

COUNTING ON US | SEASON 1 | EPISODE 7

Learning to Let Go

A Newfound Purpose

[00:00:02] **Daniel Treviño** Margie Walker has lived in Fort Worth, Texas, her whole life. When she was one and a half years old, World War Two had just broke out. After her father went into service, she and her brother were brought to their grandparents' home to be taken care of.

[00:00:18] **Mrs. Walker** I was raised by my grandparents because my mother was wild. Now, we were poor. We didn't have a lot, but they were there. They were always there. They weren't gone with a friend or staying overnight with a friend. They were there, and we knew that we were loved.

[00:00:48] **Daniel Treviño** Margie would later meet the love of her life, Howard Walker, and be married to him for over 50 years. They had a girl and two sons, but both boys died prematurely due to a rare genetic disorder. The dream of having a son eluded them, and their relationship with their daughter became strained. In 2009, Howard passed away, leaving Margie feeling devastated and lost for the next few years.

[00:01:18] **Mrs. Walker** Since my husband passed away, I went into a really bad, deep depression. I just lost interest in everything around me and life in general. I mean, I was here by myself and I felt like I had lost all my friends. I hadn't, but you think that way when you're depressed. I was coming home from someplace, and I stopped by the mailbox to get the mail, and there was a brown envelope in there. Inside, it said, "Mrs. Walker, CPS has your great-grandson, Drayven, and he needs a home." And so I thought to myself, "Yes, I'll give him a home. Yes, I want him. Yes. Where can I get him? When can I get him?" And so, I came home immediately, filled out those papers, and sent them directly back that day. Yes, I want him.

[00:02:28] **Daniel Treviño** Welcome to Counting On Us, a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services. The show where we share the stories of people navigating life's challenges, with ACH alongside them every step of the way. I'm Daniel Treviño.

The Unexpected Path: The Kinship Experience

[00:02:54] **Daniel Treviño** At 81 years old, Margie Walker chose to become the primary caregiver for her 15-year-old great-grandson, Drayven. The likelihood of having a more senior member of the family take up that role of caregiver has become increasingly more common. The transition of moving a child from their biological parents to their extended family or kinship family can, at times, be traumatic. Should caregivers not receive proper support, the risk of a failed placement runs high.

[00:03:27] **Mandy Martin** Kinship families are different because traditional foster families are prepared for this. They think about doing it, and they know what they're getting into. They get to go through all the trainings and observation hours, and they get to kind of see what it's like firsthand. Whereas our kinship and fictive kinship families are simply placed with a child, and then it's kind of like, "Okay, now go run with it." So we prepare them while the children are in the home, which brings on more challenges—childcare, trying to get to classes, and things like that.

[00:03:56] **Daniel Treviño** That's Mandy Martin. She's part of the Kinship Connections team at ACH Child and Family Services. Every week, Mandy works with families who have recently become new caregivers and connects them with extra resources and support. Mrs. Walker and Drayven are one of those families.

[00:04:15] **Mandy Martin** I started working with Mrs. Walker and Drayven back in January of 2020. We received a referral, and I just made that initial contact— went out and talked to her—and you could tell she was definitely checking me out, seeing who I was and why I was there.

[00:04:31] **Mrs. Walker** And I was a little bit apprehensive. I was afraid that we'd never see the kids anymore. You know, I was afraid, "There goes my boy—the I wanted so bad— and now I'm not going to have him."

[00:04:52] **Daniel Treviño** Did you feel like receiving help from Kinship Connections would work against you?

[00:04:59] **Mrs. Walker** Exactly. I said, "I can do this. I'm going to do this some way. I'm going to do this." And then Mandy came along, and she said, "You don't have to do this by yourself. We are here to help you."

[00:05:15] **Daniel Treviño** Mandy, can you tell us how you put it? How were you explaining it to Mrs. Walker?

[00:05:22] **Mandy Martin** I just had to let her know, because she was fearful. In situations like this, when caregivers are taking in these children, they think everybody's eyes are on them, and that any little wrong thing they do is going to get reported to the CPS worker and the child will be removed. So I just kept being myself and reassured her that I was here for her, and that we would do whatever we needed to do to keep this long-term placement. She started realizing that, and then she began calling me more often, was willing to talk to me, and became more open as we worked through the licensing process.

[00:05:56] **Daniel Treviño** Should kinship families decide they would like to pursue legal adoption, they must begin the complex licensing process. For anyone, this would be a daunting task. But for Margie Walker, it was particularly challenging since she had to learn new technology.

Overcoming the Hurdles of Kinship Licensing

[00:06:17] **Mandy Martin** Number one was that we needed an email. Since Mrs. Walker did not have one, I helped her set one up and then explained the importance of having an email and why we would need it throughout the process.

[00:06:30] **Daniel Treviño** Mrs. Walker you're laughing—why is this funny?

[00:06:33] **Mrs. Walker** I still don't have an email.

[00:06:36] **Mandy Martin** She has an email, but she doesn't know how to use it still.

