

Why don't they become foster carers?

A study of people who inquire about foster care

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In response to concerns within the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria (CWAV) about the difficulty of recruiting foster parents, a study of the recruitment process experienced by Victorian inquirers was conducted. The literature consistently reports a low rate of conversion of inquirers into foster carers. This study was concerned with finding out the cause of this low rate, what happens to the inquirers after making a call and why they decide to continue or not continue with foster care?

Telephone interviews were conducted with 91 inquirers about their experience of the recruitment process. Only 4 per cent of these inquirers had become carers. The rest were split evenly between those who decided not to continue because of personal circumstances, and those who were discouraged in some way by the response to their contact received from the allocated agency. This result was surprising and disappointing, and we suggest that these callers may be a more valuable resource than agencies suspect. Ways of giving these callers more effective follow up, while recognising constraints on time and resources experienced by workers in this field, are needed to take full advantage of the opportunity to recruit the potential carers among them.

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Foster carers perform an invaluable role in the community, providing temporary short and long-term care for children unable to remain with their families. The struggle to recruit enough foster carers to fulfill the needs of the community is well understood by foster care agency workers, and has been frequently reported in the literature (Friedman et al. 1980, Lawrence 1994, Volard et al. 1993, Triseliotis et al. 1995). Agencies are constantly engaged in the process of finding more carers, often at high cost and with little success.

Since the 1960s, foster care literature has noted a shortage of foster carers, and that foster care recruitment is time-consuming and costly with few carers recruited compared to the amount of worker time invested (Lawrence, 1994, p38).

Typical recruitment strategies used by foster care agencies in Victoria include articles in local newspapers and school newsletters, posters at child care centres, letter-drops in the local community, paid advertisements, displays in shopping centres, and talks to community groups (Howe et al. 1991). In addition, a State-wide effort, titled Homesharers, is coordinated by the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria (CWAV) each year. This campaign includes television advertising, print media advertisements in major newspapers and magazines and cinema advertising.

In response to their recruitment efforts, a Melbourne foster care agency (North East Foster Care) reported a consistent rate of approval from initial inquiries of approximately 10% during the six year period 1985-91 (Howe et al. 1991). Similarly, Lawrence (1994) evaluated a

recruitment campaign in Sydney and found that of the 205 inquiries, only 17 new carers were recruited. The CWAV advised the researchers that over thirty three thousand dollars had been spent on their information campaign in 1996, but similarly, to the extent of their knowledge, no more than 10 per cent of callers who responded to the campaign had become carers.

Research on foster care recruitment has often focused on the marketing of foster care, and has led to a shift in the style of foster care advertising over the last thirty or forty years. Once advertising focused on the neglected younger child, often attracting people wanting to rescue children. It is now more common for advertisements to describe in more detail elements of the foster caring role. Agencies using this approach have reported that they are attracting more appropriate applicants (Pasztor & Burgess 1982). Recruitment messages in Australia have also changed, and now the term 'family' is avoided in advertisements as it has been found to discourage single people and childless couples from applying (Howe et al. 1991).

Research has explored other ways to improve the recruitment of foster parents. It is now commonly understood that recruitment is a long-term strategy and should therefore be a continual and persistent activity. As important as directly recruiting carers is the need to pursue overall community education and awareness of foster care (Pasztor & Burgess 1982, Lawrence 1994, Howe et al. 1991).

Negative aspects of current foster care strategies have also been identified. Pasztor and Burgess (1982) claimed that many agency practices hindered the

recruitment of foster parents. They found that staff shortages led to fewer staff members responding to inquiries, and that some agencies took as long as six months to review an application and complete an interview. Clearly this situation will frustrate the potential foster carer and raise questions about the agency, especially if it has advertised an 'urgent' need for homes.

Smith and Gutheil (1988) found that agencies tended to assume that the large loss of prospective foster parents during the recruitment process is a desirable and 'natural filtering mechanism', and that those who drop out of the process are not likely to be good foster parents. In a sense, this strategy results in only the most determined inquirers making it through the process. Similarly, Wolins (1963) found that agencies in the past were uncomfortable enforcing selection criteria and afraid of having to reject applicants. Agencies preferred that applicants to become foster carers 'self-selected', that is, dropped out of the process of their own accord. It may be, however, that this is a high risk strategy for selecting foster parents, since potentially good foster parents may not proceed because they do not feel encouraged to do so.

