

Bringing Foster Siblings Together Again

A special summer camp brings together siblings, who are separated and living in different foster homes, for bonding

BY MAITI TUOHY

They sat side by side on a bench under a monkey-pod tree, each peering forward at this reporter sitting on the ground in front of them. With the sun blazing down and other children playing around in the distance, the three sisters, ages 10 to 13, aren't really themselves. The girls are enjoying a rare day together at Lani Kamaha'o, a camp on the North Shore, after one of them was recently placed in a foster home.

Now speaking softly, giving one-word answers to questions and occasionally fidgeting in their seats, the girls seem much quieter than when I initially met them. It was almost as if they were taken out of their element of being children, answering some tough questions about being together, their feelings about each other and grasping the larger concept of what was going on in their lives by a reporter ignorant of their situation — they are separated by foster care.

They were loud, high-energy and carefree playing with other children at camp Lani Kamaha'o, a multi-purpose camp on the North Shore

before they began talking to me. A camp counselor, Nancy, later tells me the girls might know the answers to the tough questions I was asking, but they weren't at the camp to think about their troubles, they were here to just be together with each other during a program called Camp Connection.

"Kids will often go off on their own with their siblings," says Nancy, "and I'll tell the other counselors to back off and let them bond with each other. Because that's what they're here for — to be with each other and just have fun."

The camp offers food, tents as shelters, campfire sing-alongs and all the other traditional elements sleep-away camps have.

Camp director Pat Brown says the time the kids spend at her camp is important and necessary so the children can form memories with each other and make a connection. "When the kids age out of the system, they've been separated for years and they have no common bond," she explains. "Childhood memories are not redactable. You get one childhood."

Project Visitation, an organization that unites siblings separated by the foster care system in Hawaii, makes Camp Connection possible by finding the siblings who are separated by the foster care system, collaborating with community organizations (like the camp) and giving these kids a chance to stay connected when they're in different homes.

The department works under Foster Family Programs of Hawaii

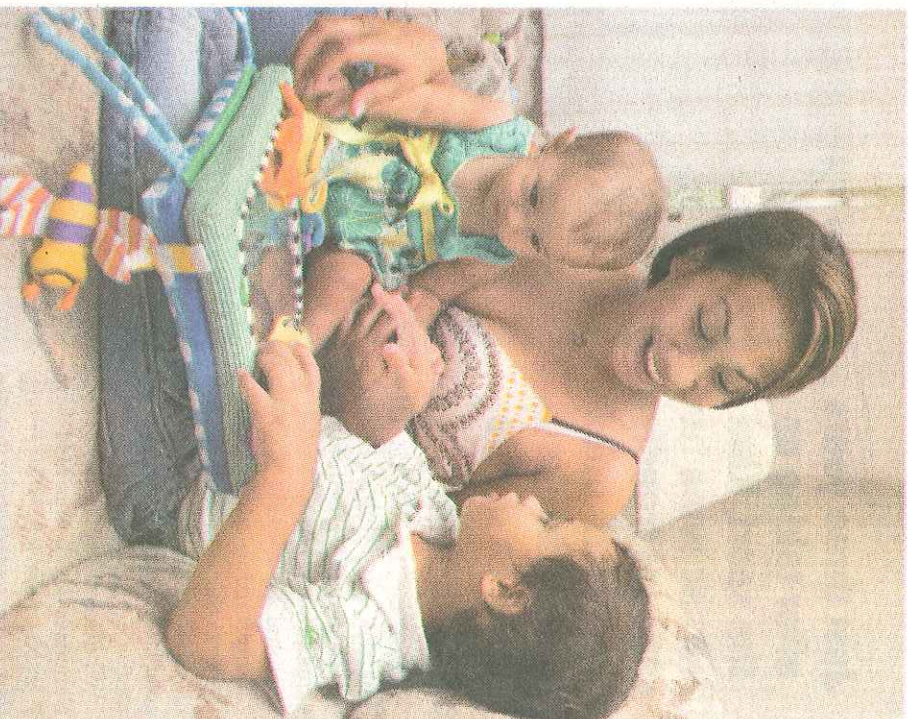
and was created by Family Court Judge R. Mark Browning and the state Department of Human Services in 2001, with the mission of getting siblings together who are separated by foster care on a monthly or quarterly bases. The department relies heavily on volunteer support — of which it is lacking — to pick up children, donate funds and supplies for events like Camp Connection, and so much more.

The whole dynamic of the camp is to have them bond together," says Vince Abramo, communications coordinator for Foster Family Programs of Hawaii. "Most people come away crying because they can't believe what happens at camp."

Hundreds of children, the majority of whom are of Hawaiian descent (at 59 percent), are taken from their parents' care each year, according to a study by the Child Welfare League of America released in June 2001.

