

Rise is a magazine by and for parents who have been involved with New York City's child welfare system (ACS). Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 2, FALL 2005

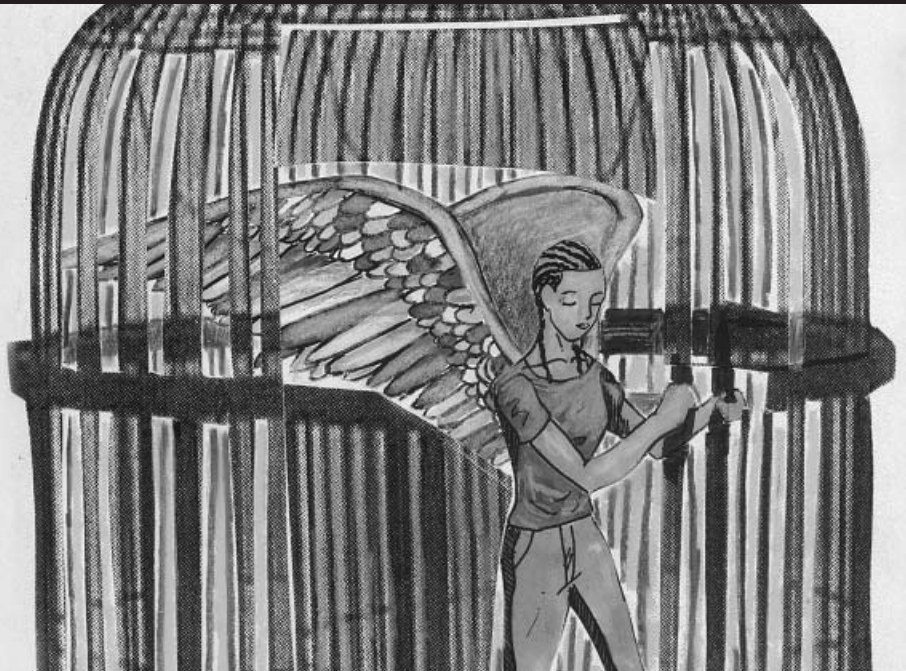
BY AND FOR
NEW YORK CITY
PARENTS

Recover and Reconnect

Many children enter foster care because their parents are struggling with an addiction to drugs and alcohol. It's very hard to stop using drugs or drinking, and rehab can be sad, painful and shameful. But parents can get help, reconnect with their children and reunite their families.

In their own words, parents who have gotten clean explain how they faced their pain and learned to love their sobriety.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARTELL BROWNYC



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True Stories by Teens

A Way Out

Getting arrested saved my life.

BY SANDRA JIMENEZ

One morning I woke up dope sick. I needed a bag of heroin. I said to myself, "I'm not just going to lie here sick." So I got up and went to a dope dealer I knew and told him to help me out with a bag. He said to me, "Here, do this bag and sell these."

I went in the bathroom and got my fix. That day the dope was very strong so I came out of that bathroom real high. I could barely see straight. I remember the dealer said to me, "Look how high and thin you look. You're a mess and even if I lose the hundred dollars, I hope the cops arrest you so you can get help, 'cause I know you're better than this."

From his mouth to God's ears.

'This Cat Set Me Up'

I had never sold dope on the

streets before, but it took only one time to get caught. This guy who I bought dope from every day came up to me. I said, "Yo, watsup, baby?" He said, "I'm really sick. Do you have anything on you?" I gave him two bags and he gave me a twenty-dollar bill. I put it in my pocket.

Everything that happened next seemed surreal, like a movie in slow motion. I was walking towards this girl who was being loud, attracting attention to the corner, getting it hot. I was ready to whip her ass when I looked back and saw cop cars making U turns, tires screeching, cops running towards me out of nowhere.

They caught up to me, slammed me up against a fence, and produced a marked twenty-dollar bill from my pocket. I was like, "Oh, no! This cat set me up.

But you know what? What that cat did to me saved my life.

I Had Never Felt So Much Shame

Before I got arrested, my family told me I needed a program. All I would say was, "I'm not locking myself up in no program."

But when I got arrested, it was like God smacked me on the head, sat me down long enough to get me sober, and made me take a look at my life long enough to ask myself: "What am I doing? What the heck is wrong with me?"

