



CROSSROADS FOR FLORIDA KIDS

NEWSLETTER | FALL EDITION 2024

Tommie's Story: A Battle of Perseverance and Resolve

by Scott Tolliver, Executive Director

When we met Tommie, he was completing a survey that asked, "Where do you see yourself in 5 years?" His response? "That's dangerous to think about."

Tommie is a prime example of a Crossroads' case representation. Tommie was born into foster care. Tommie spent his childhood moving in and out of 53 different foster care placements. Tommie has suffered trauma, causing documented behavioral and emotional disabilities. When Tommie turned 18, he aged out of foster care and transitioned into extended foster care. Currently, Tommie is 20 years old. At 21, he will be legally independent.

We learned of Tommie's case after his case management team counseled him to sign an agreement that would terminate his extended foster care. Thankfully, Judge Essrig recognized Tommie needed an attorney and referred his case to Crossroads. Aimée Canty and I were appointed as Tommie's AAL's in his dependency case.

Tommie's situation was dire. Recently homeless, he'd just transitioned into a rooming house where he shared a bedroom with three other adults in a house with no air conditioning and rampant infestation. He was not receiving services he was entitled to such as food stamps, housing costs, and counseling services. He struggled to maintain a steady income to meet his basic needs.

Our first step was to immediately appeal case management's decision to terminate Tommie's extended foster care. Without our legal assistance, Tommie would have given up all his legal rights and not even known he'd done so. The Crossroads' order of appointment entitled us to receive

all Tommie's dependency and school records which together contained a lifetime of case plans, doctor reports, education history and other important information for us to identify a legal strategy to help Tommie succeed.

One important component of Crossroads is that we collaborate as a team to achieve the best outcome for our clients. Rosemary Armstrong, Crossroads' Founder and Board President, assisted the team by reviewing the voluminous dependency and school records and created a 14-page chronology using her legal experience representing children to highlight the most important information. Aimée and I would need to advocate for Tommie. Our team developed a winning legal strategy to reverse the termination order and to extend Tommie's time in extended foster care with a focus on receiving counseling services for his trauma and vocational training to work towards independence. Crossroads helped set up a neuropsychological evaluation for Tommie to provide the court with Tommie's mental health history and a comprehensive assessment of Tommie's skillset to help him achieve independence.

In addition to our legal work, the AAL's at Crossroads strive to develop a trusting relationship with our clients so that they value our counsel and understand that we care about them. Oftentimes, Crossroads' attorneys are the first adults in our youth client's lives that they can trust and depend on. To that end, I invited Tommie to attend a career fair supporting teens aged out of foster care. Tommie and I started meeting weekly in person and talking almost daily as we worked to get his benefits restored and discussed his personal goals and dreams. I am invested in Tommie's success and he can tell that I care, something he

has rarely, if ever, experienced.

Through our counseling and persistent advocacy, Tommie's case management team was ordered to find stable placement for Tommie and to cover all expenses. Tommie is currently in a new placement, receiving vocational rehabilitation services, and substance abuse and mental health counseling to help him overcome the trauma he experienced during childhood in the foster care system.



Today, Tommie is no longer struggling to figure out how to keep a roof over his head or food in his belly. Now, he spends his days thinking about the career he wants to pursue, the goals he wants to achieve, and the dreams he wants to fulfill. Tommie's transformation has been an absolute blessing to witness, and we at Crossroads are so proud of him. Above is a photo of Tommie and me at a Career Fair hosted by Madi's Movement helping foster kids achieve independence.

