

COUNTING ON US | SEASON 1 | EPISODE 8

The Right Support Transforms Care

Introduction

[00:00:00] **Daniel Treviño** Just a quick reminder: if you haven't listened to the previous episode, make sure you do. Since up next, that story will be part of this episode's conversation. All right, enjoy the show.

[00:00:14] **Daniel Treviño** Here on Counting On Us, I get the opportunity to share the stories of those who have found the hope to push forward and overcome the challenges of their lives—like gaining independence, building a family and healing from trauma. But how universal are their stories? And what are the threads that connect them with other ACH clients, and what does ACH's team of caregivers and professionals really want you to take away from their stories. I get help unpacking these questions from the members of the community ACH serves, and directly from those whose mission it is to help them.

[00:00:52] **Daniel Treviño** On today's episode, my conversation with Arquilla Walker, Becca Cadena, and Stacy Ladd about a recent story shared on the podcast. I'm Daniel Treviño, and you're listening to Counting On Us, a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services.

Margie's Story Recap: Kinship Connections

[00:01:18] **Daniel Treviño** Previously, on Episode Seven, we shared how Margie Walker became the primary caregiver for her great-grandson, Drayven. After years of feeling lost without her husband, Margie found hope again when CPS informed her that her estranged granddaughter's son needed a home. Unfortunately, she wasn't prepared for what would soon be asked of her physically, financially, and emotionally. With the support of ACH's Kinship Connections, Margie received the resources and guidance she needed to achieve legal guardianship of Drayven.

The Trauma Behind Family Separation

[00:01:50] **Daniel Treviño** My first guest is Arquilla Walker. When she was just 18 years old, her life was forever changed after she agreed to take care of two boys from a woman named Donna. Forty-four years later, Arquilla has raised nine children—eight of them from Donna's family—and none of them related to her by blood. Consequently, she has sacrificed a marriage, a career, and an engagement. To this day, the pressures of being the sole provider of three children continue to be felt. But the love she has for Prince, Princess, and Messiah runs deep and motivates her to carry on. Welcome, Arquilla, to Counting On Us.

[00:02:29] **Arquilla Walker** Thank you.

[00:02:31] **Daniel Treviño** All right, I need to ask you a question that I know many people are thinking: Why do you keep accepting responsibility for raising all of these children? This is multigenerational — it goes back many, many years — and considering that you're not related to them by blood, you are fictive kin, meaning you're a close family friend.

[00:02:58] **Arquilla Walker** I don't even know that I was a family friend — remember, I didn't know Donna.

[00:03:02] **Daniel Treviño** Oh.

[00:03:03] **Arquilla Walker** She just happened to have a child by my brother-in-law. A lot of people ask me about this because they don't understand it. They say, "Why do you take care of these children?" And I say, "Who's going to do it? If I don't do it, who's going to do it?" Somebody has to do it. And that's the issue here.

[00:03:27] **Arquilla Walker** I tell people that when these children become adults, I wouldn't want to walk down a dark alley and meet one of them—someone who's never had a hug, who's never been told "I love you," who no one ever hugged, who no one ever kiss goodnight when they put them to bed. Somebody has to teach them. Somebody has to train them. Somebody has to show them the ways of the world. Somebody has to love them. So, you can say it's not my job, but whose job is it? And if the mother can't do it, and I can do it, why wouldn't I?

[00:04:05] **Daniel Treviño** I'm sure you're familiar that when these children do come into your home, they have already experienced trauma. So you know, that's a lot of work that ends up being asked of you as well.

[00:04:21] **Arquilla Walker** It is so much more work than I think I even understood. I have never experienced a child that has been given up by the parent that has not had problems because they can't really understand it. It always manifests as: "Something is wrong with me. Why didn't my mom want me? Why doesn't my dad want to know me? Because when you think about it, it's not only the mother—where are the fathers in this situation?"

[00:04:53] **Daniel Treviño** Uh huh.

[00:04:54] **Arquilla Walker** And so it reaches a point where they don't like themselves very much, and that's where the problems begin. That's why I've realized how important it is to have counseling when they're young. I have the five- and six-year-old in counseling now.

Bridging the Gap for Kinship Families

[00:05:14] **Daniel Treviño** How has this situation affected your relationships with your family and friends?

[00:05:20] **Arquilla Walker** My siblings are very disconnected from what I do. They don't understand it. I have many friends who are church members, but none of them really understand what I do. I feel very alone in what I do. I don't have a support system.