The day I went before a judge, I was at least 30 pounds underweight for my height, my hair looked crazy, I had two pairs of pants on thinking it would make me look fatter, and my cheeks were sunken in. I always looked like I was whistling. I looked

smoked out 'cause, oh yeah, I had a crack and alcohol problem, too.

When I looked up, who was sitting on the bench but a woman who used to be my co-worker. Yes, I used to work in the courts. Yes, I used to have a good job, a business, a marriage, a family, friends, I blew it all without even realizing it.

When that judge saw me, she had to take off her glasses and take a second look. She said, "Sandra?" in disbelief. I wanted the earth to swallow me. I had never ever felt so much shame.

All I could do was put my head down. I couldn't bring myself to look up throughout the whole arraignment. She remanded me to Rikers and set bail.

'God Don't Make No Junk'

When I called my lawyer four days later, she told me that the judge told her that I am a good person, a good mother and a good co-worker. The judge didn't understand what had happened to me but asked my lawyer to help me as much as she could. She said the judge said she loved me and was praying for me.

That was it. I broke down and all I could do was cry and cry, a deep cry that came from deep within my soul. I cried out to God and asked him to help me, that I couldn't stand myself any more and I couldn't stop using by myself. I saw myself as a waste, a loser, just like everybody in jail. And I said, "No. I will be somebody 'cause God don't make no junk."

I was sent to a drug-rehabilitation program where I stayed for 17 months. I knew rehab was where I needed to be. I was ready to surrender.

Pain From the Past

In rehab, I began connecting to the emotions that might have led me to use in the first place.

I learned that I used in order to medicate pain I didn't want to feel—especially memories of growing up with my mom.

One time during a group therapy, we were listening to a tape that asked us to remember how we felt when we were real little kids, up to 5 years old. Five years old was not a happy time for me. I had just come to this country, leaving my dad all the people I knew and loved back home in the Dominican Republic. I had left the familiar

warmth of my home, my country, its people.

Breaking the Cycle

I came to the U.S. to live with my mother, who abused me. In the session, I remembered being slapped and punched for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I remembered welts, bruises and broken lips. I remembered incest. I remembered being immersed in a tub of very hot water. I still felt very vividly the sorrow and the fear of being 5 years old.

For a few months after that flood of memories I was very depressed. Nothing made me happy. Every time I saw the therapist, I would chase her down and say, "Hey, when are you going to take me out of 5 years old?"

I kept going to counseling, though, and eventually I came out of that depression. Confronting my past helped me put it behind me. I learned that my past did not have to write my future. I could break the cycle. First I had to learn not to abuse myself. Then I had to accept that by living the life I was living, I hurt not only myself, but my children and my family.

Praying for My Daughter

At the time, I had eight kids. Some live with my mother and some live with my father because when I was using drugs, I was unable to care for them.

My eighth daughter, Mattie, was put in foster care just before I was arrested. After I had been in treatment for four months, they began talking about terminating my rights. I refused to believe that God had brought me this far to allow me to lose my daughter.

The people at the foster care agency, St. Christopher's Inc. helped me immensely. The first day I went there, my casework supervisor, Sid, said to me as I sat there scared to death and ashamed, "Forget about what you did in the past. It's what you do from today on that counts." That started a trust, because he didn't judge me.

Learning to Bond

While I was in treatment, I kept running to my caseworker to share with her my accomplishments: completing parenting, completing my vocational training, getting a job, getting my apartment. And she and Sid would say, "We're so proud of you. See, you're doing it."

'Forget about what you did in the past. It's what you do from today on that counts.'

Parents! We need you!

If you're in preventive services, have children in care, or have gotten your children back, we're interested in your story.

Work with an editor experienced in helping parents tell their stories. Make your voice heard.

Your experiences and insights can help others.

No experience is necessary. Se habla Español.

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Still, reunification is never easy, especially if your child was removed at birth. My daughter had become accustomed to the ways of her foster mom, and she didn't always want to be with me.

The hardest times were on weekend visits. She would cry for her foster mom all the time. I would wonder if it would always be this way. But I kept going to my visits and bonding with my daughter. And, on September 18, 1998, my daughter was returned to me.

Now every night when I get home from work, I feed Mattie and get us ready for bed. Then I put her in my bed and read to her a picture book and explain to her what the pictures are and what the colors are and ask her questions to see if she understands. I continue to read

until she falls asleep.

There Is a Way Out

After I got Mattie back, I also became a parent advocate at a foster care agency, helping other parents who were in the same situation I was in. I even became a special assistant to the executive offices. I have found a direction and a passion for helping others see that there is a way out.

