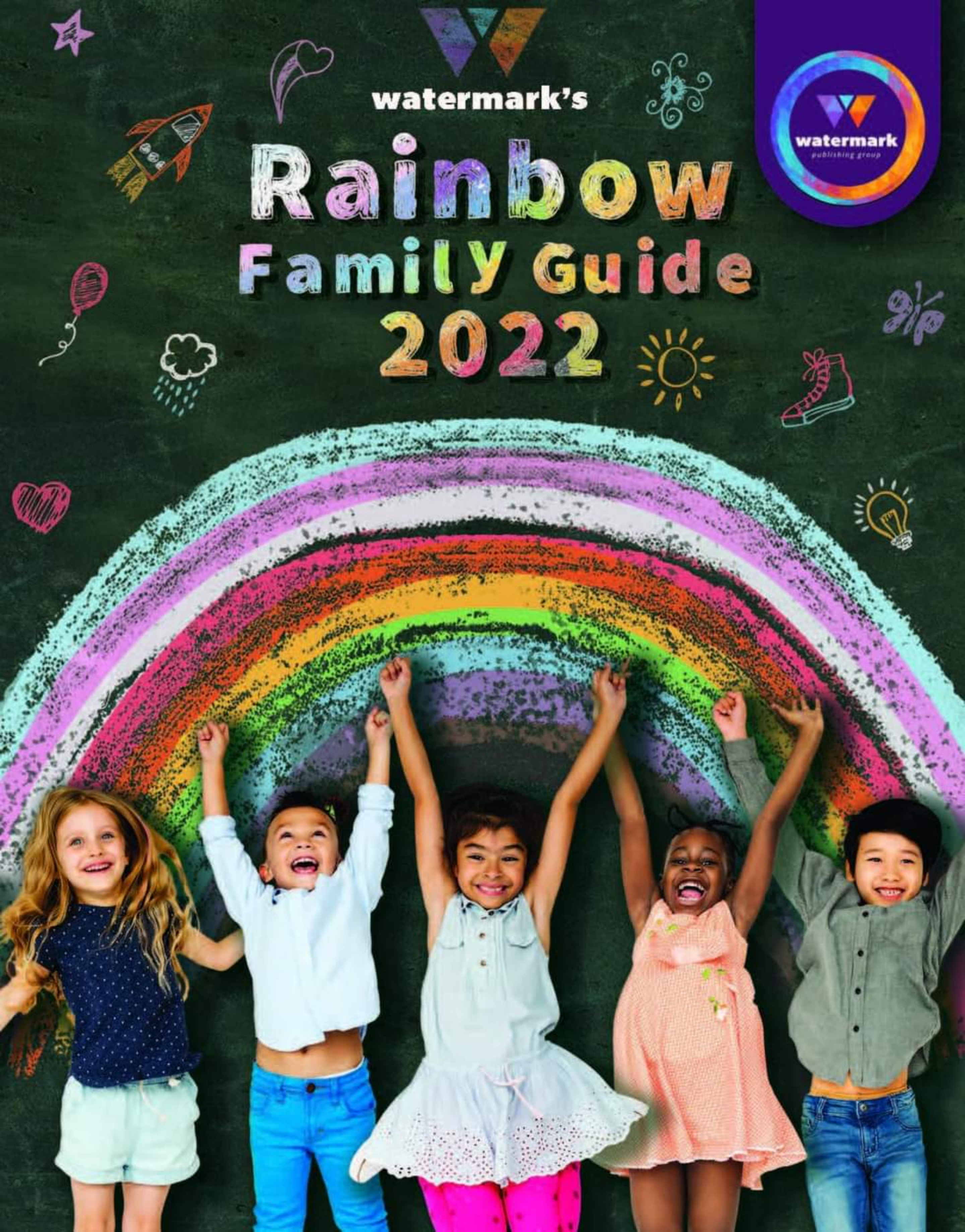


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# Rainbow Family Guide 2022





# Finding Family



## Changemakers create connections for those in need

DEBORAH BOSTOCK-KELLEY

For one TikTok user with more than 100,000 followers and another social worker serving those in Central Florida and Tampa Bay, sitting on the sidelines as intolerance toward the LGBTQ community and their families grew was never an option.

For Daniel Blevins, the content creator known as the\_zombie\_dan, that meant empathizing with other LGBTQ social media users. He could imagine members of the community lacking support from their families and hoped it might bring them solace to see a gay man volunteering to help fill that void.

He and his network of supporters were ready to show those in need compassion. They were ready to stand in as a family member for their life events, however minor or major. It's an offer he never realized would go viral on TikTok, but it did. His Jan. 2021 video set into motion a chain of events that would touch every corner of the world.

"If you are a same-sex couple getting married that does not have a biological family there to support you, let me

know," Blevins said. "If I'm not able to attend your wedding, I have friends that will. We'll be your biggest fans."

Stand In Pride, formerly TikTok Stand-In Families, was born after that. "I started getting contacted by young people looking for validation or affirmation," he explains. "I didn't know what to think about the video going viral, because it happened really fast. When I started reading comments, other people were offering to help as well."