[00:05:35] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

[00:05:36] **Arquilla Walker** My friends, when you consider it, are between 55 to 75, and they're not interested in babysitting a little kid. So I don't really have a support system in terms of backups. They go on vacations—I'm not able to go. They take cruises—I'm not able to go. They get together and go out to dinner, and very seldom am I able to join them. I don't have a babysitter.

[00:06:02] **Daniel Treviño** So if I understand this correctly, for the majority of the time you were taking care of all these children, you didn't really have much of a support system?

[00:06:14] **Arquilla Walker** I didn't have any support system. I had not had any financial support until ACH.

[00:06:20] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

[00:06:21] **Arquilla Walker** It's different this time because I had never had anyone say to me, "We're here for you, and we are supportive of you." Never.

[00:06:35] **Arquilla Walker** I've never had a family member do it, never had a friend do it, never had a backup. And actually, it was Stacy Ladd — a director at ACH — who came to me one day and said to me, "What do you need?" And I just about broke down because no one had ever said that to me. I had never even thought that way. What do **I** need? I always thought only in terms of what **they** needed. And somebody called them one day and said, "I have some furniture. I'm buying my son some new furniture. Do you know anybody that needs furniture?" And they called me and they say, "Do you need a bed for Messiah?" And I said I did. I had bought him a crib, but he was crawling out of it. He really needed a toddler bed. They told me they had some furniture for me, so I said okay. They gave the lady my number, she called me, and said she was going to have it delivered and set up for me. It is the best furniture in my house. She sent a desk with a chair and everything I needed to furnish his room.

Having an Advocate in Your Corner

[00:07:57] **Daniel Treviño** And that's through—here at ACH, we have Kinship Connections, which is the program you're currently in. So let's switch gears a bit... I had you listen to Mrs. Walker's story—the other Ms. Walker. After listening to her story, what stood out to you, and what did you relate to?

[00:08:26] **Arquilla Walker** I related to...When you think about taking in a child, people think about what they're giving the child— not on what the child is giving them. And when I heard her story, it sounded like to me that this kid saved her life. And it resonated with me because these children saved my life. I was in an abusive relationship, and I would have been in that probably for the rest of my life. But it was through the children that it made me want to have a better life. I wanted to provide a more stable environment for them. So even when I didn't care enough about myself, I cared more about them.

[00:09:08] **Daniel Treviño** Were you ever hesitant in receiving help from Kinship Connections? I know Margie Walker talked about being concerned that receiving help from ACH would hurt her legal case.

[00:09:20] **Arquilla Walker** Very much so, I was raised to be very independent. I've been working since I was 13 years old and never stopped. Even at 61 years old, I work an average of about 50-plus hours a week. So I am very independent. I feel like if I'm going to take on the responsibility, then I should provide. It can be a struggle at times. There were times that I had to maybe not do something. Maybe we don't take vacations in the summer because I have financial responsibilities.

[00:09:55] **Arquilla Walker** So to have someone that is there no matter what means so much. To give you an example, I switched electricity companies, and both the old and new company sent me bills at the same time. I had two electric bills, each several hundred dollars, and I was like, "Oh, how am I going to pay two electric bills this month?" Then I thought about what Stacey said. And I emailed her and I said, "Stacy, can you help me this month?" And she did. She paid that electric bill, that extra electric bill for me. The services they offer —and the counseling—are invaluable. I have a counselor, or rather she's more of a connector. Her name is Becca, and she works with us.

[00:10:44] **Daniel Treviño** She's your Kinship Connection Specialists.

[00:10:46] **Arquilla Walker** Yes, and she works with us, and she knows all of my kids. On Thanksgiving, she brought us a basket and a gift card to buy a turkey. She brings us gifts on Christmas. She comes out and talks to my kids. And Prince—who has a hard time connecting with anyone—met Becca and fell in love with her. I didn't think he would talk to her because I thought he needed a guy. But she came out, and he just resonated with her. They formed a connection and he talks to her. When I have a problem, I call Becca crying and say, "Becca, this is what happened. What do I do?" And Becca finds me a resource or a connection where I can get through that problem. It's invaluable to me. I mean, who has someone they can call like that? I've called Becca after hours. Matter of fact, one time I had to call the police because Prince was having a mental health episode. I called Becca, and she's like, "I'm on my way." Who has that— when you don't have a family to call— and someone says, "I'm on the way? Here comes Becca.

