

LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE + KEY INSIGHTS

w/ **Jessica Brandon**
*Conferences and
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Jessica Brandon brings more than 20 years of experience in nonprofit fundraising, event management, and organizational leadership to the National Center. As Conferences and Events Coordinator, she develops innovative and educational platforms that strengthen engagement, oversees mission-driven events that inspire action, and supports collaborative initiatives that bring people together around a shared purpose.

Before joining the National Center, Jessica built a career leading nonprofit fundraising and event initiatives, developing strategies that connected donors to mission-driven causes and supported long-term organizational growth. She has produced large-scale galas, capital campaigns, and community events that raised critical resources while inspiring collective action.

Jessica is also a foster and adoptive parent. Her personal experiences continue to shape her commitment to supporting children and families and reinforce her belief in the power of resilience, compassion, connection, and community.

The Power of Connection

Strengthening connection, learning, and collaboration that help improve outcomes for children and families.

What have you learned about the role connection and community play in creating meaningful change?

In my twenty-plus years as a Certified Meeting Professional (CMP), I've always believed there is something incredibly powerful about bringing people together. My role with the National Center is especially meaningful to me because, as a foster and adoptive mom, I've seen firsthand how important connection and community are for children and families.

I now get to plan the meetings where change happens, bringing together people with lived experience, professionals, advocates, and leaders to have conversations that can lead to real change in the lives of children and families.

I've learned that meaningful change doesn't usually happen because of one person or one big idea. It happens when people come together, learn from each other, and then take what they've learned back to their communities. That's where the ripple effect begins, and it's why connection and community matter so much.

What makes a learning experience memorable and impactful?

I have heard it said that people don't always remember what you say but how it made them feel. That goes for meetings and events, too.

I think the most memorable learning experiences are the ones where people feel connected, not just to the content, but to the people around them. Sometimes that connection starts with something incredibly simple: "Are you a coffee person or a tea person?" Finding even a small piece of common ground gives people an opening to let their guard down and let others in.

As an event planner, I think a big part of my job is creating an environment where that can happen. When connection questions, meaningful activities, and social interactions are intentionally built into a meeting, participants are more comfortable asking questions, sharing experiences, and being open to learning from one another.

As a foster and adoptive parent, how has your lived experience influenced the way you think about creating meaningful learning, engagement, and support opportunities for others? Is there an example you would be willing to share?

As a foster and adoptive parent, my lived experience has taught me that meaningful engagement starts with creating space for people to be heard. I've learned that people closest to an issue often have the clearest insight into what needs to change.

I've had the opportunity to participate in convenings that brought foster youth, foster parents, and birth parents together to talk about what children and families in the system truly need. I came into those conversations with my own ideas, but listening to the experiences and perspectives of others challenged my thinking and helped us find common ground.

Together, we turned those conversations into action, advocating at the California State Capitol for changes that would better support foster youth, including AB 1051, which strengthened continuity of mental health services for youth placed outside their home county.

That experience reinforced something I carry into my work today: creating meaningful learning and support opportunities means listening first, making room for different perspectives, finding a shared goal, and then acting together, one step at a time.