Erika Righter in the playroom of her Highland bungalow, surrounded by reminders of her foster kids.
Unwanted

As the Colorado Legislature continues to slash budgets, the state’s foster care system remains chronically under-funded. Something’s got to give, right? The thing is, if we don’t pay now, as the kids grow up, it could continue to cost us all a whole lot more than money. Just ask Erika Righter and Shawn Larson.

By Natasha Gardner

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANA ROMANOFF
The baby, Gabriel*, had been crying—screaming really—for two hours, and it seemed like there was nothing Erika Righter could do about it. She tried rocking the eight-month-old baby in her arms. She tried cooing in his ear while holding him close and breathing in his smell, that mix of sweat and baby powder. Of course, she had felt his forehead and cheeks. Sensing they were feverish, Righter’s instinct was to give him baby’s Tylenol, but when she’d called a help line near midnight on that night, October 23, 2009, she had been told not to.

Righter pushed her blond bangs off her forehead. She is always doing that: flicking back her blond bob whenever she is frustrated. She’s only 31, but her blue eyes at once convey a hardness and a softness, like a woman who has worried too much, cared too much. Fifteen years as a nanny, babysitter, and social worker prepared her for moments like this—she wouldn’t just sit there. She got up in her Highland bungalow and walked down the narrow hallway that connected her room to the kids’ room. Righter rustled awake Gabriel’s older sister, two-year-old Josefina, telling her they were going for a ride. Josefina grabbed her knockoff Cabbage Patch Kids doll and a stuffed cow. Righter buckled the children into car seats in the back of her red Ford SUV. The drive probably took less than 10 minutes, but Righter, as a mom would do, looked in the rearview mirror every few seconds to check on the kids.

At the emergency room at St. Anthony Central Hospital, it was one hassle after another. She couldn’t believe the intake paperwork. Finally, she watched nurses peel off the baby’s pajamas. He looked so small in that bed. They took his temperature and monitored his pulse. Righter was on the precipice of exhaustion. Like any new parent, she was learning as she went. Parents typically have nine months to prepare for a baby: paint the baby’s room, stock up on diapers, fret over which car seat to buy, moon over onesies, and read What to Expect When You’re Expecting. Not Righter. She’d had just a couple of days to prepare. Seventy-two hours earlier, she got the call to become a foster care mom. Now, in the hospital, as she held Josefina tight and watched Gabriel’s chest rise and fall in a steady rhythm, Righter thought, It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

Shawn Larson paced at the bus stop in Wheat Ridge, trying to focus on the music in his headphones. On that fall morning in 1987, the 17-year-old couldn’t stay still. He moved his thin, bony frame back and forth in a staccato rhythm. If he stood tall, he’d be around six feet, but Larson’s shoulders were always sloped inward, making him look smaller than he really was. His blond head bobbed as the cassette tape whirred, repeatedly playing U2’s “New Year’s Day”:

“All is quiet on New Year’s Day / A world in white gets under way / I want to be with you / Be with you night and day”

Man, it was chilly at the bus stop. Larson had been in Colorado for five years now but still wasn’t used to the cold. His arms were covered in goose bumps. Cold was his first memory of Colorado: He’d moved here during the ’82 Christmas blizzard with Vernon and Linda. Vernon had landed a job as a principal of a small Pentecostal school in Englewood. Vernon would never be his dad. Larson could never really think of anyone as his “dad.” Vernon’s was just another home. Larson couldn’t even tell you for sure if Vernon and Linda legally adopted him. As far as he was concerned, it didn’t matter. His

* Names of minors have been changed.
Shawn Larson bounced around the foster care system and eventually into the prison system. His current address is the Bent County Correctional Facility.

This is where they came, a group home and center in Lakewood for teenage girls in the foster care system. Righter would shuffle through their paperwork and try to piece together their story. Are you hungry? Do you have a nickname? She’d process them, all the while wondering why we can find pets after a hurricane, but these kids show up here, foster care kids, without a file. Righter had talked to enough of these girls to know that to them she was just another social worker prying into their lives; in a day, or a few weeks, Righter would disappear, move out of focus, and another social worker, or another somebody, would...
take her place. Some of the girls, perhaps all of them, were already resigned to what Righter was learning to accept: There wasn’t a whole lot of care in foster care.