[00:06:38] **Mrs. Walker** I have a tablet, but I don't know how to use it. I can hardly use my telephone.

[00:06:46] **Mandy Martin** That was one of the other ones. Having a phone that I could communicate with her, and then just programming my name to make it easier for her to find me and call me when she needed me or had questions. We tried to walk her through text messages, but that didn't work.

[00:07:02] **Mrs. Walker** It's better on the phone.

[00:07:04] **Daniel Treviño** And Mandy, how have you seen Mrs. Walker learn and adapt?

[00:07:09] **Mandy Martin** Well, we did a TBRI on Saturday. I couldn't be there to show her how to get on Zoom on her tablet, so just seeing her on the other side of Zoom for that training said a lot. I had written down directions for her, and she followed them, and she was on for the whole six-and-a-half-hour training. Anything she needs to learn, she learns it, and she tries to apply it the best she can. So it's been a lot of growth from Mrs. Walker throughout the process.

[00:07:42] **Mrs. Walker** Oh, I couldn't have done it without her. I just couldn't have. I mean, we were together like three times a week — sometimes more — and on the phone almost every day. I mean, no, no, I wouldn't have gotten to first base without her.

[00:08:03] **Daniel Treviño** In addition to helping Mrs. Walker register and set up for taking online classes, Kinship Connections at ACH assisted her with other community resources.

[00:08:13] **Mandy Martin** We helped her get her Social Security card, extra food, cleaning products, and hygiene products for the two of them. We also made sure the house was safe — adding smoke detectors — and then helped with the outside. There were a lot of unsafe and hazardous items all over the yard. She had a huge two-story shed that was just crammed with her things.

[00:08:43] **Mrs. Walker** It was a red storage building. Now it was—gosh—it was a huge thing.

[00:08:51] **Mandy Martin** Two story.

[00:08:52] **Mrs. Walker** Two-story, and it was—well—it covered that whole driveway out there and then some. I bet you that thing had been out there for 50 years.

[00:09:03] **Daniel Treviño** And how urgent was it that you get her home and yard cleaned up?

[00:09:08] **Mandy Martin** It was pretty urgent if she wanted to get licensed. I mean, the home needed to meet minimum standards and ACH policies.

[00:09:14] **Mrs. Walker** She said, “We got to get rid of this building,” and I thought, “Oh no, we’re not.”

[00:09:20] **Mandy Martin** Only because it was a safety hazard and it was falling apart.

[00:09:24] **Mrs. Walker** I understand. I understand now, but when she said that, I thought to myself, “Woman, you’ve gotta be crazy.” Yeah, because for one thing, I don’t have the strength that I used to as a younger person, and I just couldn’t do it all. Although I did quite a bit of work to get that accomplished, I still couldn’t do a lot of the things they wanted done. And I didn’t have the financial means to do it.

[00:09:54] **Daniel Treviño** Mandy, with the crucial need to remove the shed and clean up the property, how did Mrs. Walker and Drayven do that all by themselves?

[00:10:02] **Mandy Martin** Well, they didn’t. I had to do some research and find a company that was willing to come out and help and work with us.

[00:10:12] **Daniel Treviño** We’ll be right back.

A Message from Wayne Carson

[00:10:16] **Wayne Carson** Hi, it’s Dr. Wayne Carson from ACH Child and Family Services. I hope you’re enjoying the podcast. Here at ACH, we know that the community is Counting On Us to get it right. So, for over 100 years, ACH has remained true to our mission of protecting children and preserving families. Follow us on social media or visit our website, ACHservices.org, to learn more about what we do, how to get involved, or if you’d like to support us. Now, back to the show.

Helping Families Cope with Major Change

[00:10:56] **Daniel Treviño** Once it became clear that Ms. Walker didn't have either the strength or the financial means to remove the two-story shed and other items from her property, Mandy began to investigate.

[00:11:08] **Mandy Martin** I think I was trying to Google junk-removal companies or places that handled large amounts. I was just looking for businesses that were in the area, had availability, and were willing to talk with me, because I had originally reached out to the city to see if they did anything like that, and that was a hard no—it was really expensive, too. And then I'm not even sure how I eventually stumbled across him, but I remember reading reviews and things like that, and that's how I got connected.

[00:11:31] **George Berry** My name is George Berry, and I'm the owner of Junk King Fort Worth. I got a—well, I can't remember if it was a phone call or an email—from Mandy. I normally try to do one free job per month. I went out to Mrs. Walker's place and saw that she could really use some help. She seemed like a very nice lady who was trying to make the best out of a bad situation, and if we could help a little so her—I believe it was her grandson—didn't have to be in the regular foster-care system and could stay with family, then, you know, that just seemed like a win for everybody.

[00:12:13] **Daniel Treviño** Initially, at first inspection, Mr. Berry thought he and his crew would be able to remove everything in one day, but they soon encountered a roadblock.

[00:12:26] **Mandy Martin** That first trip was just really picking up the yard and going around. Then it was a whole different story when she opened the shed and saw the memories, and that took some time to go through...

