Even though I was adopted into another family when I was seven, I still feel that she is my mother. I have had times when I’ve been really angry with her for what she has done to me, both physically and mentally, but I also have had times when I have been proud of her. People oftentimes ask me why I even talk to her anymore and they say that if their mothers ever did that they would never talk to them again. I look at the positive things about her. She’s funny, caring, and most of all, she still treats me like a daughter. Growing up, she

attended all of my extracurricular activities ranging from band practices to track meets. She showed up at all of my plays that I was in and she went to my graduation. Best of all, she is 100% sober and that was the hardest thing for her. She tells me how sorry she is for everything she has done and how much she loves me. That means more to me than anything else she did in her past. I know she regrets the things she has done in her past but I have forgiven her and I believe it has made our relationship stronger. If I hadn’t the heart to forgive her, I would have missed out on a lot of good times. I hear a lot of negative things about mothers that drank during pregnancy. There is a misconception out there that if a mother drinks while she is pregnant, she is a bad person, especially if she does it repeatedly. My mother drank repeatedly during all three of her pregnancies. Her first child was born with Hydrocephalus and died as a baby. I was the second, born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and my sister, who is 18, was born with Fetal Alcohol Effects. Even though she didn’t seem to “learn” from this, she isn’t a bad person. She needed help and didn’t have the right support. I believe that she is undiagnosed of FAE. This in my opinion is what started her on the path of addiction.



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We would like to hear from you. We need stories by, for, and about FASD birth issues. Submit any FASD or addiction happenings in your area to be included in the COH calendar to Kelly Raiser at raiser@nofas.org, or you can write to us at the address listed above.

## ALCOHOL AND PREGNANCY DON'T MIX

### UPCOMING EVENTS:

- \* **Substance Exposed Newborns: Weaving Together Effective Policy & Practice**, Washington, D.C., Oct. 6 – 7, 2005
- \* **10th Annual Hawaii Foster Care Conference**, Oct. 14 - 15, 2005
- \* **MOFAS FASD Family Retreat**, Brainerd, MN, Oct. 20 –23, 2005
- \* **National Association for the Dually Diagnosed (NADD) 22nd Annual Conference**, Missouri, Oct. 26, 2005
- \* **Women in Film, NOFAS Fundraiser**, LA, CA, Oct. 28th, 2005
- \* **Training for Facilitators for Parent Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Classes**, Nov. 1-4, 2005, Whitehouse, Ohio contact Sister Suzette Fisher, SND (419) 479-3060 ext 2 sfisher@toledosnd.org
- \* **FAS Summit 2005 ; Honoring Our Past, Shaping the Future**, Nov. 1–3, 2005 Anchorage, Alaska  
[www.hss.state.ak.us/fas/summit](http://www.hss.state.ak.us/fas/summit)  
<<http://www.hss.state.ak.us/fas/summit>>
- \* **NOFAS Fundraiser**, NYC, NY Nov. 10th 2005
- \* **Wellness & Spirituality XIII Conference in Arizona, Nurturing the Healer Within** Nov. 14-17, 2005 Tucson, AZ, (405) 325-1316
- \* **The Link to Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders**, Nov. 15th, 2005 London, England  
Phone : 0208 458 5951  
[Nofas-uk@midatlantic.co.uk](mailto:Nofas-uk@midatlantic.co.uk)
- \* **California Women in Recovery**, Susanville, CA, Nov. 15th, 2005

### WHERE WE'VE BEEN...

- \* **Building FASD State Systems**; San Antonio, Texas  
*Both the Circle of Hope and NOFAS' American Indian youth peer education project REACH presented at this event.*
- \* **FASD Forward**: Lexington, KY May 13 and 14
- \* **CSAT Women and Children Treatment Grantee's Meeting**; Presented to treatment centers on the COH and addressing FASD in addiction treatment
- \* **FASD Conference**; Columbus, Ohio
- \* **National Healthy Start Association 6th Annual Conference**, Washington, DC
- \* **McLean Hospital** (Affiliate Harvard Med School), Boston, MA

### WHERE WE'RE GOING...

- \* The compilation of a comprehensive Community Advocacy Guide is in the final stages. NOFAS hopes to have the guides available within the next two months.
- \* NOFAS has been successful in increasing membership on the Congressional Caucus on FASD. With a continued increase, we are hopeful that "Advancing FASD Research, Prevention, and Support Act" will gain enough support to witness an easy passage through the 109th Congress.
- \* NOFAS will embark on a new project with the financial assistance of the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to work with Community Health Centers nationwide to educate medical and health care professionals on FASD.