When the United States moved away from the Dickensian orphanages in the mid-1900s, foster care—a system for placing neglected and abused children in state-monitored homes—seemed like the best available solution. It was in 1967 that foster care became a federal mandate, yet it was left to each state to create its own system. The state put its foster care program under the control of the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS). And CDHS, the state’s second largest agency, created a series of foster care programs comprised of both public and private agencies. Viewed as a slice of the proverbial pie, less than 1 percent of the state’s child population requires foster care.

However, that amounts to more than 8,100 children. On average, foster care kids are in the system for about two years before either aging out at 18, or returning to their biological families, or being adopted—becoming one of the fortunate ones who finds a “forever family.”

At JC’s, Righter saw about 20 of these foster teens in 18 months. With girl after girl after girl treated as little more than yet another “intake,” Righter knew she wanted, needed to do more—no, to be more—for these girls. If only for one of them. It was a twisted thing, she thought, to know you have parents and family, but not to live with them. Teenage girls, she’d learned, were among the hardest to place in a forever home. Families were reluctant to take these girls because they were too old, too damaged. What if they got in trouble? What if they got pregnant? Righter figured if she could help just one kid, it’d be worth it. So, in July 2009, she applied to become a foster parent. She filled out the paperwork, went through the 30 or so hours of required training, and underwent the background check.

Along the way, she burned out at JC’s. However, that amounts to more than 8,100 children. On average, foster care kids are in the system for about two years before either aging out at 18, or returning to their biological families, or being adopted—becoming one of the fortunate ones who finds a “forever family.”

The long hours and trail of sad teens had gotten to her. She didn’t even have health insurance. It was the worst possible time. The economy had bottomed out and she didn’t have a Plan B, but she just needed a break. On her last day at JC’s, in October 2009, Righter noticed a petite, pale Hispanic girl with long dark hair who’d come in. Of all the broken girls Righter had seen, she’d never met a teenager as devastated and depressed as this girl was.

Her name was Daniela, and she had a little girl of her own. Daniela was going to school and had started working late into the night. She’d leave her daughter with her mother while she worked. Fed up with the babysitting duties, Daniela’s mother called child services, hoping for a little tough-love assistance. There was a communication gap (Daniela’s mother speaks very little English), and instead of helping with daycare, the state put both Daniela and her baby in foster care. Within months, Daniela was still in foster care and she became pregnant again. When Daniela and her foster care parents had a falling out, the state had trouble finding a new placement home for Daniela and the

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two kids. And so Daniela ended up at JC’s, while the kids were shuttled off to another foster care placement.

Righter couldn’t get this girl out of her head. About two weeks after she quit JC’s, Righter got a call from Adoption Alliance, a private but state-approved foster care agency. They wanted to know if she was ready. No problem, she said. She had diapers. She had a crib. She had nothing. She’d transformed the front room of her house from an office into a baby’s room. She had warned her new boyfriend that being a foster parent was something she needed to do, and amazingly, he’d said he was on board. Yes, yes, yes, Righter was ready to take on a child, but Adoption Alliance wanted to know if she was ready for two—Daniela’s children.

By the time Vernon and Linda moved to Colorado in 1982 with Larson, he’d spent much of his time running away or planning to run away, and in Colorado, it was more of the same. One time, he made it about six miles, all the way from Littleton’s Ridge Road to the Southwest Plaza shopping mall. He didn’t have anywhere to run to.

Colorado removed Larson from the couple’s home. In Larson’s memory, though, it’s clear: It took six or so years for Vernon and Linda to abandon him, just like his own parents did.

At 12 years old, he was now bouncing from placement to placement: Golden, Wheat Ridge, Denver, Boulder. The homes, the beds, the moms, the neighbors, the curfews, the teachers were all starting to blend together. Larson was learning to pack quickly, and with each move he lost more of what little of a history—photographs, toys, report cards—he had. Larson was learning to never get too attached, that temporary was forever. The more he was moved around, the more he stole. A kid with nothing and no one to call his own has nothing to lose. He spent time in programs like JC’s, thrust into “homes” with a revolving “family” of “siblings” who didn’t look much like him, except for the same defensive posturing and blank stares.