Regardless of ethnicity, the cause of children's seizure by the state often has to do with substance abuse by the parents. Other reasons listed are lack of parenting skills, mental health/emotional functioning and lack of motivation on the parents' part to change their lifestyles to care for their children.

"I was so excited because I could be a kid again," says Jamie A'ana, a former participant who was reunited with her younger brother. "I could just be his sister, not just a mentor person keeping an eye on him. I could actually play with him." A'ana, 23, and her younger



Former foster child Jamie A'ana and her 8-month-old daughter Saphira and 2-year-old son Milvano

Leah Ball photo

brother Justice, 2 at the time, were separated when DHS removed him from their mother's care because of drug abuse when she was a teenager. When services came to take her baby brother away, they left her because she felt no immediate danger. "Which kinda made me wonder if they not going to take me away because I'm in no immediate danger, I'm not sure what the reason was," she says.

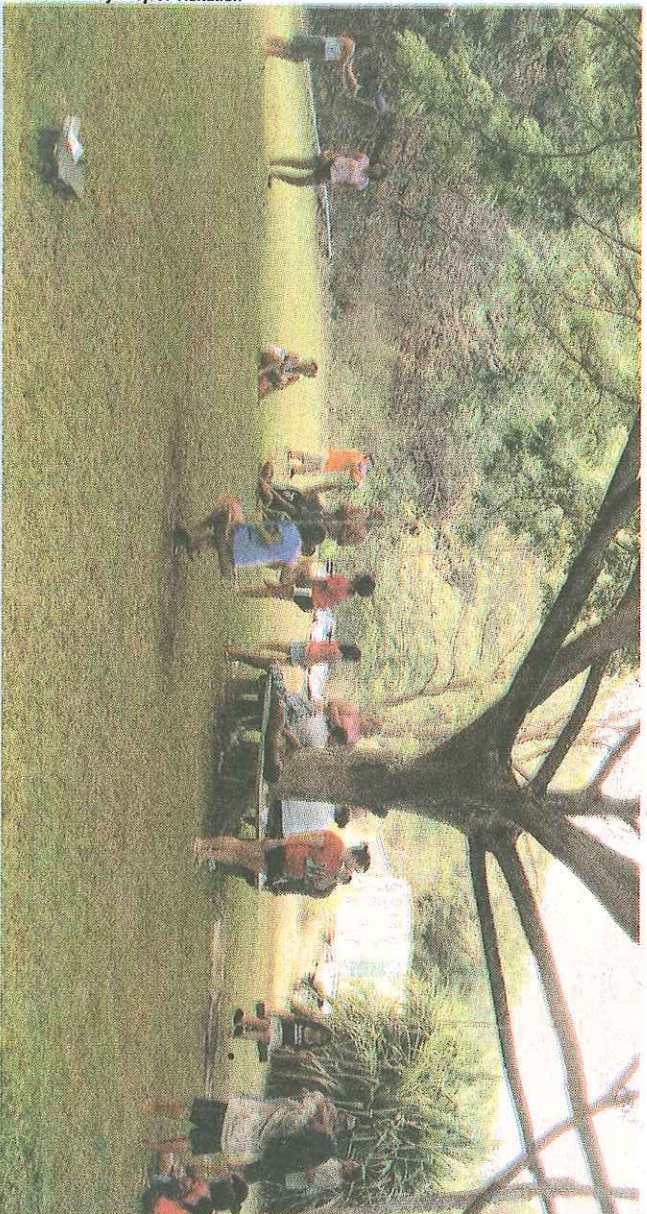
"I'm still not sure (why they took him away) if they was allowed to stay." Reasons for seizing just one sibling aside, the only opportunity A'ana had to see her little brother was through Project Visitation. She described her first visit as one of the highlights of her life. A volunteer picked her and her brother up, brought them to a family barbecue, included them in all the family activities and then took them to Dave and Buster's to finish the day.

"To this day I can still remember what we ate, what we drank, the face he had when he was playing games," she recalls. "And we didn't have to pay for anything out of pocket." A'ana was able to meet with her brother a few more times through the program until he was adopted. His new family decided not to associate with his biological family, which includes his big sister. "Ever since he got adopted, I have this void," she says, noting that her own children have helped fill that void. "There's always a spot in my heart for him."

A'ana admits even though she misses her brother, the time they spent together through Project Visitation was special. "We never had another opportunity like Project Visitation," she says. "That program and what they did for me that day are priceless." So, the three sisters at Camp Connection might not know their fate, if they'll stay in touch when they get older or where they plan to meet up in the future, but they will always have their memories, thanks to the efforts of Project Visitation.

For more information on Project Visitation, go to www.fjphanui.org or call 521-9531.

Photo courtesy Project Visitation



Siblings who are foster children living apart enjoy a day together at Camp Connection, playing and talking like regular siblings