I used to ask God why he kept me alive. But now I think that if I had not gone through all I've been through, I would not understand to the extent that I do and be able to reach out and help others. I'm not proud of some of the things I've done. But I'm willing to risk the shame to share if it will help one of you not walk a mile in my shoes.



ILLUSTRATION BY MARTELL BROWN / NYC

Home Training

In Family Rehabilitation Programs, your kids stay safe with you while you get help.

In the early 1990s, ACS created a nationally recognized program that gives drug-addicted mothers treatment while their kids stay home with them, instead of going into foster care. Mothers in Family Rehabilitation Programs (FRPs) attend drug treatment during the day and get intensive support, including nearly daily visits from a social worker.

FRP caseworkers are expected to bend over backwards to keep mothers involved in rehab—even if it means waiting in the morning at the door of a client's apartment and convincing her to attend treatment that day. "In the beginning, it's hard," says Joyce Russell Anderson, director of the FRP at Seamen's Society for Children and Families on Staten Island. "The workers are screamed at, cursed at, lied to, manipulated. It's horrible. If you don't have a good sense of self, you don't stay in business long."

'Porcupine to Teddy Bear'

But over time, parents see that FRP workers treat them with respect and unconditional acceptance. The parents pick up that if they talk about family skeletons, "we're not going to turn our backs on them or talk about them. We're going to hold them responsible and help them," Anderson says.

"Once we get a connection, the clients become wonderful people to be with," she adds. "I remember one woman who was really violent, incarcerated for assault a few times while she was here. I told her, 'You look like a nice person who's afraid to let anybody know you.' Over time, she went from being a porcupine to being a teddy bear."

About 70 percent of women who are addicted to drugs were sexually or physically abused as children; research shows that they do best in programs for women only, where they can open up about the issues that led them to abuse drugs. "You have to touch on that for it to be real recovery," Anderson says. "When I look at the parents who come in, even though they're adults, when I look at them I see children who are hurting and have withdrawn, who got caught up and fell through the cracks, and never had someone say, 'I believe in you.'"

The Mommy Role

Most of the mothers also grew up in chaos, so on home visits social workers teach parents every aspect of caring: This is how you hold a child, feed a child, give warmth and nurturing, says Elaine Caraccioli, a supervisor at Family Consultation Services, an FRP in Queens Village. "When women are starting treatment is the time to be nurturing, to play the mommy's role and help them get on their feet," she adds. "Over time we wean the women from being dependent on a social worker's mothering. Then they have to do the mothering themselves."

Family Rehabilitation Programs are surprisingly successful at keeping moms off drugs and kids out of care. A 1999 study found that FRPs had higher success rates than traditional treatment and that few children in FRP care ended up in foster care. Seaman's Society deals with 30 families a year and sends children from only about two families into foster care each year. Likewise, the Family Consultation Center sends only 10 children out of 200.

Even so, only about 1,000 of the thousands of ACS-involved parents with substance-abuse problems get help at FRPs.

One Step at a Time

How you can recover from your addiction.

BY ROSITA PAGAN

In November 1999, ACS sent me to Women Connect, an outpatient substance abuse treatment program affiliated with Lincoln Hospital to deal with my drinking problem. It turned out to be the beginning of a new life for me.

I was blessed with Ms. Angela Torres, my substance abuse counselor. Now I've been clean for five years. Last month, I was even hired as a parent advocate at Children's Village, a foster care agency. To find out how other parents get help with their addictions and get their kids home, I went back to Women Connect and spoke with Ms. Torres. She explained the steps of recovery to me.

1. Face Your Addiction

Ms. Torres said that addiction is a habit that takes over your life. Even though you're aware that a certain behavior—like drinking, using drugs or even staying in an abusive relationship—has negative consequences, you repeat the behavior anyway. You're always doing the same behavior and expecting different results.

The first step toward ending an addiction is breaking denial, Ms.

Once you get sober, your thinking gets clearer, your behavior gets better, and the counselors can begin to see all the strengths and skills you have.

Torres said. Denial is what allows the problem to take over your life. You don't keep using drugs if you're aware that it's hurting you and your family. "Once denial is broken, there are possibilities," Ms. Torres said.

Ms. Torres said it's usually easiest to break parents out of denial when their kids are in a foster home.

"When the children are given to a relative, the parents say, 'I haven't lost them really,'" she said. "It's much harder for the parents if they have to say, 'I don't know where my children are.'"