The teenage Larson started cutting himself. He would drag a razor blade across the skin on his arm. He tried to hide the cuts, but like the stealing, he just wasn’t very good at it. He spent time in programs like JC’s, thrust into “homes” with a revolving “family” of “siblings” who didn’t look much like him, except for the same defensive posturing and blank stares.

He just wanted to be somewhere else. He started stealing. Small things, like candy, but it was stealing. He wasn’t any good at it, and it seemed he always got caught. It’s difficult to say whether Vernon and Linda gave up on Larson, or whether the state of

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He would drag a razor blade across the skin on his arm. He tried to hide the cuts... The state put him in the Fort Logan Mental Health Institute.

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pastor and former board member of a local Big Brothers chapter, Brindle had known Larson for years, mentoring him as he moved around the foster care system and helping him to feel normal. It went against everything Larson had learned in the system, but he grew to trust Brindle. For once, this was a “guardian” who wasn’t an uninvited guest in his life. Brindle took him on ski trips and created a mixed tape of Whitesnake songs for Larson to listen to on the bus. When he offered Larson a place in his home—a bedroom of his own—Larson almost didn’t believe it. He finally had a home. He finally had someone whom he considered a dad.

Until that fall night in 1987, Larson worried he might be responsible, at least partially. After living with Brindle for only six months, how, he thought, could he have been so gullible? At school the next day, Larson told a counselor: Last night, Richard Brindle molested me. Larson didn’t fully appreciate what that report would turn into for him. He was so mixed up about it all. Was it somehow his fault? He had a certain complacency, right? No, he told himself, it never should have happened. And so, on that morning after, the 17-year-old couldn’t stop moving; he paced back and forth at the bus stop in Wheat Ridge, trying to focus on the U2 music in his headphones.

“I...I will begin again / I...I will begin...”

THE PLAN ADOPTION ALLIANCE and the state came up with for Erika Righter to take custody of Daniela’s kids might have been the best under the circumstances, but it sure didn’t feel like it. On October 23, 2009, Righter picked up the children, two-year-old Josefina, and baby Gabriel, at Daniela’s mother’s house—the grandmother who had called child services in the first place. Daniela and her mother were distraught. The kids didn’t seem to know what was happening.

As Righter drove away with Gabriel and Josefina, she thought, Oh my God. What have I done? Righter had gotten into this trying to help, really help, one child. Yet in trying to help hold a family together, she now seemed to be pulling the family apart. Glancing into the rearview mirror at the two small faces in the back of her Ford SUV, she realized that indeed, this wasn’t babysitting or looking after a friend’s kids. Just like that, these children were her responsibility. They were her kids. Except,
of course, they weren't her kids.

No one knew better than Righter that Daniela was their mother, and the family ought to be together as much as possible. While the foster care system had determined that Daniela must continue to stay at JC's, Righter and Daniela almost immediately agreed there was nothing to stop Daniela from spending every waking minute at Righter’s house. But every visit that began with smiles, as Daniela hugged her children, ended in an emotional separation. Especially that very first night after Daniela visited Righter’s house and the children, and then returned to JC’s.

Josefina and Gabriel didn’t understand why Righter had taken them from their mother, or why their mother had then come to Righter’s house and left again. They wanted to be with her, not with Righter, or anyone else. Gabriel wouldn’t stop crying, especially that first night. Two hours later Righter was in the emergency room at St. Anthony, watching nurses tend to the baby. Ultimately, the hospital staff just gave Gabriel baby’s Tylenol, which had been Righter’s instinct all along.

Righter believed Gabriel’s fever was symptomatic of separation anxiety. If Righter’s stomach felt empty and hard, and it did, the children must have been feeling so much worse. The separation anxiety only intensified. Every day, as soon as she awoke, Daniela came to Righter’s house, and every evening, Righter would send Daniela back to JC’s. She’d close the front door, knowing what would come next: Josefina. How could anyone expect a two-year-old to understand why her mom left every night? She’d lie on the floor kicking her legs and waving her arms and wailing until she was exhausted. Gabriel wasn’t doing much better. Every night he’d scream, in what Righter could only describe as night terrors. People told Righter she was overreacting and that a baby couldn’t possi-
Foster care parents have long battled the stigma that they profit from the kids who come into their homes, that foster care is a booming business. Righter was paid $23 a day for the baby, $32.28 for Daniela, and $23.38 for Josefina. Without a job, and without daycare assistance, that meant that Righter had about $2,300 a month to clothe, feed, and lodge three children, along with herself—just about $500 above the state poverty line. She’d given up on making ends meet; she was broke. She’d been trying to teach Daniela to ask for help when she needed it, and now Righter was the one who needed help. On a particularly cold day in December, she did something she never thought she would have to do: She went to a food pantry.