[00:12:37] **Mrs. Walker** Yeah. That's probably when I really had the problem.

[00:12:40] **Mrs. Walker** The thing that I had the hardest time dealing with was my and my husband's bed. I tried to explain this to Drayven the other day because he brought up, and I didn't know how to answer him.

[00:13:03] **Daniel Treviño** What do you think that bed represented to you?

[00:13:07] **Mrs. Walker** It meant a lifelong friendship, loyalty, love, appreciation. It meant all the things that are good and happy in life.

[00:13:36] **Daniel Treviño** How were you able to convince yourself that getting rid of the bed and everything in the shed was the right thing to do?

[00:13:49] **Mrs. Walker** Well, I said, 'Howard's gone, and the past is over, and I have to look forward.' And it was hard. One thing I did was get in my car and drive out to the cemetery. I went to his gravesite, gave his tombstone a big old hug, and said, 'I hope you can feel this. Howard, I've got to move on with my life. I can't do this anymore. I can't keep you in my life day after day, knowing I'll never see you again until we're in heaven.' I told him I wasn't going to come out there as much, and I wasn't going to be able to think about him as much—I had to let him go. And after I had that talk with him, I could already feel the pressure begin to release and fade away. Then I came back home and said, "Thank you, building, for being there for us when we needed you. And I'm sorry, but we don't need you anymore."

[00:15:28] **Mandy Martin** I just felt for her. I mean, that was a lot to ask of someone—to have to go through things that were so important to her. All I could do was be there for her: just listen, let her tell me how much those things meant to her, and empower her by reminding her that she was in charge. She got to make the calls about what could go and what couldn't, and if she needed to stop the process and take a break, that was fine, too.

[00:15:54] **Daniel Treviño** Over the course of a month and a half, the Junk King returned several more times until, finally, the day came when they removed the two-story shed.

[00:16:03] **Mrs. Walker** Well, after I got over my tears, we had a good time. The guys were great—the ones that were here. They were very sympathetic to me, too, and they were very helpful in keeping me sane throughout it.

[00:16:19] **George Berry** She came over and gave a couple of my guys hugs. I think she maybe even gave me a hug, and then we all took a picture together. She was thanking us, and she was very happy—and we were happy to be able to help. It was a good day.

A Grandmother's Wish

[00:16:40] **Daniel Treviño** With the shed removed and the cleanup over, Margie Walker's goal of adopting Drayven got a whole lot closer. While the journey of adoption isn't over, Kinship Connections at ACH Child and Family Services will continue to work with Mrs. Walker to guide her through the legal process. Until then, Mrs. Walker continues to dream about what kind of man Drayven will grow up to be.

[00:17:09] **Mrs. Walker** I just want him to be a good man, a good father, a good husband, a good neighbor, and a helpful person—which he's already well on his way to becoming. He is so cute. When we go to the store or someplace and I get out of the car, he'll run around to my side and put his arm out. I say, 'What's that for?' and he says, 'Grab ahold of it so you don't fall.' He helps me up the steps and down the steps and all around. And that's just so sweet.

[00:17:48] **Daniel Treviño** What does family mean to you?

[00:17:52] **Mrs. Walker** Oh, well, I'll tell you what—I think with family, there's just no one closer. I don't care how many arguments or disagreements you have; they're still family. And that's what has hurt me so bad about all of this, because I don't have the closeness with my daughter and my granddaughter that I used to have. And I just miss that so bad. And I'm not sure what I can do and what I can't do, because I'm not going to do anything—I don't care what it is—I'm not going to do anything that's going to jeopardize me having Drayven. And if that means staying away from my daughter and my granddaughter, then I stay away from them.

[00:18:36] **Daniel Treviño** So, your family right now is you and Draven.

[00:18:40] **Mrs. Walker** Right.

[00:18:41] **Daniel Treviño** And how do you nourish that?

[00:18:45] **Mrs. Walker** With all the love I can muster. I mean, I don't know how else to put it. I just love him. I'm going to do for him as much as I can, and yet I've got to let him go to be his own man. And I know that, and that's going to be so hard. But we're going to do it. We're going to make it. We're going to be together.

[00:19:16] **Mrs. Walker** Hello, my name is Margie Walker, and I'm 81 years old, and I'm fixing to adopt my great-grandson, who is 15. Can you believe it?

[00:19:37] **Daniel Treviño** Thank you, Margie Walker, for sharing your story.



Closing Credits

[00:19:40] **Daniel Treviño** If you feel inspired and would like to support ACH in its mission to protect children and preserve families, then you can donate now at ACHservices.org/Donate, or you can find the link in the show notes. Also, if you liked this episode, please share it with a friend, follow us, or write a review, it makes a huge difference. Counting On Us is a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services, written, edited, and produced by Daniel Treviño. Special thanks to Kinship Connection Specialist Mandy Martin and George Berry from Junk King Fort Worth. Mixing by Panoramic Sound. Thanks for listening!