Researchers and agencies agree that recruitment is a difficult and constant job for foster care agency workers and that only a small proportion of inquirers become carers. There is no information in the literature, however, about the types of people who inquire about foster care and why they fail to become carers. In response to concerns within the CWAV about the difficulty of recruiting foster parents, a study of the recruitment process experienced by a group of Victorian inquirers was conducted. This study looks at the type of people who inquired about foster care following the statewide publicity campaign and at the process by which inquirers do or do not become carers. With this critical information, it may be possible to design more effective strategies for responding to inquiries and selecting foster parents and to suggest ways of making the process more productive.

METHOD

This study was in collaboration with the CWAV, and their representatives

assisted with the planning of the research, and the development of the questionnaire.

As a result of the massive publicity campaign which is conducted during September each year, the CWAV receives a large number of telephone inquiries. People who telephone the CWAV to inquire about foster care speak to an operator who gives them information, and takes down their name, address and telephone number. These details are then forwarded to a foster care agency selected on the basis of area and function. The list of names, addresses and telephone numbers of inquirers who called in September and October 1996 formed the basis of this study which was conducted in the first half of 1997.

Telephone interviews were conducted with the sample of inquirers. During the whole year of 1996, 2440 calls were received at the CWAV (Children's Welfare Association of Victoria 1996), with 731 of these coming in September and October. Inquirers who had non-metropolitan telephone numbers were excluded, due to cost constraints on the study. This exclusion reduced the number of callers in September and October to 468 and of these metropolitan inquirers, a random sample of 150 was selected.

THE RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

A letter of introduction was sent from the CWAV to the sample of inquirers. This letter made it clear that inquirers had the option of not taking part in the research. Very few inquirers phoned to say that they did not want to take part in the study, and of those inquirers the researchers were able to contact, a high proportion gave an interview.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire consisted of a total of 30 questions (both open-ended and closed questions) and took between 10 and 20 minutes to complete. There were 15 demographic questions, 9 questions related to the inquiry process, and 6 questions explored the participant's motivation for making an inquiry, as well as their beliefs and concerns about foster care. This paper reports findings relating to the demographic characteristics of participants and to the recruitment process.

Handwritten notes of the interviews were typed up and entered into NUDIST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing) (Richards & Richards 1991). Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data. All responses that could be coded were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social

Table 1 Geographic location of callers to the CWAV during Sept and Oct, 1996

Area	Number of callers (n %)			
	All callers	Sample	Respondents	Total
Western Melbourne	99 19.7	32 20.7	22 24.5	153 20.5
Inner Melbourne	47 9.4	14 9.1	10 11.1	71 9.5
North Eastern Melbourne	51 10.2	22 14.3	8 8.9	81 10.9
Inner Eastern Melbourne	65 12.9	20 13.0	17 18.9	102 13.7
Southern Melbourne	44 8.8	10 6.5	3 3.3	57 7.6
Outer Eastern Melbourne	63 12.5	20 13.0	11 12.2	94 12.6
Mornington Peninsula	133 26.5	36 23.4	19 21.1	188 25.2
Total ($\chi^2=9.8, p<0.05$)	502 100.0	154 100.0	90 100.0	746 100.0

Table 2 Sex, age, education, employment status and occupation of inquirers

Demographic	n	%	Demographic	n	%
Sex			Employment status		
Male	15	16.5	Employed	57	62.6
Female	76	83.5	Home Duties	19	20.9
<i>Total</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>100.0</i>	Social security	11	12.1
Age			Aged pension	3	3.3
Under 25	5	5.5	Student	1	1.1
26-35	48	52.7	<i>Total</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>100.0</i>
36-45	24	26.4	Occupation		
46-55	7	7.7	Professional/Managerial	14	25.0
56 and over	7	7.7	Administrative/Clerical	16	28.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>100.0</i>	Skilled/Tradesperson	3	5.4
Education			Sales	6	10.7
Primary or none	3	3.3	Semi/Unskilled	12	21.4
Secondary	58	63.7	Self-employed	5	8.9
Trade certificate	2	2.2	<i>Total</i>	<i>56¹</i>	<i>100.0</i>
University degree	28	30.8			
<i>Total</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>100</i>			

1: 1 missing value

Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. The Chi-square statistic was used as a measure of association between categorical variables, and a p-value of less than 0.05 was considered significant.