A statewide audit of the Colorado foster care program in 2007, the most recent audit, concluded that state allowances to foster care parents were too high. Citing the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s cost-of-living analysis, the audit stated, “provider rates for foster care grew more than local inflation over the last five years.” The
report proposed that the state could have saved about $3.1 million a year if the rates were lowered by about 13 percent. That would mean a monthly drop of about $300 for Righter, putting her—and the kids—nearer the poverty line.

Comparing foster care parent allowances to local inflation may not be the most fiscally or, for that matter, socially responsible measure. Colorado’s child welfare system costs about $380 million annually, but the national costs related to addressing child abuse and neglect is nearly $104 billion, which includes things like hospitalization costs, child welfare services, and the adult criminal system. (The monthly bill for an inmate in Colorado is around $2,300, the same amount Righter received to raise three children.) For foster kids turned adults, for the taxpayers at-large, the costs keep adding up. More than 60 percent of foster kids end up homeless, incarcerated, or dead within two years of exiting the system—like Shawn Larson.

**The state trusted her with these kids 24 hours a day, yet didn’t take her feedback on what was and wasn’t working.**

Within days of the teenage Larson telling his school counselor that Richard Brindle had molested him, Brindle turned up dead. The newspapers glossed over the details. The obits didn’t note a cause of death. Larson believes that Brindle, overcome by shame, committed suicide. After Brindle was gone, Larson moved into another home and, eventually, left the foster care system. For a time, he could almost see a normal life for himself.

He had a girlfriend, Shawna, a petite blonde. They’d met in study hall. On dates, they’d play bingo or go roller skating. There was a normalcy to it—a rhythm of birthdays, holidays, and family meals; the rites of passage that make up a life. Together, they dropped out of school. And when the teenage couple found out they were pregnant, marriage seemed like the right next step. The wedding took place on May 7, 1988, in the Denver-area trailer park where Shawna’s parents lived. Her family was
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there, and Larson, dressed in a white tux with a baby blue cummerbund, cobbled together an assortment of people to stand for him.

The wedding, and the rest of his new life, went the way of a disaster. He’d left the foster care system, but what came next? He didn’t have anyone to help him bridge the crucial years between childhood and adulthood. He didn’t have role models. What he did have were parents who’d given him up, fleeting institutions, and a molester. By the time Shawna gave birth to a baby girl on October 20, the couple had separated and Larson was roaming aimlessly, spending some time in California looking for his biological family.

He was drinking—tequila mostly—and soon he was facing a felony charge for breaking into a liquor store. Each day, he promised himself that he’d change, but each day he’d find himself with an empty bottle of tequila. One night in his Denver apartment, he reached for a .357, and contemplated ending it all. To hear him tell it, he squeezed the trigger, but he buried the bullet in the couch’s cushions.

The years started to run together. He’d hold down odd jobs until the boozing made it impossible to clock in. Shawna moved out of the state and took their daughter. The last time Larson saw his daughter, she was 12. He took her to the zoo. There was irony in showing her the caged animals because it was only a matter of time before he was behind bars himself. His 30s were what he calls an “epiphany on drugs.” He tried everything from crack to crystal meth to heroin. The time—days in prison and on the street—started to weigh on him as he neared 40.

His whole adult life was either spent in a fog of substance abuse or behind bars. He was incarcerated again in August 2007, the result of a combination of drug charges and parole violations, when he received a letter from his daughter. The letter was short, but to the point: She’d gotten married and was hoping to go to Bible college to become a youth minister. The letter had no return address, and Larson couldn’t track her down. He never heard from her again. He laminated the letter. In it, Larson’s daughter informed him that someone else had stepped in to be her “dad.”