[00:11:58] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, it kind of mirrors the relationship in Mrs. Walker's episode—the relationship between Mrs. Walker and Mandy Martin, who is her Kinship Connection Specialist. In the story, her husband had died, and in order to get her home ready so she could obtain that legal status, she had to...

[00:12:17] **Arquilla Walker** The storage shed.

[00:12:18] **Daniel Treviño** Yes, get rid of the shed. And they had all these memories, and that was such a hard experience for Mrs. Walker.

[00:12:27] **Arquilla Walker** Uh-huh.

[00:12:27] **Daniel Treviño** But it really— for me—showed that if she hadn't had that support from Mandy at that time to empower her to continue...

[00:12:38] **Arquilla Walker** It would not have happened.

[00:12:39] **Daniel Treviño** It would not have happened.

[00:12:40] **Arquilla Walker** It would not have happened, because it wasn't only the physical part she couldn't do but the emotional part as well.

[00:12:46] **Daniel Treviño** Uh-huh.

[00:12:47] **Arquilla Walker** Just anything you need to do what it is you do—they're there for you.

[00:12:53] **Daniel Treviño** Uh-huh.

[00:12:54] **Arquilla Walker** Instead of taking the stance of, "You've got to get this done. You must do this to become a counselor or foster parent." They don't take that attitude. They take the attitude of, "What can I do to help? What do we need to do to get this taken care of?" And that's always been the way that they've handled things with me— just with the greatest care.

[00:13:22] **Daniel Treviño** Is there anything else you would like to share or communicate to our audience?

[00:13:29] **Arquilla Walker** I cannot stress enough that... like when people say, "Why do you do this?" And I say, "Well, who's going do it? I cannot stress enough how much this is needed. Everybody doesn't have a family that's loving. Everybody doesn't have a family that's financially viable to do it. Everybody doesn't have a family that should have a child—unfortunately, sometimes it's just not safe. And like I said, if I could afford it, if I could buy a home with ten bedrooms, I'd take more. I really would. They give back so much more than I give to them; they do. If I can just raise God-fearing, law-abiding, good citizens, then I've done my job. And that's all I want out of life now. That's what I want for them— to grow up, and have good lives, and say somebody loved me enough to take care of me.

[00:14:35] **Daniel Treviño** Well, that's so powerful. I just want to thank you for all of the love that you've given these children.

[00:14:44] **Arquilla Walker** And getting!

[00:14:45] **Daniel Treviño** And getting—yeah, and getting.

[00:14:48] **Arquilla Walker** I'm getting kisses daily.

[00:14:50] **Daniel Treviño** So that's— I mean—that's a blessing too, right?

[00:14:52] **Arquilla Walker** It is.

[00:14:53] **Daniel Treviño** Well, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

[00:14:57] **Arquilla Walker** Thank you.

[00:14:57] **Daniel Treviño** And I just wish you all the best luck in the world with your children.

[00:15:03] **Arquilla Walker** Thank you. I appreciate it.

[00:15:06] **Daniel Treviño** We'll be right back.

A Message from Wayne Carson

[00:15:10] **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.

Kinship Care is Growing

[00:15:48] **Daniel Treviño** All right, let's continue the conversation.

[00:15:51] **Daniel Treviño** I'm here with Stacey Ladd and Becca Cadena—both valuable members of the team here at ACH. Welcome to Counting On Us.

[00:16:00] **Becca Cadena** Hi, thanks for having us.

[00:16:01] **Stacy Ladd** Thank you so much for having us.

[00:16:04] **Daniel Treviño** Can you both introduce yourselves and tell me more about what you do here at ACH? We can start with you, Stacy.

[00:16:10] **Stacy Ladd** Sure. My name is Stacy Ladd, and I'm the Kinship Connections Manager. I manage two units in our Kinship Program. We have two units: one that handles licensure or expedited licensure for kinship caregivers, and the other that provides support services for kinship caregivers.

[00:16:27] **Becca Cadena** I'm a Kinship Connection Specialist. I work on the community side and provide support to kinship families. I also handle the therapeutic side with the children and assist the higher-risk families who need additional support.

[00:16:45] **Daniel Treviño** What are some of the trends that we see with kinship care in Texas, Stacy?

[00:16:52] **Stacy Ladd** I think kinship is becoming a primary placement option. In the past, children primarily went into foster care, and only later did the department try to find a relative who could take them. Now, we're becoming much more kinship-focused, and relatives are being considered as an option from the start. And usually, there is a family member willing to step forward for a child in their family. So I think kinship care is becoming the primary option, whereas in the past, it was the secondary option.