RESULTS

Of the one hundred and fifty people in the random sample of inquirers, 47 were excluded because they could not be contacted on the telephone numbers listed. Ninety-one of the 103 people who were located and contacted agreed to be interviewed, resulting in a response rate of 88 per cent of the group

contacted or 61 per cent of the sample overall.

As a surrogate measure of socioeconomic status, geographic location was used to determine if the sample was representative of all inquirers to the CWAV in September and October 1996. The sample was found to be representative in terms of geographic location (Table 1).

WHO INQUIRED ABOUT FOSTER CARE?

The demographic profile of the inquirers is shown in Table 2. The majority of callers were women

between 26 and 45 years of age. They had a high level of education, with 64 per cent of the callers having completed secondary education, and a 30 per cent having completed a bachelor or higher degree. A surprisingly high 63 per cent of the callers were working, with only 21 per cent of the sample made up of women engaged in home duties.

Household composition

While the majority of callers (65%) lived with a spouse or partner, over a quarter (26%) lived alone, and 9 per cent lived in a share household. Almost half of the callers (48%) had children at home (Table 3).

In most of the households with children in them (73%), the caller was living with a partner or spouse. Couples with children at home formed the largest group of inquirers followed closely by couples without children.

Ethnicity

The majority of the inquirers were born (72%) and raised (88%) in Australia. This resulted in only a small percentage (16%) of the respondents identifying with an ethnic group other than Australian and may indicate a problem with advertising campaigns. It could also indicate that some ethnic communities rely on their own informal arrangements to care for each other's children. Symons (1989) also reported difficulty in attracting carers from ethnic backgrounds.

THE SUCCESS OF THE CAMPAIGN

The CWAV assumes that calls during September and October originate from the promotion campaign that they run each year. In order to check the validity of this assumption, callers were asked to recall what prompted their inquiry to the CWAV. They were also asked if they remembered any other advertising around the time that they made the phone call.

Ninety-six per cent of callers were affected in some way by foster care advertising, with by far the most commonly remembered advertising being television advertisements (Table 4).

Table 3 Household composition by children at home

	Household composition (n %)				
	Couple	Live alone	Share	<i>Total</i>	
Children	32 72.7	11 25.0	1 2.3	44	48.4
No children	27 45.8	13 27.7	7 14.9	47	51.6
<i>Total (p>0.05)</i>	<i>59 64.8</i>	<i>24 26.4</i>	<i>8 8.8</i>	<i>91</i>	<i>100</i>

Table 4

Promotion recalled by inquirers

Type of promotion	Frequency	
	(n)	(%)
TV advertisement	68	74.7
Local community newspaper	17	18.7
Billboard or poster	8	8.8
Radio interview	7	7.7
Major daily newspaper	5	5.5
Leaflets	4	4.4
Total	109	119.8¹

1: Multiple responses allowed

Table 5

Furthest stage reached in recruitment process

Furthest Stage	n	%
No response to inquiry	2	2.2
Information in the mail only	43	47.2
Telephone call	19	20.9
Attended an information session	15	16.5
Preliminary Interview	6	6.6
Attended training	2	2.2
Awaiting first placement	1	1.1
Became a carer	3	3.3
Total	91	100

Table 6 Reason for not proceeding with foster care.

Reason for not proceeding	n	%
Personal circumstances	44	51.2
Agency did not follow up	23	26.7
Agency could not offer appropriate placement	12	14.0
Advised not to proceed by agency	7	8.1
Total	86¹	100

1: One person still trying to get approved, 4 approved

Response to inquiry

The callers had reached various stages in the recruitment process. Nearly half of the sample had received no personal follow-up to their inquiry, including two per cent who received no follow up at all, and 47 per cent who only received information in the mail. Only four per cent of the sample had been approved as carers between September 1996 and July 1997 (Table 5). This is lower than the 10 per cent approval rate suggested by the CWAV (Children's Welfare Association of Victoria, 1996).