The Clock was Ticking: Success for C.S.

by Lisa Kilbride, Zuckerman Spaeder LLP



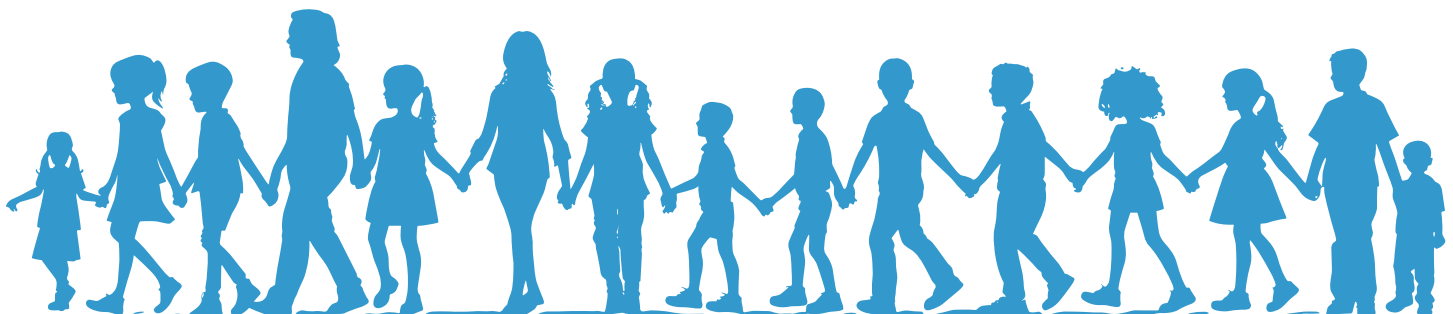
for this type of instruction at the time. C.S. would need to pass his GED exams before turning 18-years-old or he would not qualify for Postsecondary Education Services and Support (PESS) or Extended Foster Care (EFC). The clock was ticking. C.S. had less than one month before turning 18. Not only would C.S. not qualify for PESS or EFC, but his group placement could dismiss him on his 18th birthday, and he would not qualify for any housing assistance.

At the time, the Hillsborough School District personnel told me that it was uncertain when GED classes would open back up and all GED testing was suspended indefinitely. After numerous calls and a lot of online research, I found a small community college in northern Pasco County that was still conducting in-person GED testing under stringent COVID restrictions including seating distance and mask mandates. I contacted both Case Management and the Group Home operator, but neither were willing to transport the client 35 miles away to take the GED test. I stepped in and drove C.S. to the testing center and waited for him to take the exam. After a few hours, I picked C.S. up and took him to lunch while we waited for his results. About halfway through our meal, C.S. checked the online portal and HE PASSED!

I will never forget his smile that day!

Back in 2020, C.S. was taking classes to prepare for the General Education Development (GED) Test. C.S. was 17 years old. After over a yearlong battle with parental lockouts and arrests for domestic incidents with his mother, we had successfully petitioned the court to get C.S. into foster care. C.S. was living in a group home placement and attending classes regularly when the COVID-19 pandemic caused all schools to close. C.S. was only days away from taking his GED section exams and there was no online alternative

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Firm Spotlight: Older Lundy Koch & Martino contributes to Crossroads' mission

At Older Lundy Koch & Martino, we believe in giving back to the community through pro bono work, which is an essential part of our professional and personal mission. Supporting those who cannot afford legal representation is not only our duty as attorneys but also a privilege. That's why our firm has chosen to partner with Crossroads for Florida Kids, an incredible organization dedicated to representing children in the foster care system and juvenile delinquency cases. Our attorneys volunteer their time and legal expertise through Crossroads, helping to ensure that vulnerable children in Florida have a voice and an advocate. By working with Crossroads, we are not only able to support individual clients but also help foster a more just and equitable system for all children. Our firm's commitment to pro bono work goes beyond legal representation; it's about making a lasting impact on our community and the lives of the most vulnerable members of society.



One of our standout attorneys involved in this meaningful work is Jennifer Meister. Jennifer's passion for helping others is a core part of who she is, both professionally and personally. As a mother of three children she adopted, Jennifer has firsthand experience with the challenges and rewards that come with caring for children in need. Her personal journey of adoption has deepened her commitment to pro bono work, particularly through Crossroads for Florida Kids, where she advocates for children in the foster care system. For Jennifer, working with Crossroads is not just an opportunity to use her legal skills—it's a way to give back to a community that she feels deeply connected to. She believes that every child, regardless of their background, deserves a chance to thrive, and through her volunteer work, she is dedicated to ensuring that children in foster care and juvenile systems

are treated fairly and with dignity. Jennifer's work is a reflection of her belief that legal advocacy can change lives, especially for children who may not otherwise have a voice in the system.



