



O'Connell
CHILDREN'S SHELTER

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O'Connell Children's Shelter exists to serve and be an answer for children, youth, and families in our community and our state.

oconnellchildrensshelter.org



1925 Delaware Street Lawrence, Kansas 66046 August 2024

From our Executive Director Gina Meier-Hummel

Summer is a busy time at OCS; while the youth are not in school, everyone is busy with various projects and activities.

Thanks to our generous donors, our youth are busy with swim passes at the Lawrence Outdoor Aquatic Center. They are also spending a day at the Kansas City Zoo and Aquarium.

In addition, our garden, managed by Master Gardener volunteer Susan Andersen, is bursting with produce including tomatoes, cucumbers, and garlic. This has created the opportunity for the youth to make and enjoy fresh pickles.

Our youth have also begun weekly Positive Peer Culture groups, facilitated by Max Shockley, Hope Center Manager. The focus of these groups is working on appropriate and productive skills and behaviors. A recent example is "Anger Reducers," including *Deep Breathing*, *Counting Down from 20 to 1*, and *Peaceful Imagery*. These shared learning opportunities allow the youth to build their skills in a safe and trusting environment.

In O'Connell's Prevention Department, we have hired three case managers who are establishing our Generations program, working with Douglas County families to overcome intergenerational poverty and focus on a stable future.

You may not realize that O'Connell supports individual foster parents in Kansas. We interviewed foster parent Brooke Grier on her experiences; please catch up with her on the next page.

School begins August 14, and the O'Connell staff is working to ensure a smooth transition back-to-school. This includes preparatory meetings with students participating in our Truancy and Diversion program, establishing positive expectations and a smooth start to the 2024/2025 school year. Our residential youth will also prepare with fresh haircuts, school supplies, and new clothes, as needed. If you are interested in supporting the back-to-school efforts, please visit the Amazon wishlist at oconnellchildrensshelter.org.

We so appreciate all of your support and well wishes. It truly does take a village to raise a child, and we couldn't do it without you. Please reach out to me personally with any questions or thoughts you may have.



Foster Parent Brooke Grier: Thoughts on Foster Parenting

O'Connell Children's Shelter supports people in becoming foster parents, providing training and ongoing support and guidance as they work to become licensed and continuing throughout their fostering experiences. We encourage diversity in our families and seek to find families who have lived experiences that match with youth in need of care. An O'Connell foster parent, Brooke Grier, shared her thoughts with us on her experiences as a foster and adoptive parent. She and her husband Ethan have been fostering children for over 20 years and have adopted 6 children out of foster care. She has a long history of understanding the need for foster parents, as her own parents cared for children in foster care as she grew up.

"It's the hardest yet most rewarding thing I've ever done," comments Brooke. Raising children is a full-time job for her, one that she and Ethan have devoted themselves to. Brooke and Ethan work to plant a seed for the child's success with the hope, but no guarantees, that the seed will grow.

Many children in foster care face trauma that stays with them. Brooke noted that she "always tries to put herself in the child's shoes," which may include multiple placements, sometimes indifferent or harmful caregivers, and separation from their birth families and home communities. As a result, Brooke and Ethan make their home a soft place for children to land, somewhere safe, with acceptance and love.

They have always tried to help all their children become successful adults, which includes giving them the typical experiences youth have such as participation in extracurricular activities, getting a driver's license, and applying for jobs. They share family meals together, all family members contribute to chores, and all are included in the Grier's extended family events.

O'Connell has provided support to the Griers as foster parents. Brooke described her experience with Shannon Heide Livingston, their O'Connell social worker, as "amazing," saying that "Shannon was responsive, supportive, and always there for them when they needed help." Brooke and Ethan were named O'Connell's "Unsung Heroes" in 2018 for their commitment to children in foster care.

When asked how anyone can help foster parents, Brooke responded with ideas of offering to babysit, cook a meal, offer a gift card, or offer respite or time alone for foster parents. She highlighted the need for foster parents to find ways to cope with the challenges that will come up. Whether with family members, a therapist, a foster parent support group, or a trusted friend, it's important for foster parents to have an outlet and sounding board. As Brooke said, foster parenting is the hardest yet most rewarding things she's ever done.

If you would like to know more about becoming a foster parent, please contact us at 785-843-2085 or by email at shannonhl@oconnellcs.org.



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September 14

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