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OP-ED

How providing care, safety and support to South Florida's children became my calling | Opinion

By Sarah Franco

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JAFCO's mission is to provide care, safety and support to children and their families within the Jewish community and beyond in South Florida who are impacted by abuse, neglect, trauma or developmental disabilities.

In 1992, Broward physician Ron Simon proposed to me the idea of a foster care nonprofit dedicated to serving Jewish children. I wasn't in favor of it.

I was a social worker, and I didn't want to single out a specific ethnic or religious population for foster care services. Every community needs them, after all; why target one?

Now as I prepare to retire after more than 30 years in the role, I can say that leading Broward's Jewish Adoption & Family Care Options (JAFCO) turned out to be one of the most rewarding and meaningful experience of my life.

Florida's then state-run foster care system was stressed. It prioritized immediate placement over all other factors, which sometimes resulted in children being placed in cultural and religious environments that were different than their birth family.

When a child is abused and removed from their family, they lose everything in one moment – their family, their house, their pet, their school, their friends. One of the few things we can salvage is the traditions that form part of their identity. Maintaining that element of connection helps the healing process and supports family reunification, which is the goal of every foster care case.

Acting on that idea, Simon created a new agency called the Cultural Foster Care Program of Broward County, which recruited foster parents from underrepresented cultural backgrounds. The Broward Board of Rabbis passed a resolution asking us to serve the Jewish community, and we started training Jewish families.

The system didn't track data on children's religious background back then, but we had to start somewhere. Simon and his wife, Deni, reviewed Broward's foster care files and found about 20 children with Jewish-sounding names, and we went from there. We changed the name of our agency to Jewish Adoption & Foster Care Options (JAFCO), and applied to become a licensed foster care and adoption agency.

Simon offered me the director position, but I initially turned him down. I had just had a baby, and I didn't think I was qualified anyway as a 30-year-old social worker, so I joined the search committee instead.

It quickly became clear that no one else had expertise placing Jewish foster children with Jewish families. JAFCO was the first private organization of its kind, so no one else was qualified. I took the job – and found my calling.

We've grown from a staff of one to a staff of 200, from an annual budget of \$50,000 to one of \$20 million, and from serving 20 children in our first year to serving more than 3,000 yearly.

Beyond offering foster care and adoption services at our Children's Village in Sunrise, JAFCO now helps children with developmental disabilities and their families at our nearby Children's Ability Center, as well as those affected by the trauma of Marjorie Stoneman Douglas Senior High shooting at Eagles' Haven in Parkland. We even offer support to families in crisis outside South Florida at our FamilyMatters center in Philadelphia.

I am enormously proud of the human touch that characterizes all our services. Real people answer all our phones, emergency cases are seen same-day, and we have never and will never charge for our services. We have never closed a program, and we've never laid off a staff member due to funding.

Our clinical team of experts in childcare, mental health and family services inspires me every day. They have devoted their lives to breaking the cycle of abuse and ensuring that

every child in our care knows that they are loved. I consider myself extremely lucky to have worked with them; their skill is matched only by their passion.

There's a quote on the wall of Eagles' Haven: "8 Days a Week." It reflects our commitment to being constantly available, providing all our services even more than 24/7.

None of that would've been possible without the support of the South Florida community. Whether you've donated to us, volunteered with us, referred someone to us, or even just talked about us with your circle, thank you. You're all a part of the JAFCO family, and your continued generosity helps improve thousands of lives every year.

The gravity of our mission made deciding to retire difficult. I did it confidently, though, because I know our incredible staff and our incoming CEO, Robby Etzkin, are as moved by our mission as I am.

I can't wait to watch how JAFCO continues to grow over the next 30 years and beyond. With the help of our communal family, we will continue to provide care, safety and support to children and their families, giving every child a place to belong.

Sarah Franco is the outgoing CEO of Jewish Adoption & Family Care Options (JAFCO), a non-profit organization established in 1992 to provide services to at-risk children and families in South Florida.

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