ERIKA RIGHTER HAD the kids in her home for only three-and-a-half months, but she was struggling. That isn’t unusual: Turnover rates for foster care parents are high.
As many as 50 percent of parents leave the system each year, and there are never enough homes. (Log on to Craigslist.org and you’ll find pleas for new foster care parents.) The reasons guardians drop out of foster care vary. Some retire or decide to focus on their biological family. Others miss the support systems inherent with traditional families—the baby showers, babysitting favors, and more. For others, the stress becomes overwhelming or they simply can’t afford it.

To make matters worse, Righter often felt like the state’s caseworkers undervalued her opinions. This struck Righter as incongruous. The state trusted her with these kids 24 hours a day, yet didn’t take her feedback on what was and wasn’t working. The caseworkers’ priority, it seemed to Righter, was on preserving the placement—the roof—not on enhancing the children’s lives. She wanted to move past the bureaucracy to help Daniela think about college, to find more books for Josefina, who was becoming a voracious reader, but the focus was on the bare necessities.

The paperwork, meanwhile, was barely inching along. Righter had a hint of how slow things happened that first night when Gabriel’s fever spiked. She knew he just needed baby’s Tylenol to stanch the fever, but as his foster parent, she needed authorization to give him any medication—which she didn’t have. When she picked up the kids that first day, there was no medical authorization form, which would have allowed her to administer the Tylenol. The only option then was to take him to the emergency room. It seemed ridiculous to bundle up two kids on an October night and haul them to an ER for a dose of Tylenol, but that was the rule. Righter was OK with rules that protected kids, but she didn’t understand why Gabriel’s paperwork didn’t accompany him to his new placement—her home. The whole episode could have been avoided with a simple piece of paper.
That was just one of the paperwork snafus. Daniela’s medical insurance card didn’t work for a month, so she could not receive dental or medical treatment, including birth control. Some of the confusion was because there were so many adults involved in these kids’ lives. Daniela had one team of social workers, and the children had another. There were contacts at Adoption Alliance, and judges, and teachers, and nurses, and more, and none of them were on the same page. States, by federal law, are required to make sure that caseworkers have monthly face-to-face visits with at least 90 percent of foster children. Only about 84 percent do in Colorado. Daniela and her children fell through the gap. Caseworkers didn’t come for weeks, then months.

ONE DAY THIS PAST summer, Shawn Larson sits in the dining room at the Crossing, a transitional housing complex owned by the Denver Rescue Mission. It’s lunch hour for the New Life Program, a rehabilitation program for men. The tables are filled with recovering addicts dressed in T-shirts and jeans and eating gelatinous slices of turkey with mashed potatoes and gravy. It could be a high school, except for the random urine tests and pack-a-day smoking habits. Larson blends in.

He’s been on parole since December 2009, and in the New Life Program for a few months. The program’s participants focus on Bible studies and catch up on basic life skills. On any given day the computer lab is packed with grown men poking away at a keyboard, taking a Mavis Beacon typing test or setting up an e-mail account. Larson says he’s been sober for three years, although much of that time was spent behind bars on a drug charge.

His sandy blond hair is cropped close to his skull in a buzz cut, and most days, he wears a faded pair of jeans, sneakers, and a T-shirt with the earbuds of his Walkman threaded up his back beneath his shirt. His arms are caramel-tan from long hours spent outside. His whole body is tight, so tense that veins bulge out on his forearms and distort the Harley-Davidson logo tattooed on his right arm and the word “Dokken” (one of his favorite metal bands) inked on the left arm.

He dug both tattoos into his arms himself, but had a professional trace over the Harley ink for $35 to clean up the edges. The Dokken logo helps to cover the scars from his teenage cutting. During the
day he is either in Bible study or working in the program’s maintenance department laying down sod or chipping paint off curbs.

At night he plays drums and practices with a band, a hodgepodge assembly of whoever happens to be in the New Life Program. The third-floor practice room is as ramshackle as the players. There’s a plastic brown couch in one corner. An Alcoholics Anonymous book tossed aside on the floor. A sofa pillow is stuffed in the bass drum to act as a damper. There’s a new member in the group tonight: The old bass player missed a blood alcohol test and was booted out of the program. As the band starts to play, Larson peers out the windows that overlook the flat Eastern Plains. He’s chomping away on a stick of Wrigley’s gum, popping it out between his teeth in time with the music, both legs bouncing.