Blevins knew that if his voice could connect with an LGBTQ youth or adult in need, he had to try. He determined a private group on Facebook was the best option to do that. "It's a place for people to post their needs, whether they need a person physically to stand in for someone at a wedding or graduation, or they simply need someone to talk to," he says. "They can take that conversation to messenger, FaceTime, or however they choose."

More than a year later, there are over 36,000 other voices parroting Blevins' sentiment that everyone is worthy and loved. In a private Facebook group, the rainbow banner reads, "Together we make a family."

Blevins is proud that the platform gives those in the LGBTQ community a safe space to be their authentic selves. Erin Brea Newsome, a Stand-In Mom in Central Florida, says she joined because she knew it was a way to show her support as an ally.

"Many people lose family when they come out, so I hope to be that missing

love and support that they need when they need it," she says. "A group like this



PHOTO VIA DANIEL BLEVINS

is important because we all need support. Regardless of who you are and who you love, we are all human. I think this group was truly borne of necessity ... there are people out there who are willing to stand up and give advice and support to those who otherwise might not have it."

"We have a lot of Mom figures who check-in on the kids they have adopted through the group every day. We have Dads who are there if someone needs advice on fixing things, though some Moms are good at fixing things too," he notes.

Blevins will soon launch a website and an app for those who don't utilize Facebook.



PHOTO VIA DANIEL BLEVINS

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PHOTO VIA STEPHENA PIERRE

Stand-In Pride will also become a nonprofit organization that will focus on providing resources for the growing number of homeless LGBTQ individuals and outreach and education programs. “I think that’s where the biggest difference can be made,” he says.

While Blevins was working to connect the LGBTQ community with stand-in families, Florida social worker and foster parent Stephenia Pierre and her husband Webster were getting a license to open a State-Certified Child Placement Agency for infants to age 18. Her goal was to pair LGBTQ foster families with diverse children in need.

As a social worker, Stephenia says she has witnessed firsthand children languishing in the foster care system, often in group homes without foster placement or siblings in foster care, separated into different families. Their goal is to be an advocate for the children without a voice.

“We can’t just sit back and watch what’s happening without actively engaging,” she explains. “We need to do more to make a difference. My ultimate goal is to make sure every child in the foster care system has a loving, caring home. It doesn’t matter who the

caregiver is as long as they are able to provide a nurturing environment for the child to thrive.”

When founding the nonprofit We Care Family Connections, she had no idea that she and her husband were the first minority-owned and operated foster care agency licensed in Florida. She works with organizations throughout Central Florida and Tampa Bay.

Stephenia’s philosophy is that having a loving home to welcome children is all that matters. Children in foster care often come into the system with nothing but the clothes on their backs and shoes on their feet. Since opening their doors, support from the community has enabled WeCare to change the lives of children and their families throughout Florida.

“We want them to feel a sense of normalcy as much as possible,” she explains. “We need clothes and shoes. However a person wants to support us, we will take it with an open heart because it’s being given with an open heart. We will ensure those items are provided to the children in the child welfare system.”

Opportunities to volunteer are available throughout the year, including sorting and organizing the donations, volunteering in the foster homes and assisting with their annual toy drive. Stephenia says that when you look at the statistics of children aging out of foster care and not having available resources, the numbers are heartbreaking.

“If anyone can provide a loving home, we would love to pair them with a child that they can provide all the stability, love and normalcy for and help nurture them to grow where they don’t have to repeat the cycle,” she says. “We want to help break the cycle. We welcome anyone who can provide unconditional love.”

If the biological parents terminate parental rights and no other relative wants the child, the foster parent may have the opportunity to adopt and give their foster child a loving forever home. Stephenia’s hope is that “the foster parent will commit to the child to provide them permanency if they cannot go back to their biological homes.”

A snapshot by the Florida Department

of Children and Families showed that in early 2022, nearly 48,000 children were a part of the Florida foster care system. Pierre is proud to give LGBTQ youth a safe haven to figure out who they truly are but needs more LGBTQ adults to open their homes.

“We need more homes in this community to place a child struggling with their identity,” she says. To become a foster parent, applicants must live in Florida, be 21 or older, be financially stable and be physically and emotionally able to care for children.

They must be able to pass a background check and have adequate room and beds in the home for children, have stable housing, and most importantly, provide the unconditional love a foster child deserves.

Stephenia has helped a number of children, like one young girl trying to find her identity. “There’s a lot of teasing and bullying and a lot of struggles there,” she says. “It’s hard enough when you are trying to figure out who you are versus when you are in an environment where you feel unsafe.”

At that time, she did not have any LGBTQ homes. She decided she had to do more to reach out to the community to embrace child welfare.

“There’s simply not enough capacity. We need all types of homes because we have all types of children,” she notes. “We want people to know we are here and we welcome them. Our motto is ‘every child deserves a loving home, and every home deserves a child.’”

Through determination and strength of character, Blevins and the Pierres are making a difference in the lives of LGBTQ youth and adults. The advocates have decided to create a positive impact in their communities, making families that will last for generations to come.

To learn more about Stand-In Pride, search “Stand In Pride” on Facebook. Follow Daniel Blevins on TikTok at the [\\_zombie\\_dan](#). To learn more about becoming a foster parent through We Care Family Connections or to support their mission, visit [WeCareFC.org](#) or call 813.898.7273. ▼