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JIM GILLESPIE:

ADOPTED AS AN INFANT, JIM HAS A HEART FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

In a moment of happenstance about five years ago, Bellwether Enterprise SVP Jim Gillespie was introduced to The Felix Organization.

Jim – who works in BWE’s New York City office and focuses primarily on the affordable housing market – was leaving an event for Toys for Tots when his friend asked him to wait so he could run back inside for something he had left behind.

With a chuckle, Jim recalls being frustrated for having to wait around for his friend to return. But it was in that moment that he struck up a conversation with members of The Felix Organization who were distributing promotional material nearby.

“It was just this by-chance introduction to Felix. I believe that nothing is by accident,” Jim said.



Photo credit: Lisa Nalven

Jim Gillespie (second from left) visiting a Camp Felix event.

“ I always had a family that told me that I could do anything I wanted. I just can’t imagine growing up without that support. So any tiny bit that I can do to help these kids who don’t have that, that’s what it’s all about. ”

During their conversation, Jim learned about how The Felix Organization is dedicated to providing services for children within the New York foster care system. Specifically, the nonprofit’s main effort is running Camp Felix, an overnight camp for foster youth in Putnam Valley, NY and Camp Felix West, a camp serving foster youth in Los Angeles, CA.

Jim said while talking with the individuals from Felix that day, one of whom was Executive Director Amanda Ricken Simonetta, he felt an immediate personal connection because he was adopted when he was just three days old.



Photo credit: Lisa Nalven

“There’s so much uncertainty in their lives, that this camp gives them one thing a year to look forward to that they can count on,” Jim said. “It’s really about empowering, connecting them with mentors, and helping give them the support they don’t have at home. That’s what really pulled at my heart strings. I was very fortunate that I’ve got a great family, but had circumstances been different, that could have very well been me.”

Jim has visited Camp Felix and has met many of the kids the camp serves. He has also served in various volunteer roles and works to raise funds to help with the future sustainability and ultimate growth of Felix. In addition to running the camp, Felix also provides other year-round services, support and mentorship for the children.

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"Jim has been amazing," Amanda said. "He's really one of those rare finds who walks the walk."

The Felix Organization was established in 2006 by Sheila Jaffe, an Emmy-award winning casting director, and musician and rapper Darryl McDaniels, better known by his stage name "DMC" from the American hip hop group Run-DMC. Like Jim, both Sheila and Darryl were adopted.

The organization holds several fundraising events throughout the year, but its largest is the annual Dance This Way event, to be held this year on May 13 at the Rumi Event Space in New York City.

Jim is a part of this year's event host committee for Dance This Way and has a personal goal of raising \$8,000 for the organization. Felix's overall goal for the event is \$250,000.



Photo credit: Lisa Nalven

The majority of the money raised from the Dance This Way event is dedicated to Camp Felix.

Running in June in Los Angeles, and from July through August in New York, the foster children have an opportunity to spend up to two weeks attending the overnight summer camp. Amanda explained that the camp has all of the activities one would imagine a summer camp to have, including swimming, sports, climbing, arts programming, campfires, star gazing, and plenty more.

It's not intended to be a therapy camp, she added, instead it's simply a place for kids to be able to let their guard down, have fun and be kids. Campers range from ages 8-13 and older teens can participate as counselors in training and eventually as counselors.

According to Amanda, most organizations dedicated to supporting foster kids focus on ensuring the children have the basic needs, such as a safe place to live, food and clothing, and getting them into a proper school.

"That's all very key and important," Amanda said, "but some of the other sort of typical experiences that kids have get lost. Things like going to camp, or being on a soccer team, or taking dance or piano lessons. Some of the things we consider just as part of childhood in America, a lot of the kids (in foster care) don't get those opportunities. Those are the things that can spark and interest or passion that can lead you down a positive path in your life.

"Our kids in foster care are sort of forced to grow up so quickly and think about and deal with some pretty adult issues and topics at a young age. So at camp, what we really want to do is just let them be kids. I think that's kind of the unique thing that Felix does. We really have the drive to focus on sparking that seed of joy and passion and excitement with our kids."

Beyond the camp, which is attended by about 500 foster kids each year, Felix also provides funding for children interested in pursuing various extracurricular activities. In the past, they have funded photography lessons, sports team costs, welding classes, and laptop purchases.

In total, Felix has served over 8,000 children in foster care, but there's always room to help even more. In the state of New York alone, there are currently over 25,000 children in foster care. On any given day, there are more than 443,000 children in the foster care system nationwide, according to the nonprofit child advocacy group Children's Rights. And of those, more than 80,000 are 15 years

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old or older and approaching a time when they will be aged out of the foster care system.

Too often, Jim said, these adolescents are faced with the uncertainty of where they will live once they age out of the foster care system. This leads many of the teenagers in foster care to drop out of school to find employment.

“Could you imagine being 16 years old and thinking, ‘in two years, I’m going to be on the street. So I need to quit school and get a job so I can pay rent because I don’t have a family.’” Jim said.

Those thoughts are why he is so passionate about helping in any way he can.

“I’ve been incredibly fortunate in my life,” Jim said, reflecting on the opportunities that were presented to him thanks to being adopted as an infant. “I’m really truly, truly blessed. I always had a family that told me that I could do anything I wanted – for my whole life. I just can’t imagine growing up without that support. So any tiny bit that I can do to help these kids who don’t have that, that’s what it’s all about.”



Photo credit: Lisa Nalven

Through his work in affordable housing, Jim has learned about projects – some of which are supported by government funding – that are dedicated specifically to providing housing for individuals who age out of foster care.

“I’d love to figure out a way to get Bellwether plugged into some financing of these transitional housing projects.”

In the meantime, his primary focus is on raising funds for the May 13 Dance This Way event. To learn more about The Felix Organization, the upcoming fundraiser, or to donate, visit DanceThisWay.org.

[Click here to link directly to Jim’s donation page.](#)