

# ANU FAMILY SERVICES

---

SAINT PAUL, MINNESOTA



## FINDING FOREVER HOMES

Anu Family Services (Anu) connects children in foster care with loving and stable families. Its culture of innovation is evident in its willingness to develop new relationships and partnerships and in its rigorous pursuit of evidence and data. Anu's attempt to not only improve its own outcomes, but also influence the field of child welfare, creates tools and guidelines that didn't exist before.

STORY BY MAYA BECK

“

**In order to  
do our work  
well, we have  
to follow the  
kids wherever  
they go... That's  
unheard of in  
our work. We  
follow the kids.**

— AMELIA FRANCK MEYER, Former CEO of  
Anu Family Services

**YEARS ACTIVE**  
Founded in 1992

**GEOGRAPHY**  
Minnesota, Wisconsin,  
Native Nations

**BUDGET**  
\$5,000,000+

**LEADER**  
Mechele Pitt

# INNOVATION

## ANU FAMILY SERVICES (ANU)

Anu finds permanent homes for youth by helping them develop lifelong, healthy relationships.

### BREAKTHROUGH

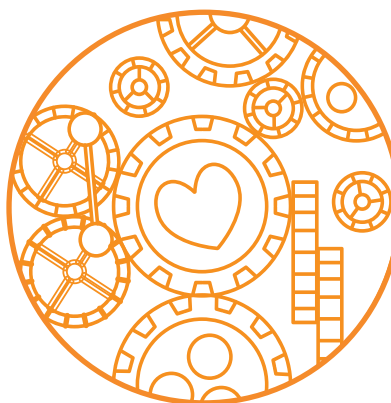


To revolutionize the child welfare system, Anu set an ambitious goal to be the last stop for a child before finding a permanent home. Thanks to a culture of creative problem-solving that includes the kids, Anu doubled its placement rate. Today, 70 percent of kids who come through its doors find their forever home.



### SETTING BIG GOALS

Anu flipped the foster care model on its head and transformed its business model to help more kids find permanent homes. To drive Anu's process and boost placement rates, the change required staff to rely on an unexpected group of experts: its kids.



### TUNING THE MACHINE

An organization is only as strong as its staff. Anu encourages its staff to practice self-care, take well days (not sick days) and participate in "stay interviews" (not exit interviews). Its staff is engaged, alert, healthy and renewed, allowing the team to fully support the youth they serve.

### ANU'S KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATION



**CONTINUES  
THROUGH  
SETBACKS**



**BUILDS  
RELATIONSHIPS**



**LISTENS  
ACTIVELY**

# A Big Hairy Audacious Goal

**A BLACK PLASTIC BAG.** That is what many foster children use to pack up their belongings before moving from one house to the next. The average foster child moves more than seven times before the age of 18. Biological relatives appear and disappear, are forgotten or unreliable. Promising foster families grow overwhelmed and give up, and give the kids back. Once they reach the age of 18, foster kids are on their own. Anu sets out to change this experience for foster kids by helping them find a forever home.

“

**It's commonplace now to recognize that kids in foster care have lots of trauma.**

— Anu Family Services stakeholder

---

# T

hrough an intensive process to transform its work, Anu declared an audacious goal: to serve as the last placement prior to a permanent home for 90 percent of its kids. This was unheard of in the foster care system. At the time, Anu's permanence rate was only 38 percent, and there was no business model to reach this new goal. Anu decided to work backward from the community need, even if it meant totally changing the way they did their work. Today, Anu has a permanent placement rate of 70 percent, double the previous rate of foster kids placed in forever homes.

Mechele Pitt, Anu's CEO, integrates TRIZ, a Russian problem-solving model, to find solutions.

(The acronym only works in Russian, but it roughly means "Theory of Inventive Problem-Solving," or TIPS.) It's a counter-intuitive way of working. The first step is to outline what one would do to make a child fail in the welfare system: over-medicating them, moving them from school to school, refusing to listen to their needs. This exercise highlights everything Anu should not do.

One of the central principles of TRIZ is the idea that one can develop creativity logically. Start with what's known about the problem, find similar problems in different fields and adapt the solutions in a way that suits the problem at hand.

- 
- Anu decided to work backward from the community need and committed to transforming its business model if necessary.
- 



#### ANU EXHIBITS RESOURCEFULNESS

Anu knows the intentional sharing of knowledge is one of the most effective ways to create new initiatives, like the Youth Connections Scale. Through research with the University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW), Anu discovered that there was no way to measure the quantity and quality of relationships kids in foster care had. So Anu commissioned CASCW to create, pilot and test a free, fast and youth-engaged tool that is now nationally recognized and used in the field.





ANU STAKEHOLDER

---



# SETTING BIG GOALS



## ANU VALUES EXPERTISE

Anu prioritizes the staff's feedback regarding what the organization is doing right or wrong. Anu's culture recognizes expertise throughout the organization and values all staff opinions. Its workplace provides multiple opportunities to collaborate and speak up, including monthly in-person meetings so that remote employees can participate in the decision-making process, and a flat management style that encourages feedback regardless of position.