[00:17:25] **Daniel Treviño** So, when children can no longer stay with their parents, what are the benefits of placing them in kinship care?

[00:17:33] **Stacy Ladd** Studies show that kinship placements are more stable. Those caregivers are committed and less likely to disrupt a placement because of a child's behaviors. Kinship care also helps preserve the child's culture—they remain connected to their cultural identity and their family. Even when the placement is with fictive kin—someone with a significant relationship to the child—that connection is still carried over, and the child has the opportunity to stay connected with other family members. It's simply not as disruptive for the child.

[00:18:01] **Daniel Treviño** All right, well, now let's switch gears a bit. I had you all listen to Mrs. Walker—I know you've actually worked with her. This is Margie Walker. It really is the 'Walkers episode,' since we have two Walkers. But let's start with Margie Walker. What stood out to you—your first impressions, Becca?

The Hidden Sacrifice of Kinship Caregivers

[00:18:21] **Becca Cadena** There was a lot that stood out. I think one of my takeaways was her age.

[00:18:30] **Daniel Treviño** Uh-huh.

[00:18:31] **Becca Cadena** As far as...

[00:18:32] **Daniel Treviño** She's eighty-one years old.

[00:18:34] **Becca Cadena** Eighty-one years old and literally has to start over.

[00:18:39] **Daniel Treviño** Uh-huh.

[00:18:39] **Becca Cadena** And it's very much a trend.

[00:18:44] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, I know. So, she was eighty-one at that time, and Arquilla Walker is sixty-one. How common is it to see an older woman taking up that role as caregiver?

[00:19:00] **Becca Cadena** It's very common. It's becoming more and more common. But why—how could you say no to a family member? How can you say no to a great-grandchild or grandchild? So it's the sacrifice, even though it's family...

[00:19:15] **Daniel Treviño** Yes.

[00:19:15] **Becca Cadena** Both had to sacrifice a lot to get where they are right now for the sake of the children.

[00:19:21] **Daniel Treviño** Stacy, do you want to comment?

[00:19:23] **Stacy Ladd** Just going to say, I think that we need to understand that kinship caregivers are different than foster parents.

[00:19:27] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

[00:19:28] **Stacy Ladd** Kinship caregivers don't prepare to take this job beforehand. Their homes are not in perfect order, and they're not economically ready to take another child into their home. Their home is not in perfect condition. Foster parents, on the other hand, have the opportunity to prepare—everyone is behind them: their church members, their family, and their friends all support them. What we also have to acknowledge is that sometimes kinship caregivers sacrifice relationships within their family. It causes a lot of discord and a lot of anger, and that's something they also have to deal with. Although they feel like they're doing the right thing, it's very disruptive. So the key to our relationships with kinship caregivers is building a trusting connection—a relationship that says, "I have your back. No matter what the issue is, I'm here for you."

[00:20:17] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, I know. When Mandy Martin reached out to Margie, Margie mentioned that she was afraid in the beginning because she didn't know what the ramifications would be if Kinship Connections got involved. Would they report that to her case? And would that affect whether Drayven could stay with her or not?

[00:20:40] **Becca Cadena** Well, it's already invasive enough that people are having to go to their houses. And by the time I get involved, I'm the last one in the entire process. So I go into it with, "I'm here for you. I'm here to advocate for you." Because a lot of the system is focused on the kids—as it should be—but they often forget about the caregiver. So I make it very clear, like with Arquilla: "Arquilla, my phone line is on 24/7. Call, email—anything. I'm here for you. How can I help you?"

[00:21:16] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

Partnering with Families for Better Outcomes

[00:21:17] **Becca Cadena** Because if Arquilla can't help herself, or if any caregiver isn't where they need to be mentally, physically, emotionally, the kids are going to suffer in the end.

[00:21:26] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, when I spoke with Arquilla, she shared that there was an incident where Prince was having a meltdown, and she had to call the police.

[00:21:35] **Becca Cadena** Yes.

[00:21:36] **Daniel Treviño** And once the police got there, who else could she call? She had no one—no other family to reach out to. So she contacted you.

[00:21:44] **Becca Cadena** Yes.

[00:21:45] **Daniel Treviño** And she's like, "I need you, Becca. Come down here." So can you tell me more about that moment—what happened?