Grown-up Larson looks like a combination of actor Denis Leary and a bulldog puppy, with deep furrows across his brow and a halfway smile that, most often, looks like a grimace. It’s easy to imagine that this man was once a 17-year-old boy pacing at a bus stop, listening to U2, and hoping to start over. “I trusted him,” Larson says now of Brindle. “I believed in him. And he was one of the only people I believed in. And I have never believed in anyone as much since. I can’t find home anywhere else since.”

He may not be at home at the Crossing, but he seems content, now, at band practice. He banteres with the new bass player between songs and sips on a mug of instant coffee. The lead singer launches into a contemporary Christian rock number, “Finally Home.” As they reach this, the last song of the night’s practice, Larson’s face is flushed and his eyelids droop. The lead guitarist starts to sing:

“I’m gonna wrap my arms around my daddy’s neck and tell him that I’ve missed
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Erika Righter started with simple lessons: Yes, give the baby a bath when you want to. Yes, you know what to feed them. Yes, you can do this. The plan was to give Daniela choices because so much of her life as a foster kid was dictated to her. Righter wanted to rebuild Daniela's maternal instincts; to reassure her that she—and she alone—was the best mother for her children. When Righter could hear the kids making a fuss downstairs at night, she'd text Daniela's cell phone, asking, "What's up?" rather than storming down the stairs. When one of the kids acted out, Righter would give Daniela parenting tips instead of taking over discipline duties. And although Daniela declined to be quoted for this story, she's the first to say that, yes, Righter's strategy indeed enabled Daniela to slowly rebuild her confidence.

Each day that passed, though, Righter knew it would all end—Daniela would leave. It's a heartbreaking thing, for sure. Foster parents work with a child, raise them, and send that same child away when the state says so, often shuttling the child back to the same broken or abusive homes that landed them in the system to begin with. It's not a natural life passage, like sending a kid off to school for the first time or unpacking boxes in a college dorm room. This is saying goodbye abruptly and painfully. It's more than most people can bear—but something that Righter believes she can do.

Righter was born and raised in Boston, the daughter of a schoolteacher and a businessman. As a kid, she was an effusive talker, like today, with sentences spilling together and punctuated with eye rolls and "uh-huhs." She's got an easy confidence, sometimes bombastic but always in control. By the time she was four, she had a little brother. One day, when her mother went to wake her brother from a nap, he wasn’t breathing. Her mom performed CPR on his little body while they waited...
for the paramedics to come. She sat next to her mom in a police cruiser that trailed after the ambulance carrying her brother’s body to the hospital. Once there, a social worker took her into a quiet room and sat with her in a rocking chair until family members came to pick her up. Her brother was dead.

She was just a kid, herself, but she learned what sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) was and watched her parents grieve a death they couldn’t predict or prevent. She stopped talking until a therapist slowly coaxed her to speak again. So Righter knows life is full of hard goodbyes, but she knows too, firsthand, that kids can cope. Motivated by her brother’s death, as a teen Righter volunteered at a children’s hospital. “I carried a doctor bag,” she says. “I wanted to fix everyone.”

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BETWEEN CLASSES AND WORK, Shawn Larson meets regularly with his chaplain at the New Life Program—part spiritual leader and part counselor—Danny Major. The first day he met Larson, Major was surprised. The guys he counsels usually have someone—a family member, an old girlfriend, a kid—who’s still in contact, but Larson insisted that he had no one. When Major pushed, Larson became more adamant.

“Shawn, no one is alone,” said Major. “There’s no one,” said Shawn.

Moments after the meeting, Larson was back on Major’s threshold. “Chaplain,” he said. “I need you to take a special interest in me.” It was an intimate plea, but not unusual. His drug and alcohol abuse have, most likely, irrevocably damaged the frontal lobe of his brain, the control center for social response and telling right from wrong. Which is, perhaps, why Larson feels stunted, like he never grew up. He’s a teenage Peter Pan who’s still a ward of the state, though now that means he’s on parole. In his mind, the years between now and the bus stop are flyover country.