Similarly, Kendrick Donnelly has found great purpose in his pro bono work for Crossroads for Florida Kids. As an attorney who cares deeply about fairness and justice, Kendrick has committed his time and energy to ensure that the children he represents through Crossroads are given a voice and a fighting chance in court. He understands that children facing legal challenges often lack the resources or support system to navigate the complexities of the legal process. Kendrick's drive to help these children stems from his belief that everyone deserves representation, especially those who cannot speak up for themselves. Through his work, Kendrick hopes to create positive change not only in the lives of the children he serves but also in the broader legal landscape for juveniles in Florida.

Together, Jennifer Meister and Kendrick Donnelly embody the spirit of our firm's commitment to pro bono work. Their passion for advocating on behalf of Florida's most vulnerable children has made a lasting impact through their partnership with Crossroads for Florida Kids. By stepping up to help those who need it most, they are setting an example of leadership, compassion, and integrity that resonates throughout our firm. Through their efforts, they not only provide critical legal services but also help inspire others within our legal community to get involved and make a difference. At our firm, we are proud to have attorneys like Jennifer and Kendrick who go above and beyond for their clients and our community.

A Long Journey Home: The Story of J.B.

by Katherine Yanes,
Kynes, Markman & Felman, P.A.

J.B. was a 17-year-old girl who was a human trafficking victim and a runaway. When Crossroads was appointed to represent her, J.B. was being held at the Hillsborough Juvenile Detention Center based on a pickup order from Alabama, even though she had no criminal charges pending against her. J.B.'s birth mother had surrendered her on the day she was born to a potential adoptive parent in the Florida panhandle. The quasi-adoptive parent never formalized the adoption, and the parental rights of J.B.'s birth mother were never terminated. J.B. spent the first 16½ years of her life living in the Florida panhandle with the person she believed was her adoptive parent and that person's family members. J.B. had a turbulent home life with that family, running away frequently, and as a young teen, she was a victim of sexual assault and human trafficking, as well as being introduced to drugs.

When J.B. was 16½, her situation came to the attention of the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCFS). Upon learning that the parental rights of J.B.'s birth mother had never been terminated, DCFS found J.B.'s birth mother via social media. Although J.B. had not seen or had contact with her birth mother since the date of her birth, DCFS allowed J.B.'s birth mother to take J.B. from Florida to her own state of residence, Alabama. DCFS did not perform a background investigation or home study on the birth mother. Had DCFS done such an investigation, it would have learned that J.B.'s birth mother could not provide

a suitable home for J.B., and in fact had a prior Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR) case involving an older child. J.B.'s placement with her birth mother lasted only twelve days. On Christmas Day 2019, J.B.'s birth mother took J.B. to the hospital emergency room for a medical issue and abandoned her at the hospital.

Although it was J.B.'s wish to return to her home state of Florida, the Alabama DHR took custody of J.B. Following J.B.'s turbulent upbringing, her repeated victimization as a teenager, and her history of drug use, J.B. had significant trauma and mental health issues that resulted in acting out. The Alabama DHR initially placed J.B. in a series of foster homes, but before long she was placed in an inpatient rehabilitation facility and then finally in a locked juvenile inpatient mental health treatment facility in Alabama.

J.B. left the Alabama mental health treatment facility without permission and made her way to Florida. She was found by law enforcement in Hillsborough County, Florida, and was taken into custody as a runaway based on the pickup order from the State of Alabama. Although J.B. was not charged with a crime, she was being held in secure detention in Hillsborough County when Crossroads attorneys were appointed to serve as her attorneys ad litem.