When I first went to Women Connect, two of my daughters were in foster care and my son was living with my sister. Even so, I was totally in denial about my alcoholism. "In the beginning, you were not compliant at all," Ms. Torres remembered. "Many times you came in under the influence."

Ms. Torres gave me tough love. After three months, Ms. Torres told me, "Go home and pack your underwear. You've hit rock bottom and it's time for you to get up."

She sent me to inpatient detox and rehab upstate for 35 days. When I went back to Women Connect to continue outpatient treatment, facing Ms. Torres without my mask of anger was overwhelming. But she was happy for me. She said, "I knew there was a good person under all that drinking."

2. Face Your Pain

One thing I didn't like about recovery was that I had to talk about my childhood. I asked Ms. Torres why treatment often brings up the past. "Because childhood issues are often the reasons why people turn to drugs," she said.

How people treated you in your



ILLUSTRATION BY EMILY DINAN

household, and how they treated each other, can set you up for feeling bad about yourself. "If you don't value yourself, then you don't care what happens to you," she said.

Addiction is about using something outside of ourselves to feel complete, whether it's alcohol, a drug, a person, money, or something else, she told me. You shouldn't have to rely on something outside of yourself to feel good.

3. Discover Hope

Once denial is broken, counselors try to help you see that your life can be better. "We give people some sense of hope that they can achieve things for themselves and their children," Ms. Torres said.

It helps that, once you get sober, your thinking gets clearer, your

behavior gets better, and the counselors can begin to see all the strengths and skills you have. Once I'd been sober for a month or so, I started feeling better about myself. I told myself, "I have to get my family back. I'm not worthless. I can accomplish things if I make an effort."

Ms. Torres told me about another client of hers who was resistant like me. We'll call her Brenda. Brenda was using marijuana and her mother was taking care of her.

When Brenda came to Women Connect, she was not compliant and ended up getting discharged. Then she made a complete turnaround. Ms. Torres thinks that happened because Brenda's mom got fed up. She told Brenda, "Here's your children. I'm not taking care of them."

At first, Brenda started using even more because she was stressed out. Then ACS got involved and Brenda returned to rehab. “We did an intervention kind of thing like, ‘If you have no problem, then why do your kids need to be with your mother? Why is ACS involved?’” Ms. Torres told me.

Once Brenda faced her addiction, she changed. “She was a real hard worker, a real go-getter,” Ms. Torres said. Brenda stuck with rehab, got her GED, got her kids back, got her driver’s license, started driving school buses and is now hoping to go to college.

4. Face Your Children’s Pain

Many times parents don’t believe their addiction hurt their children. “They say, ‘I feed my children. I don’t leave them home alone,’” Ms. Torres said. “But I don’t think feeding your children is really enough.”

Ms. Torres says she confronts parents first with the less severe kinds of neglect, saying things like, “If your kids are giving you so much trouble, what role are you playing in making that happen? Something’s missing in your child’s life when they act out. Remember how you felt as a child when you acted like that? That’s how they feel.”

One painful thing is that, once parents get clean, their kids (especially their teenagers), “can get really nasty,” Ms. Torres said. The kids want their parents back, but they also have so much anger.

Ms. Torres told me about one client who brought her daughter to the program once a week. “Her daughter spoke to her like she was a piece of nothing.” Ms

Torres told me. “We had to say to her, ‘Look, we know what your mother did. But you have to treat your mother like a parent while you’re here.’”

5. Change Your Future

To start having good relationships with their children, families and partners, Ms. Torres said parents need to learn to set boundaries. Boundaries are rules that protect you and others, that make you and other people in your life feel safe.

When a parent is addicted, she doesn’t set any boundaries, like curfews or chores for her children. If your kid was coming in and out of the house at any time while you were drinking, you need to start setting boundaries by saying, “I wasn’t aware of that when I was drinking, but now you need to be home by 9 p.m. or you’ll be facing consequences.” And you don’t set a boundary unless you stick to it. You’ll lose face.

Parents can also connect with their children by talking frankly about the past and giving their children hope for a better future. “Saying, ‘Look what I did. I don’t want that for you.’ Or, ‘Now I know how to be different, and I’m trying to be here for you more than my parents were for me,’ can show your kids that things can be different and better,” she explained.

