

# AFFM'S 29TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

*Foundations of Belonging*

## Keynote Speakers



Justin Black  
Author, Speaker



Jim Harris  
Ed.D., MSW



Registration: <https://affm.net/support/training/annual-spring-conference/>

April 10th & 11th 2026



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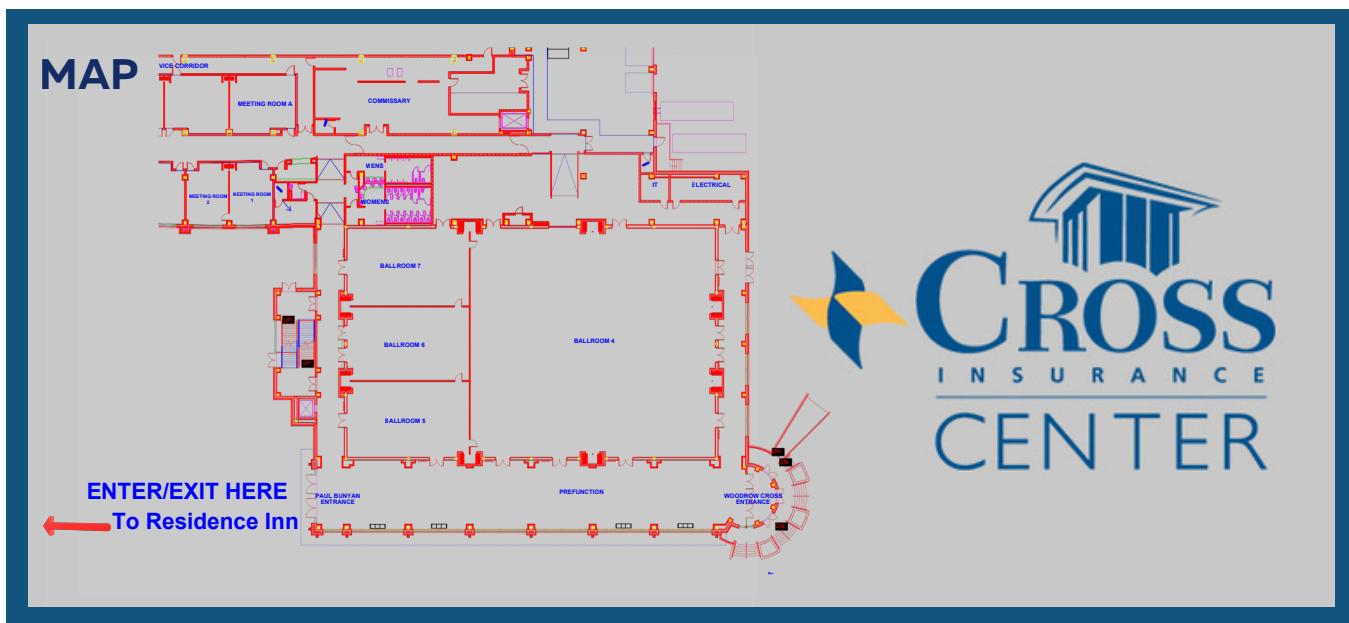
# WELCOME TO AFFM'S 29TH ANNUAL SPRING CONFERENCE

## Who Should Attend:

Kinship Providers, Foster Parents, Adoptive Parents, Social Workers, Child Welfare Workers, Clinicians, CASA Volunteers, Judges, Attorneys, Educators, and Other Child & Family Advocates.

## Why Attend:

AFFM conferences offer specialized training tailored for families and professionals seeking unique and advanced learning opportunities. These events also provide a valuable chance to network and build connections with families and service providers from across the state, fostering collaboration and shared growth.



# Introducing the Keynote Speakers



**JIM HARRIS**

Ed.D., MSW

**Jim Harris, Ed.D., MSW**

Dr. Jim Harris is the Director of Marshall University's Interdisciplinary Behavioral Health Center and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Work. He is also the founder of Opportunities Consulting Services. Dr. Harris brings a diverse background in health and human services, having served as an early interventionist, parent educator, educational consultant, university instructor, and behavioral health therapist.

A TEDx speaker whose talk was selected as an Editor's Choice video, Dr. Harris has delivered presentations at conferences ranging from local gatherings to international venues on topics such as behavioral intervention, parenting, positive behavior support, trauma-informed practices, and organizational change. Dr. Harris has partnered with both public and private organizations, including the Fred Rogers Company, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Justice.

Known for his practical and engaging approach to complex topics, Dr. Harris helps audiences better understand human behavior—both their own and that of the people they support.