[00:21:52] **Becca Cadena** Yes. As I said before, I work with a lot of teenagers who come from hard places. Prince's background—unfortunately—he could be the poster child for trauma. So it led up to a big, explosive meltdown, and Arquilla called and said, "I don't know what to do. I cannot give up on this kid. You have a really great relationship with him—can you come and help me?" Absolutely. What else am I going to do?

[00:22:23] **Becca Cadena** So I went there, and we got him the help he needed. Even though it felt like it took days, I was probably there for five hours or more. But we were able to get him the help he needed. So if I can step in and just be another ear, another face—anything to help calm the situation—I'm going to do it.

[00:22:46] **Daniel Treviño** I wanted to bring you on, Stacy, because when I was speaking with Arquilla, she mentioned that she once received a phone call from you, and it turned out you were offering her a connection for furniture. But you were also asking her what she needed. No one had ever asked her that before, and it was incredibly powerful for her. Are you aware of how impactful it is to ask caregivers what they need?

[00:23:18] **Stacy Ladd** I think, as Becca mentioned, that if you don't have a healthy caregiver—or if your caregiver is struggling—that directly impacts the child. Asking someone what they need, asking “What can I do to help you?” is something that's ingrained in anyone who chooses a helping profession. I feel so grateful to have staff who share that same focus—that we're here to help, we're helpers. Whatever it is, whether it's being an ear that listens or saying, “I know you're struggling—what can I do to help you?” Even financially, when we know someone is struggling. We've been very blessed to be able to do that through a grant from Rees-Jones, and it's allowed us to do things that help caregivers breathe a little easier and not feel so burdened.

[00:24:03] **Daniel Treviño** Any last takeaways?

The Resilience Found in Kinship Caregivers

[00:24:06] **Stacy Ladd** One of the things we learned early in kinship work is that kinship caregivers make the conscious decision to take in a child, but unlike foster parents, they don't have the luxury of being emotionally disconnected from the person whose child entered foster care. For example, if you have a grandmother whose daughter is the one the child was removed from, she is emotionally rooting for her daughter to get her life together. And when that doesn't happen, she grieves. So we have to acknowledge the emotional and financial barriers that come with this. Every kinship caregiver will tell you that they believe the child is going home—that this is short-term. And many times, we have to break that news to older caregivers like Margie Walker. She's eighty-one years old, and I think she truly hoped Drayven would return home. But in the end, he didn't—and now they only have each other. All Drayven has is Margie Walker, and she wants to do the best job she can for him. She feels like she's all he has, and this isn't the life she planned for herself. But she graciously accepted it and made the decision to do the best she can for the rest of her life with Drayven.

[00:25:19] **Becca Cadena** It's the same thing for Arquilla. You know, she helped raise generations of this family. And who would have thought that now, ten or fifteen years later, she has the children of the children she raised? I'm so happy that I've been able to help her over the past year and a half with that. And now she has another grandchild with her—and a girl this time. It's going to be different.

[00:25:42] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.

[00:25:43] **Becca Cadena** Like it's going to be difficult, but she's very resilient.

[00:25:50] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah.



[00:25:50] **Becca Cadena** I will say, I think that's a big key between these two Walkers. These Walkers are resilient.

[00:25:59] **Daniel Treviño** Yes.

[00:29:59] **Becca Cadena** There is not a wall they won't break down. There is not a fire they won't put out. So yeah, it's really beautiful to see.

[00:26:58] **Daniel Treviño** Yeah, I asked Arquilla, 'What's different this time?' And she said that now she has ACH—now she has a support system. She knows who to call when Prince has a meltdown or whatever comes up. So anyway, thank you both for all the great work you do here. I really appreciate it, and keep it up. Thank you.

[00:26:34] **Becca Cadena** Thank you.

[00:26:34] **Stacy Ladd** Thank you so much.

[00:26:35] **Daniel Treviño** Alright, bye.

Closing Credits

[00:26:38] **Daniel Treviño** That's all for today. But make sure you like and subscribe so you don't miss the next two episodes—we release new ones every two weeks. And if you enjoyed the show, please share, rate, and write a review. It makes a huge difference. Also, if you feel inspired and would like to support ACH in its mission to protect children and preserve families, you can donate now at [ACHservices.org/Donate](https://www.achservices.org/Donate), or you can find the link in the show notes. Counting On Us is a podcast presented by ACH Child and Family Services, written, edited, and produced by Daniel Treviño. Special thanks to Arquilla Walker, Becca Cadena, and Stacy Ladd. Mixing by Panoramic Sound. Thanks for listening.