Reasons for not proceeding

Ninety-six per cent of the callers had not become foster carers ten months after their inquiry. We were interested in the types of reasons callers gave for this lack of progress. Participants responded to the question, 'What happened as a result of the phone call you made to the CWAV late last year?' Answers to this question were coded into four categories: personal circumstances; lack of follow-up; inappropriate placements; and advised not to proceed by the agency (Table 6). For just over half of those who did not proceed, personal circumstances precluded them from becoming carers. For the other half, however, their lack of success in becoming carers was a direct result of the response they received from the CWAV or an agency. The response may have been too slow, discouraging or inappropriate in terms of what was offered.

Personal Circumstances

The types of personal circumstances cited by callers as the reason they dropped out of the recruitment process included: financial difficulty due to loss of home or job; family changes like a pregnancy or separation; or an unwilling housemate or child. Other callers became busy, or re-assessed their situation and decided that they were not ready or that foster care was not what they were looking for.

I explained to the agency, that due to unexpected change in our circumstances our home would be sold, and we no longer wanted to proceed with a placement. (4)

In the end I got pregnant, we didn't pursue it any further. (107)

We moved house, and it all seemed too chaotic at the time. (142)

I rang and told them not to put me on their list as I had changed my mind. I decided to apply for overseas adoption. (14)

Agency did not follow up

Twenty-seven per cent of inquirers did not proceed because they had no follow-up from the agency. Some saw it as the agency's responsibility to contact them about foster care and interpreted the lack of follow-up as a sign that they were not needed. Others contacted the agency themselves but still got no response.

I rang them two or three times. I kept getting put off, they said they would ring back and didn't. (109)

They took my name and details and said they'd get back to me. They never got back to me.... we just presumed that there wasn't the need for foster parents at that time. (138)

Nothing, we didn't hear from the agency. (115)

Agency could not offer appropriate placement

Fourteen per cent of inquirers could not get the sort of placement they wanted from the agency in their area. The agency may have offered children of the wrong age or sex, or available placements may have been of the wrong type.

The agency only had children that needed longer term care, not occasional or weekends. As I work and my mother looks after my own children it's not possible to have another child full-time. I think that this was a shame. (09)

Advised not to proceed by agency

Eight per cent of inquirers were advised not to proceed. The types of reasons they were given for not proceeding were varied. A young couple were discouraged because they had not started their own family, another because their children were too young, and yet another because they were soon to move into a new area.

We decided that we needed to get confidence first with our kids before we handled anyone else's. The

Table 7 Outcome of inquiry by reason for not proceeding

Outcome of inquiry	Reason for not proceeding (n %)					
	Personal		Agency		Total	
Information in mail only	23	51.1	22	48.9	45	52.3
At least telephone call	21	51.2	20	48.8	41	47.7
Total (p>0.05)	44	51.2	42	48.8	86 ¹	100

1: One person still trying to get approved, 4 approved

agency worker also strongly recommended to us we bring up our own kids first before we tackled others. (115)

A lady came out and talked to us, asked us questions. In the end she said because we are buying a house, we need to do it in the new place. Get a child in the new area. (33)

There was no association between the stage of recruitment reached by callers and the outcome of their inquiry (Table 7). Those who only received information in the mail, and no personal follow-up, were no more likely to drop-out because of issues related to the agency than they were to drop out because of personal circumstances. They were also no more likely to drop out because of agency issues than were those who received at least a telephone call from the agency. These results suggest that more follow-up is required than merely telephoning each caller, and that the quality of follow-up may be as important as the quantity.

The type of household the inquirers were from also had no impact on the reason they decided not to proceed with foster care (Table 8), suggesting that no one type of household is more likely to proceed than any other.

Callers' satisfaction with the outcome of their inquiry

When callers were asked if they were happy with the outcome of their inquiry, only 36 per cent said that they were (Table 9). Presumably those few people who became carers were satisfied with their inquiry, but who else in the sample was satisfied with their inquiry? In order to find out who was happy, the reason callers did not proceed with their inquiry was compared with their level of satisfaction (Table 9).