Watch Dr. Harris's TEDx talk here:

<https://youtu.be/5EPxwJwUPs4?si=5B1DnR0PdVPUR-TE>



**JUSTIN BLACK**

Author, Speaker, and  
Serial Entrepreneur

Justin Black is an author, speaker, and former youth in care dedicated to fostering healing and growth in communities. He studied public relations and African studies with a focus on urban development and global perspectives in countries including Rwanda, Uganda, Senegal, and South Korea. Alongside his wife, Alexis, he co-authored the award-winning, bestselling book *Redefining Normal: How Two Foster Kids Beat the Odds and Discovered Healing, Happiness and Love*, which has reached over 40,000 people. Through their company, Redefining Normal, they lead conversations on healthy relationships, mental health, and community transformation through speaking, training, and workshops.

Watch Justin's TEDx talk here!

[youtube.com/watch?v=rZNBEtKI9tM&ab\\_channel=TEDxTalks](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZNBEtKI9tM&ab_channel=TEDxTalks)

# Friday Morning

April 10th

8:30-9:00 A.M. Ballroom - **Welcome**

*Travis Bryant, Executive Director, Adoptive & Foster Families of Maine Inc., and The Kinship Program*

9:00-10:00 A.M. **Ballroom - Keynote-‘What's Wrong with Kids These Days? Start with a Better Question’**

*Presented by: Jim Harris, Ed.D., MSW*

*It is no secret that we live in an increasingly complex world, which has resulted in several challenges for youth's social and emotional development. In this session, Dr. Harris returns to the developmental basics and offers some ideas on how we can better understand and support youth in an ever-changing and complex world.*

10:00-10:10 A.M. **Break**

10:10 -12:00 P.M. **Ballroom - Workshop - ‘Now What? Behavior Support at Home’**

*Presented by: Jim Harris, Ed.D., MSW*

In this session, Dr. Harris builds on his keynote presentation to explore real-world strategies that parents and supporting professionals can apply in home and family settings. Drawing on the principles of Positive Behavior Supports and trauma-informed practices, this workshop emphasizes practical, usable tools that can be implemented immediately.

12:00-1:00 P.M. **Ballroom - Lunch**

## Quiet Connection Room

**Step away from the busyness of the conference and find peace in our Quiet Connection Room, a dedicated space designed to help you decompress, process, and recharge.**

**This serene environment offers:**

**Tranquil Atmosphere:** Soft lighting, and minimal noise for a soothing retreat.

**Tools:** Journals, pens, adult coloring, and fidgets will be available for use in this space.

**Whether you need a moment of solitude to process new information, reflect on key takeaways, or simply catch your breath, the Quiet Connection Room is here to support your well-being throughout the day.**

# Friday Afternoon

1:00-1:30 P.M. Lobby - **Networking & Resource Exploration**

1:30-3:30 P.M. **Breakout Workshops**

## **Ballroom - 'The Adolescent Brain: Understanding the "What" & "Why"**

*Presented by: Jim Harris, Ed.D., MSW*

In this session, Dr. Harris will take you on a journey into the adolescent brain. That sounds scary! However, with this improved understanding, you will learn how to consider the growth-related status of the teenage brain in developing programming and interventions. Dr. Harris will pay specific attention to developmental progression and its relation to different behavioral manifestations. He will use case examples and common issues in adolescent interventions to bring "real-world" relevance to the information.

## **Breakout Room 1 -'Understanding Psychotropic Medications in Foster Care: Guidance for Resource Families'**

*Presented by: Dr. Adrienne Carmack, OCFS Medical Director, and Rebecca Richardson, OCFS Manager of Child Welfare Strategies and Policy Implementation*

This informative workshop provides resource parents and kinship caregivers with essential knowledge about the use of psychotropic medications for children and youth in foster care. Participants will explore the different classes of medications, their intended uses, potential benefits, and important considerations for monitoring and advocacy. The session will also review the Department's updated protocol and clarify the role of caregivers in informed decision-making and collaboration with medical and child welfare professionals. Designed for licensed and unlicensed caregivers alike, this training equips families with the tools to confidently support the mental and emotional well-being of the children in their care.

## **Breakout Room 2 -'Centering Lived Experiences to Create Belonging and Trust'**

*Presented by: Youth Leadership Advisory Team*

Join staff from the Youth Leadership Advisory Team (YLAT), housed at the Catherine Cutler Institute, and Maine youth who have experienced care for an interactive workshop focused on practical tools and best practices for deepening relationships and trust with youth. Cutler staff will explore how caregivers can overcome biases, understand reactions, stretch ideas of normalcy, and broaden perspectives on what it means to belong as a youth and as a caregiver. A panel of youth who have experienced care will speak to the ways adults have both supported and stood in the way of their ability to feel meaningful belonging.