Other organizations may focus on making the best decisions for the kids, but Anu's youth-driven process lets the kids determine their own needs and ideal living situations. Anu then works to make the living situation safe and healthy. Anu's "family finders" conduct an exhaustive search that flips the foster care model on its head. They let kids identify important adults as potential caretakers in possible permanent homes. Family finders lead in-depth searches to identify the adults most likely to value the welfare of the kids.

Anu consults the kids to identify positive role models who are already a part of their lives, such as teachers, caring neighbors and mentors. These connections may not be able to foster a child, but can provide support in other

areas. The goal is to develop a support network to ground the children.

Former CEO Amelia Franck Meyer explains, "In order to do our work well, we have to follow them wherever they go. They can move to Bemidji to a group home, and we show up there. If they wander away from the group home and they show up in detention in Iowa, we show up there. That's unheard of in our work. We follow the kids."

The kids have the power to hire and fire a caseworker who does not meet their unique needs. During frequent check-ins, Anu encourages kids to rate their satisfaction with their living situations. The older kids answer questions on cleanliness, trustworthiness and safety, grading



each from “A” to “F” on a report card. Younger kids select smiley faces or frowny faces in response to questions such as, “Do your parents do what they promise?” and “How does the food taste?” Anu uses the report cards to facilitate conversations between kids and their foster parents.

Anu also prepares prospective foster parents to be responsive

and compassionate. Anu offers 24-hour support, connects foster parents to peers and emphasizes the nature of their role as “healing foster parents.” Foster kids often have histories of abuse, neglect and trauma, which often result in behavioral challenges. Well-equipped foster parents will respond to their kids with affection, never punishment or control; Anu provides specialized training to build these skills.

“

**Most people tend to focus on one area; Anu has not been afraid to focus on everything.**

— Anu Family Services stakeholder



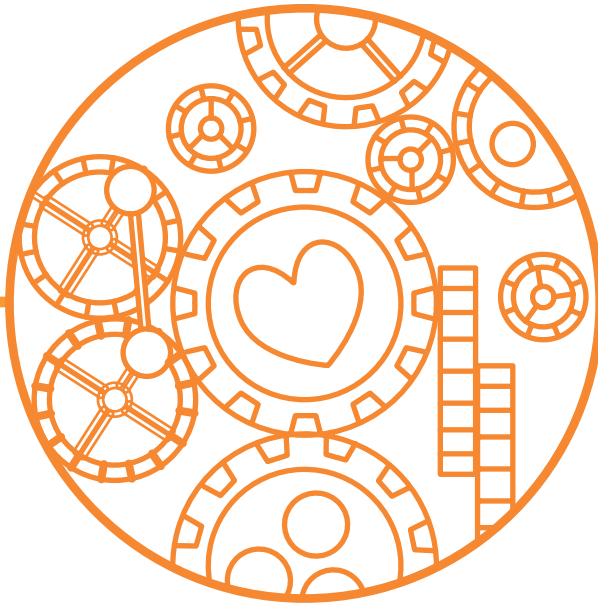
ANU STAKEHOLDER





MECHELE PITT, ANU

---



# TUNING THE MACHINE

Mechele sees Anu as a machine of many parts. It must be tuned and regularly checked to pass inspection. All of its components, whether staff or clients, must be in good working order. To support the children, the staff must also be healthy. Anu intentionally focuses on work culture to be more employee friendly.

Turning the tables on the exit interview, Anu holds one-on-one

“stay interviews” to investigate the reasons why workers choose to stay. It asks questions ranging from “What kinds of flexibility would be helpful to you in balancing your work and home life?” to “What talents, interests or skills do you have that we haven’t made the most of?”

Based on the responses, Anu will offer employees professional development opportunities or

“

## Why do you choose to stay?

— Question from Anu Family Services “Employee Stay Interviews”



invite them to use their photography skills to liven up the website. The final question is simply, “Why do you choose to stay?” Staying in a job as intense and emotionally demanding as foster care placement brings secondary trauma.

Staff can take “well days” off before they need a sick day. Anu also implements Employee Well-Being Scorecards that measure work/life balance, employee retention, vacation days lost, average tenure and other dimensions of health. The high marks these scorecards capture demonstrate Anu’s dedication to the mental and physical well-

being of its employees. Something as simple as self-care contributes to high employee engagement, low turnover and burnout, and less bouncing around for the staff as well as the kids they serve.

For Mechele, it’s about more than just fine tuning Anu as an organization; it’s also about transforming the child welfare system. From empowering kids to advocate for themselves, to focusing on everything that supports healthy kids, families and employees, Anu tamed its big, hairy, audacious goal and now more foster kids will have the forever homes they deserve.



#### ANU SHARES OWNERSHIP

There isn’t much hierarchy within Anu. The organization fosters a sense of ownership among its employees by embracing a flat management style. Employees at any level can give input on decisions at any level. Staff often receive face-to-face answers as equals. This ensures that resources of time are used effectively. There’s no time for bureaucracy or power struggles. In doing away with hierarchy, Anu also eliminates negative feedback from its work culture. “When you’re not worried about being punished, shamed or blamed, you can focus on creating better outcomes,” Mechele confirms.



ANU WORKSHEET



**When you're not worried about being punished, shamed or blamed, you can focus on creating better outcomes.**

— MECHELE PITT, Anu Family Services, CEO



**ANU STAKEHOLDER**



**MINNEAPOLIS-ST. PAUL SCENES**