Eighty per cent of callers who said that they were happy were those who did not proceed with foster care due to personal circumstances. It appears that the style of follow-up offered to inquirers was appreciated by those people who chose not to proceed. It is safe to assume that people who chose not to proceed with their inquiry would not be concerned if agency staff did not contact them, instead being happy to make a decision in their own time. Comments made by this group in response to the question, 'What were you happy with?' included:

The information was received quickly and it covered all we wanted to know. Now I'm pregnant with our third child it was probably too much with three kids. (108)

Happy with the information and follow-up. If I wanted to go further I would have called. Couldn't offer more time. (35)

In the end it was alright because our situation changed and we felt we might not have the time and it may not be quite the right time. (63)

Being unhappy with the outcome of their inquiry was significantly associated with not proceeding because of the agency. Seventy four per cent of those who were not happy with the outcome of their inquiry, and 52 per cent of those who were somewhat happy, claimed to have not proceeded with foster care due to some problem with the agency (Table 9). Responses to the question, 'What were you unhappy about?' included:

The way my inquiry was dealt with. Advertising told of urgency, and the lady said she would call in a day. After a month I gave up. (109)

The social worker never came out as promised and I didn't feel like I should have to ring her back. They should chase me. I really felt that I didn't have enough information to proceed. (34)

It should have been made clear to us much earlier on that our needs could not be met. (55)

A phone call would have been good. It's a very personal service they are asking people to perform, a big commitment and they're looking for quality people. Wanted to talk through the issue, not just go to an anonymous meeting. (62)

Table 8 Household composition by reason for not proceeding

Household composition	Reason for not proceeding (n %)					
	Personal		Agency		Total	
Couple	28	50.0	28	50.0	56	65.1
Live alone	11	50.0	11	50.0	8	9.3
Share	5	62.5	3	37.5	22	25.6
Total (p>0.05)	44	51.2	42	48.8	86 ¹	100

1: One person still trying to get approved, 4 approved

Table 9 Reason for not proceeding versus satisfaction with inquiry

Satisfied with the outcome of inquiry?	Reason for not proceeding (n %)					
	Personal		Agency		Total	
Yes	24	80.0	6	20.0	30	34.9
Somewhat	12	48.0	13	52.0	25	29.1
No	8	25.8	23	74.2	31	36.0
Total (p<0.01)	44	51.2	42	48.8	86 ¹	100

1: One person still trying to get approved, 4 approved

Inquirers' suggestions to the agencies

Callers were asked if they would make any suggestions to the agency about recruitment. Two thirds (66%) of inquirers made a suggestion. Most (58%) of the suggestions related to some part of the recruitment process. For example:

I wanted to chat to someone, go beyond the letter, I know I missed the information evening but in my business, follow-up and customer service is important for success. I felt no-one was interested in what we had to offer. (74)

Perhaps after a period of time follow it up. There might be a reason, you don't just let go. (92)

I need more information on part-time and emergency care. I didn't know they existed. I need to be advised. (94)

There should be more positive follow up. We are still interested. (138)

Yes. Having someone ring you up.. talking to someone, even over the phone on a one-to-one basis, or even having an information line where you can talk to someone and find out yourself what fostering is all about, is, I feel, a better way than from a booklet or leaflet alone. (84)

A third of the suggestions made by callers related to the advertising of foster care. Some of the comments were:

More advertisements, people with foster parents talking about it on TV, real foster parents, not actors, like a documentary. (05)

More advertising, word of mouth, flyers in schools and doctors'

surgeries... Childless could apply for permanent care. Stipulate that permanent care is now available. Emphasise respite care for those not wanting total commitment. (12)

It wasn't publicised enough, only for a short time. (134)

Advertise on TV. (143, 50, 51)

Advertise in church newsletters and bulletins. (45)

THE SERIOUSNESS OF INQUIRERS' INTEREST IN FOSTER CARE

Howe et al (1991) found that the majority of people who proceed from initial inquiry to approval have been thinking about fostering for a while, and that those who do not proceed are those who impulsively respond to their first exposure to publicity. Therefore an important variable in this research was how long callers had been thinking about foster care. Over half the callers (57%) had been thinking about foster care for years, almost a third (31%) had been thinking about it for a number of months, and only 11 per cent had been thinking about foster care for less than a month (Table 10).