## **Breakout Room 3 -'Connecting the Pieces: The Caregiver's Role in Identity, History, and Belonging'**

*Presented in collaboration with the Catherine Cutler Institute Resource Family Introductory Training team, Cheri Crossman, LCSW, and AFFM Trainer April Belyea, M.S. Ed., CAGS*

In this workshop, we will explore the healing power of storytelling to create meaningful connections that support healing in the foster care experience. By focusing on our roles and responsibilities as caregivers, we will learn how to bridge and fill the gaps in a child's life story. We will embrace the importance of relationships, culture, and lived experiences as pieces of their identity. This approach will help participants deepen their empathy, strengthen relationships, and affirm each child's unique story.

3:30-4:00 Lobby - **Networking & Resource Exploration**

# Friday Evening

6:00-7:00 P.M. - **Mic Drop & Mingle: Karaoke**

Join us for an evening where connection meets creativity, featuring music and sound by On Track DJ Bros. Step into a relaxed, high-energy space filled with laughter, unforgettable moments, and crowd-favorite hits. Whether you're ready to grab the mic or simply soak in the fun, this is your chance to unwind, spark new connections, and enjoy a night where every voice has a place and every song tells a story.

# Saturday Morning

April 11th

8:45-9:00 A.M. Ballroom - **Welcome**

*Presented by: Travis Bryant, Executive Director, Adoptive & Foster Families of Maine Inc., and The Kinship Program*

9:00 -10:00 A.M. Ballroom - **Keynote- ‘Holding the Mirror Right: How Family, Culture, and Community Shape Foster Youth Identity’**

*Presented by: Justin Black, Speaker, Author, Former Youth in Care*

This session supports parents and child welfare professionals in understanding how family systems, community context, and culture shape foster youth's sense of "normal." Participants will gain practical tools to help youth reclaim their narratives, build a positive self-image, and transform challenges into strengths as they envision their future.

## Session Takeaways:

- Explore how family, community, and culture shape foster youth's current sense of "normal."
- Identify ways adults can support youth in reclaiming their narratives and strengthening self-image.
- Practice tools and reflections that help reframe challenges into strengths and support youth in building their own vision for the future.

10:00-10:15 A.M. **Break**

10:15-12:00 P.M. **Breakout Workshops**

**Breakout Room 1- ‘What We Lost, What We Needed, What Helps: Adult Voices from Foster Care and Adoption ’**

*Presented by: LC Coppola, LMHC, M.Ed.*

This presentation centers the lived experiences of adult adoptees and foster care alumni, integrating qualitative interview findings with the framework of the Four Major Losses of the Adoptee: loss of history, loss of trust, loss of health, and loss of self-trust. Together, these lenses illuminate how early attachment disruption and systemic separation shape identity, nervous system functioning, relationships, and meaning-making across the lifespan. Through brief video clips and firsthand narratives, attendees will hear directly from adults who grew up in foster care or were adopted, including what they needed from their guardians, how they learned to navigate the world through hypervigilance and adaptation, and how these early losses continue to influence emotional and physical well-being. The session explores how losses that are often minimized or reframed as "good" become embodied experiences, contributing to disenfranchised grief, self-doubt, and chronic stress—alongside resilience, insight, and healing strategies.

**Breakout Room 2- ‘Holding Stories: How to help children tell their stories’**

*Presented by: Heather Bowie, AFFM Resource Family Trainer*

In this workshop, we'll explore the important stories in our lives and what objects can help us remember and tell those stories. This session focuses on the power of storytelling as a way to feel seen.

**Breakout Room 3- ‘Caring for a Relative’s Child: Understanding Guardianship Options’**

*Presented by: Bette Hoxie, AFFM Kinship Program Manager*

This workshop features a facilitated panel discussion designed to help kinship caregivers better understand the process of petitioning for guardianship through the probate court system. Panelists include legal expertise, experienced Kinship Navigators, and caregivers with lived experience navigating guardianship. The session will explore who can file a petition, why guardianship may be necessary, where and how to file, and what to expect throughout the process. To protect privacy, no case-specific information will be shared.

# Saturday Afternoon

12:00-1:00 P.M. **Lunch**

1:00-1:30 P.M. Lobby - **Networking & Resource Exploration**

**1:30-3:30 P.M. Ballroom - 'Caregivers: Guiding Youth Through Redefining Normal'**

*Presented by: Justin Black, Speaker, Author, Former Youth in Care*

Every young person grows up within a “house of origin” – shaped by the patterns, beliefs, and expectations of their environment. For many, those early rooms are filled with both love and limitations, stability and struggle. This session invites caregivers, mentors, and professionals to explore how these early experiences shape a youth’s identity, sense of belonging, and vision for the future.