The more he talked to Major, the more Larson wanted to stop talking. He quit listening to music because it made him feel too much. Sobriety just reminded him about how much he’d lost—or missed. Was he Irish? How else do you get a name like Shannon Larson? Shannon. He hated that name. He changed it when he was a teen, not legally, but he’d been Shawn from then on. What was his first word? How old was he when he took his first steps? What was his favorite toy? All of those little details that he wanted to remember but couldn’t.
“I remember screaming in my room, on my knees, on my bed,” Larson says. “Screaming in tears for help.” It wasn’t coming. “Every place that I ever went I felt so empty I wanted to die. Even as a kid with Vern and Linda I just wanted to die. I had no concept of what death was, but I knew I didn’t want to be.”

Since Larson left the system, thousands of Colorado kids, like Daniela, have entered foster care. During that time, little headway has been made for a national foster care model. States employ their own methods of delivery, data retention, and oversight. In Colorado, like 13 other states, foster care is determined county-by-county, meaning that the state has 64 foster care systems. Complicating matters is the fact that foster care facilities are both public and private, like Adoption Alliance. In short: Colorado has 64 models to deal with 50,000 calls of reported abuse and neglect each year—some of which lead to foster care placements.

In 2008, Governor Bill Ritter created a task force to evaluate this complex system. Ritter was prompted, in part, by a string of deaths that had occurred—or as some critics have argued, were caused by Colorado’s child welfare system. Ritter called the deaths “outrageous” and tasked the group of politicians and pundits to determine if the system was able to protect—even help—the children it purported to watch over. Earlier this year, the committee put forth 29 recommendations, ranging from a statewide ombudsperson to training centers.

The recommendations came out during the most severe budget crisis since the Great Depression, so there were plenty of ideas, and as far as how to pay for it, there’s been plenty of spin: Ritter has presented a 2011–2012 CDHS budget with a near 1 percent “increase,” which doesn’t match inflation. There’s political economics and real-world economics, and in the real world, that increase doesn’t bring the foster care system in line with the cost of living. Teresa Huizar, executive director of National Children’s Alliance, an agency that provides funding for several child advocacy centers in Colorado, worries that the worst is yet to come. “The infrastructure we are tearing down now will take many more years to rebuild,” Huizar says. “It takes a slash of a pen to eliminate something that has taken 10 years to build and will take 20 years to rebuild. Infrastructure is hard built.”

Foster kids don’t have that much time. Too soon they become adults, like Larson. “I went way deep inside of myself, and that is where I stayed because people scared me,” he says. “There’s such a hole. There’s such an emptiness there. Most of the time I feel out of place. I carry that still. I don’t know how to act in a normal setting.” Larson says his favorite movie as a teen was *Wisdom*. The starring character can’t get a job after college and starts robbing banks. He’s a

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If that's what Larson had been hoping for, that he'd wake up and everything would have been nothing more than a bad dream, he knows there's not a chance of that now. In August 2010, Larson dropped out of the New Life Program.

He was spotted in downtown Denver, in areas where you'd go to score a fix. He was arrested and is now in the Bent County Correctional Facility, near Las Animas in southeastern Colorado. Only a month before he ran from the New Life Program, Larson told me: “Maybe people didn’t do enough. And maybe people would conclude that I didn’t do enough to be better off than what I am now. But then I could counter that and say that maybe I did do a lot more than you can ever imagine. Maybe I did enough.”

Righter was hell-bent on making sure Daniela’s “foster kid” label would not define or destroy her young life. “A lot of people think that 16, 17, or 18 is too late,” Righter says, today, over a coffee. “Neurologically, they are still going through changes. We can—literally—rewrite the future.” Doctors agree: The human brain, particularly the frontal lobe, is still in development well into our 20s. Judgment, the ability to choose right from wrong, is one of the last pieces of the neurological puzzle. Knowing this, Righter tried to be patient as the bills kept coming and Daniela contemplated her next move.