The Crossroads attorneys appointed to represent J.B. filed a petition for a writ of habeas corpus arguing that J.B.'s continued detention on a pickup order from Alabama was improper,

because of the State of Alabama's lack of jurisdiction over J.B. The Crossroads' attorneys advocated with the Attorney General's Office, the Office of the Guardian ad Litem, Florida DCFS, a non-profit organization that provides services to human trafficking victims, and others, to try to find a solution for J.B. that did not involve her being forced to return to Alabama against her will. Working together, we ultimately found a safe house for human trafficking victims in southwest Florida that could take J.B., where she would be in a safe, supportive environment and could receive the services she needed.



While J.B. was living in the safe house, she took community college classes and got a part-time job, while living in a safe, secure environment where specialized mental health services were available to her. J.B.'s case shows the difference that Crossroads' attorneys who advocate on behalf of their youth clients can make in the outcome of a difficult case.



CROSSROADS FOR FLORIDA KIDS

Crossroads expands to 11 Board of Directors: Welcome Brian Shrader, Jennifer Meister & Olivia Mejido Udell to the Board

Over the summer, Crossroads experienced some changes to the composition of their Board of Directors. Steve Todd, one of our first AALs, decided to step down as a Board member. Steve joined the Board in 2021 when it was expanded from 3 to 9 members. Steve has been a consistent volunteer with Crossroads since the organization was founded and continues to serve as a valued volunteer on case representations. We are so thankful to Steve for his longtime support of Crossroads and his willingness to continue to help the disadvantaged youth we represent.

At the August Board Meeting, our Board voted unanimously to invite Brian Shrader to accept the newly vacant position on the Board.

Brian Shrader is the founding member of Shrader, Mendez & O'Connell which is a small firm that practices Federal and State Criminal Defense, Personal Injury, Consumer Protection and Class Actions, Business Litigation, and Attorneys' Fee disputes. Brian's firm has a special focus on charity work, including working with an international charity to provide free shoes to several thousand people in need located in the Tampa area. Brian became aware of Crossroads through fellow Board member and friend, Katherine Yanes. Brian shared, "As I learned more about the organization, my interest grew. My business partners felt the same way, so our [firm's] involvement grew. Now, as a board member, I look forward to working with a group of amazing people who also enjoy giving." In Brian's spare time, he enjoys writing fiction, playing music and being a free Uber driver for his triplets.

At the September Board Meeting, our Board voted unanimously to expand the Board from 9 to 11 members. The Board voted unanimously to invite Jennifer Meister and Olivia

Mejido Udell to join the Board in the newly created positions.

Jennifer Meister has practiced as an attorney with Older Lundy Koch & Martino in its Marital & Family Law Department for over eight (8) years. In her free time, she enjoys novel writing, completing coloring and crafts projects with her children, and building miniature dioramas. When asked why she volunteers with Crossroads, Jennifer stated "I volunteer with Crossroads because I believe in its mission to advocate for children who have no support or guidance navigating life's challenges, and I'm passionate about making a positive impact in our community." As a Board member, Jennifer looks forward to contributing to Crossroads' continued growth and helping to expand its reach, volunteer attorneys, and services.

Olivia Mejido Udell joined Crossroads because she wanted a way to get involved with our community after law school. Olivia learned about Crossroads when "A friend brought me to one of Robin Rosenberg's trainings and later introduced me to Rosemary, which opened my eyes to the many issues facing children in Hillsborough, and the great work that Crossroads does to find solutions. I have now been with Crossroads for over six (6) years and have seen firsthand how our organization can change lives." As a Board Member, Olivia is looking forward to inspiring new lawyers to join and continuing to advocate for vulnerable children in Hillsborough County.

For fun, Olivia enjoys spending time with her husband, two puppies, and her senior kitty as well as traveling, hiking, and playing pickleball.

Crossroads is very excited to add Brian, Jennifer and Olivia to our Board of Directors. They've all been great contributors to Crossroads' mission, and we look forward to what they're able to accomplish as leaders of the organization.



Brian Shrader



Jennifer Meister



Olivia Mejido Udell



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