Through reflection and discussion, participants will learn how to help youth reimagine and design their own “house by design” – a framework that encourages healthy boundaries, emotional stability, and personal growth. Together, we’ll practice strategies for modeling self-care, consistency, and trust so caregivers can lead by example, creating homes and relationships where resilience is built and hope can thrive.

3:30-4:00 P.M. Lobby - **Networking & Resource Exploration**

4:00 P.M. Conference Closure

# AFFM's 29th Annual Conference Agenda

## Friday April 10th, 2026

8:00 -8:30AM	<b>Registration</b>
8:30-9:30 AM	Ballroom: <b>Welcome</b> - Travis Bryant, Executive Director, Adoptive & Foster Families of Maine Inc., and The Kinship Program
9:00-10:00 AM	Ballroom: <b>Dr. Jim Harris Keynote</b> : What's Wrong with Kids These Days? Start with a Better Question
10:00-10:10 AM	<b>Break</b>
10:10-12:00 AM	Ballroom: <b>Workshop</b> : Now What? Behavior Support at Home- Dr. Jim Harris
12:00 PM-1:00 PM	<b>Lunch</b>
1:00 PM-1:30 PM	<b>Lobby: Networking/Vendor Exploration</b>
1:30 PM - 3:30 PM	<b>Breakout Workshops:</b>  <b>Ballroom</b> : The Adolescent Brain: Understanding the “What” & “Why” - Dr. Jim Harris <b>Breakout Room 1</b> : Understanding Psychotropic Medications in Foster Care: Guidance for Resource Families - OCFS <b>Breakout Room 2</b> : Centering Lived Experiences to Create Belonging and Trust - YLAT <b>Breakout Room 3</b> : Connecting the Pieces: The Caregiver’s Role in Identity, History, and Belonging-Cutler/AFFM  <b>Lobby: Networking &amp; Resource Exploration</b>
3:30 PM- 4:00 PM	
6:00 PM- 7:00 PM	Mic Drop & Mingle: Karaoke - Networking Event

## Saturday April 11th, 2026

8:30 AM	<b>Registration</b> (Saturday attendees)
8:45 AM	Ballroom: <b>Welcome</b> - Travis Bryant, Executive Director, Adoptive & Foster Families of Maine Inc., and The Kinship Program
9:00 AM	Ballroom: <b>Justin Black Keynote</b> : Holding the Mirror Right: How Family, Culture, and Community Shape Foster Youth Identity
10:10-10:15 AM	<b>Break</b>
10:15-12:00 AM	<b>Breakout Workshops</b>  <b>Breakout Room 1</b> : What We Lost, What We Needed, What Helps: Adult Voices from Foster Care and Adoption - LC Coppola, LMHC, M. Ed. <b>Breakout Room 2</b> : Holding Stories: Helping Children Keep and Tell Their Stories - Heather Bowie <b>Breakout Room 3</b> : Caring for a Relative’s Child: Understanding Guardianship Options -Bette Hoxie
12:00 PM-1:00PM	<b>Lunch</b>
1:00 PM-1:30PM	<b>Lobby: Networking &amp; Resource Exploration</b>
1:30 PM - 4:00 PM	Ballroom: <b>Workshop</b> - Caregivers: Guiding Youth Through Redefining Normal - Justin Black
4:00 PM	Conference Closure

# Lodging Information

## Residence Inn by Marriott Bangor

22 Bass Park Boulevard  
Bangor, Maine, USA,  
04401



### Amenities Include:

From the hotel in Bangor, Maine, you can easily walk to top destinations like Cross Insurance Center, Hollywood Casino, Darling's Waterfront Pavilion, and the famous Paul Bunyan statue. Bangor International Airport is 4 miles away from our Bangor hotel.

Free WiFi, Restaurant on-site, Pool, Fitness center, Free breakfast, Kitchen, Whirlpool on Site, Pet friendly, Free Parking

\$154.00USD / Night Book before March 11, 2026. Resource families receive a discount by booking with this link:

[BOOK HERE](#)

### Additional Information

- The annual silent auction will take place throughout the conference in Meeting Room 1. Bid on a basket filled with goodies! 100% of the proceeds go back to assist resource families. Winners of auctioned items will be announced on Saturday.
- The Quiet Connection Room, located in Meeting Room 2, is a place attendees can take a break at any time during the conference.
- The Resource Room will be located in Meeting Room A. Families are welcome to stop by to pick up free items.
- All attendees can take part in a chance to win a door prize and the 50/50 raffle! Winners will be announced during Saturday's lunch.
- If you are a resource family and in need of a scholarship, please contact AFFM. For more information, visit [www.affm.net](http://www.affm.net), AFFM's Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/Resource.Family.Support>