



LEAH STAUFFER

FOUNDER,
HALF A MILLION KIDS

BY GINA LIZZO

Just a few months old when she was adopted, Newtown Square's Leah Stauffer has no memory of that time in her life. But as an adult, she was stunned by the numbers. Of the estimated 500,000 foster children in the United States, over 20,000 go missing each year, and 60% of sex-trafficking victims have a history in the child welfare system. Stauffer's first idea was a one-off documentary to raise awareness. That has since grown into Half a Million Kids, a full-blown effort to sustainably correct the course of our foster care system.



MLT: When did you know it was time to turn awareness into action?

LS: I attended a "match party" in the mid-2000s in Oaks where there were only five families in attendance for 18 children eligible for adoption. It became immediately clear that we needed a plan, with the Philadelphia region as the pilot area. The first phase is creating technology that modernizes the matching process and provides real-time data. The second is running a national campaign to attract leaders in other cities to replicate the model. The third is to open 20 homes in our region, each with two guardians and eight children, based off a successful Montgomery County House Parent model.

MLT: What kind of technology are you working on to restructure the foster care system?

LS: Case workers are given antiquated systems that are siloed. With 67 counties in Pennsylvania, they all don't talk to each other. States have their own systems, too. If a child in Philadelphia would be great for a family in Ohio, they'll never find each other. I'm creating a standardized ID indicator system that will plug into existing systems so none of them have to change. It dramatically reduces a case worker's workload and modernizes the matching process while also providing real-time data.

MLT: There's a nationwide shortage of case workers and social workers. How does Half a Million Kids plan to address that?

LS: These professionals are underpaid and overworked, often doing tasks that a

computer should be doing. Turnover is high, and the more case workers a child experiences, the lower their chances of adoption. Our technology will digitize the matching process and streamline tasks. Imagine a social worker opening their computer to 10 matches for a family—and emails already went out to the case workers for those children. You've saved them 10 steps.

MLT: What do you want the community to know?

LS: That we can correct this system in a sustainable way. They can certainly donate if they have the means, or they can share Half a Million Kids with their networks. We're also looking for real estate partners who want to use their portfolios for good, own an asset and have cash flow as part of our House Parent model.

MLT: For the time being, what does progress look like?

LS: I spend the bulk of my time trying to get the Department of Health and Human Services to deploy the indicator system nationally. We're applying for grants to finish the tech properly, but the biggest thing we need is decisions from those that can green-light this—and Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is the top person. Right now, our best course of action is implementing the tech in the Greater Philadelphia region.

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