Daniela was 19 by then, and eligible for programs like Warren Village, a low-income housing option for single parents in Denver. Daniela had applied to the program and been denied, but Righter encouraged her to appeal the decision. Daniela had to write an essay to do so, but she put it off. Each day Daniela would say that she was going to write it, but wouldn’t, until finally Righter had enough. “I want you to go, but this is about you,” she said. “If you want to go, go. Let me know.” On the day before the deadline, Daniela finally sat down and wrote the essay. “And she chose to go,” Righter says. “It was her choice.”

When Daniela moved out this past February and into her own apartment at Warren Village, Righter made sure she had those small things that make a house a home, things that a foster kid typically doesn’t have, like framed pictures, a photo album, and furniture. This would be Daniela’s house—the home she made for her children. Righter stayed in touch, but she also backed off, watching from a distance to see how Daniela would land. “I needed to let her go a bit and not come to the rescue,” Righter says.

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Meanwhile, Righter made it a personal mission to recruit foster parents, or, at least, to make the system better. She urges her friends to consider becoming foster parents. She tells acquaintances about ways they can become a mentor for a foster child. She talks about someone creating a better data tracking system so that every time a six-year-old girl ends up in a new home, she doesn’t have to recount to a stranger the way her father repeatedly raped her. She wants young professionals to buy a stroller—just one—for a new foster parent. She wants businesspeople to sign up for weekly one-hour visits with a foster care kid. She’s like a jet stream, carrying and building in emotion as ideas spill out.

She wants to help one kid, like Daniela. Through the chaos of pregnancies and foster care, Daniela managed to graduate from high school. She had a chance to walk across the stage to celebrate a year later. “You have to go,” Righter pleaded, but Daniela kept waffling. Maybe she would. Maybe she wouldn’t. “You have to, you have to,” Righter kept repeating. “It is really important for you to take time to recognize these huge steps and achievements you’ve made. This is something your kids can be proud of you for. You graduated high school. It is a big deal.” And she kept trying: “You finished school after living in 10 homes.” Finally, Righter acquiesced: “Listen, this is your decision, but I will be there, and I want you to be there.”

Parents talk about those moments that make it all worthwhile; those moments when you forget your life because the child’s life is what matters. Righter had heard it all before, but when Daniela crossed the stage—she’d come to the ceremony, after all—Righter understood. It made the ER, food pantry, and bills worthwhile. “It’s changed my entire life,” Righter says. “There are kids, like Daniela, who are just waiting—they don’t even know it yet—they’re waiting for the opportunity to turn it around, but they probably won’t ever get the chance.”

For a few months this past summer, it looked like it was all going to work out. Daniela was OK. The kids were OK. The young family had housing and Daniela had a full-time job. She applied for state-funded daycare, and she’d even enrolled in nursing school. Her classes would start in the fall. Righter was ready for her next foster kid placement. That was months ago. Now, the crib in Righter’s home sits empty. She’s working part-time with Volunteers of America, where, Righter being Righter, she is connecting elderly volunteers with at-risk children. She still wants to be a foster parent, but knows she can’t do it without a job and child care—something the daily stipend doesn’t cover. Recently, she got a call on a Friday asking her to take care of a newborn whose mother gave birth in prison and needed an emergency placement. “They said, ‘You need to take this baby,’” Righter says. “I said, ‘I can’t unless you guarantee me child care.’” Righter had to turn down the placement. She also received a letter from her foster care agency, Adoption Alliance, which said that reimbursement rates are likely to drop.

And Daniela: She’d applied months ago for child-care assistance, but she hadn’t heard back, and so she gave up her job and her plans for nursing school this fall because she needed to stay home with her kids. With no income, her housing is in jeopardy. Just weeks ago, her phone was turned off, and Righter had a few panicked days when she couldn’t get in touch with her. Talking about Daniela, Righter says, “The whole...” she stops, and for a moment, it seems like she might cry. Her eyes fill with tears. She looks at the ceiling, and she gulps. But then comes that determined flip of her blond bob and a wave of a hand, and the moment of desperation is gone. Her mind is already moving, working toward solutions.

“What if they had tickets to go see an orchestra perform? What if we set up a babysitting circle for foster parents?” Righter says. “This is what’s devastating to me.” Righter had to turn down the placement. She also received a letter from her foster care agency, Adoption Alliance, which said that reimbursement rates are likely to drop.

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Natasha Gardner is assistant editor of 5280. Email her at letters@5280.com
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