Contrary to theories about foster care, there was no evidence from the data collected that those who had been thinking about foster care for a long time were any less likely to drop out for personal reasons than those who had only been thinking about it for a short time (Table 11). This data shows that the kind of response the inquirers receive is not effective at separating the more committed inquirers from the less committed ones, instead each group is as likely to be discouraged from proceeding as the other.

DISCUSSION

It appears that there is no shortage of people interested in foster care. However, interested people need to be provided with adequate information about the role of the foster carer, assessed as to their suitability for the role, and encouraged to take on the job of fostering. This paper offers some insights into the failure of current recruiting strategies.

As expected, most of the inquiries made to CWAV about foster care in September and October 1996 were from callers responding to their very effective annual advertising campaign. However, two-thirds of the callers were less than satisfied with the outcome of their inquiry, mostly due to inadequate responses from foster care agencies or to the inability of agencies to offer appropriate placements. Many callers clearly felt discouraged by the agencies' lack of interest in their inquiry.

From the agencies' point of view it must be disappointing that despite an expensive and successful advertising campaign, only a small proportion of callers (13%) were actually interviewed and even fewer (4%) approved as prospective foster carers. It is clear from the findings of this study that the low number of approved foster carers arising out of the campaign was due not solely to inquirers' lack of commitment or changing circumstances.

Over half of the callers had been considering foster care for a number of years. Only a small proportion telephoned the CWAV solely in response to the advertising campaign, either impulsively or without prior thought and consideration. This study found that almost 42 per cent of callers did not proceed with foster care because of inadequacies in the follow-up to their

Table 10 Length of time considering foster care

Length of time	n	%
Days or weeks	10	11.0
Months	28	30.8
Years	52	57.1
Don't know	1	1.1
Total	91	100

Table 11 Length of time thinking about foster care by reason for not proceeding

Length of time thinking about it	Reason for not proceeding (n %)		
	Personal	Agency	Total
Days/weeks/months	22 57.9	16 42.1	38 44.7
Years	21 44.7	26 55.3	47 55.3
Total (p>0.05)	43 50.6	42 49.4	85 ¹ 100

1: One person still trying to get approved, 4 approved, 1 missing value

inquiry. Although not all callers would go on to become carers even if given appropriate follow-up, and if appropriate placements were available, the approval rate could certainly be increased.

The findings from this study support Pasztor and Burgess' (1982) finding that agencies often hinder recruitment endeavours. The inquiry process suited those people who decided not to proceed. It seems that for someone to become a foster parent, they would need to be determined, and to endure exceedingly slow response times and even discouragement. Of course it is not appropriate that everyone who inquires should become a foster parent, as it is a unique role, requiring specific attitudes and capabilities. It seems though that agencies create more work for themselves by neglecting and discouraging inquirers. Less time and money would be needed for advertising and recruitment if each caller were taken more seriously. Inappropriate inquirers are to be expected, but it is unlikely that as many as 96 per cent of callers would be inappropriate. Unfortunately, the scope of this study does not allow us to determine if the callers we spoke to would make good foster parents. It is clear, however, that agency staff did not assess this either. Many callers dropped out of the recruitment process before being interviewed, or attending training, due to a perceived lack of interest or need.

Lawrence (1994) noted in her evaluation of a recruitment campaign that recruitment was 'extremely time-consuming'. The task of recruitment was found to be difficult to integrate into case work. It is likely that staff time and resources are limited and other tasks are prioritised. However, it would appear from this study that more efficiency and consistency in follow up and attention to the form of the approach, should improve the conversion rate of inquirer to foster carer and reduce inadvertent attrition. This should in turn result in less advertising being required. How to carry out this follow-up in practice is a complex issue for agencies and funders and is beyond the scope of this discussion. But the results of this study clearly indicate the need to create a more productive recruitment process. □

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge the work of the other Monash University Masters students: Kym Arthur, John Wills, Diane Goeman and Effrosini Alexopoulos. We also thank Julie MacDonald from the CWAV, who provided much useful advice, co-operation and trust. Lastly we would like to acknowledge the inquirers who gave of their time for interviews, and talked openly about their experience.

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