Ms. Torres told me that she believes everyone can get to recovery if they work hard. “We give people the opportunity, and they have to run with it. And it works. We do reunite a lot of families,” she said.

Reunifying Without Relapse

Kim Sumner-Mayer, a project manager at the Children of Alcoholics Foundation, has helped treatment providers, courts and individual parents handle reunification and relapse. Here she explains how you can prepare to get your children home:

Parents often relapse right before kids come home or right after because they fear they’ll fail as parents. It’s a devastating experience. But it can be prevented by looking at the ambivalence—or mixed feelings—that parents feel about becoming parents again, and by preparing parents better to take that step.

It’s Normal to Be Nervous

All parents worry about whether they can do a good job, and many are not always sure they want to parent. If you’re a parent who’s messed up in the past, you might feel happy, ambitious, and excited about your kids coming home, but also worried, resentful of some of the demands of parenting, and unsure if you can handle everything while staying sober. Some parents who got pregnant while using may also question whether they really wanted to be a parent.

Close to 100 percent of families who are reunifying after drug treatment have these feelings. From research and work with families, we know that mixed feelings usually come from three sources. Parents often think:

- 1) “I’m not sure I have a strong enough bond with my children. We’ve been separated, and I wasn’t taking full care of them while I was addicted.”
- 2) “I’m not sure I have the skills to parent my children.”
- 3) “I’m afraid that the stress of parenting full-time will lead me to relapse.”

Practice and Gain Confidence

Usually, there’s very little opportunity for parents to surface those feelings, acknowledge them and work through them. That’s because parents feel a lot of shame about those feelings, and they fear that a caseworker will take mixed feelings as a sign that a parent’s rights should be terminated. But just because you have mixed feelings doesn’t mean you’re not motivated. (Besides, staying in your children’s lives doesn’t always mean having them home 24/7.)

Talk with a treatment counselor or caseworker about your fears and make a plan for facing them before reunifying with your children. For instance, if you feel you don’t have a strong bond, you should get help using your visits to establish and strengthen your bond. You can learn ways to get closer to each other.

If it’s a skills issue—maybe you’re not sure you can cook dinner for three kids, help them all with homework and get them all in bed at night. In that case, visits should be designed to allow you to practice skills like cooking and helping kids with schoolwork. Then you’ll gain confidence.

If you’re fearing relapse, you might want to join aftercare groups or support groups for parents in recovery who are reunifying. There are solutions. There are ways of getting at what’s behind your fears and overcoming them.

On the Case

Jessica Marcus, a staff attorney in the Family Law Unit at South Brooklyn Legal Services, explains the rights and responsibilities of parents seeking drug treatment.

Q: Will my kids be put in foster care if I tell someone I need treatment for a problem with drugs or alcohol?

A: If you go to a treatment program, they shouldn't open a case. If you go to a preventive services program for help with a drug addiction (or any other issue), they will open an ACS case. That doesn't mean there will be a case against you or that your children are in any danger, but it does mean that ACS will have information on your family in its files.

Parents should know that by going to any social service agency, they will come into contact with "mandated reporters"—people who have to report child maltreatment to the state central registry. But legally, simply having an addiction is not enough to remove a child. For your children to be removed, there would have to be "imminent risk," meaning that ACS believes the child is in immediate danger at home.

Q: If I have an ACS case, can I choose the kind of treatment I get?

A: Whether you get inpatient or outpatient treatment should be decided between the parent and ACS and the agency. If you know of a good program that you'd like to attend, you should definitely discuss that with your lawyer or caseworker.

There are two types of treatment programs that allow you to get help while living with your children. Mother-child programs allow you and a child to live together in a treatment facility. Family Rehabilitation Programs (FRP) allow you to get outpatient treatment and other services while living at home with your children. FRP and mother-child programs are

proven, effective forms of treatment, but many people working in child welfare do not know about them. If you want those treatment options, speak up.

Q: If I attend inpatient rehab, will I lose my housing?

A: Parents who go to residential treatment very often lose their housing. Unless you can pay for treatment, the program is probably going to require you to be on public assistance, and public assistance will pay the rent allowance portion of your budget directly to the program. If you can, talk to a housing lawyer to find out how to retain your housing.

If you think residential treatment is the only thing that will help you,

If you know of a good program that you'd like to attend, you should definitely discuss that with your lawyer or caseworker.

getting help should be your primary focus, but if there's any way to retain your housing and get effective treatment, you should try that.

Q: Can I switch to a different treatment program if I don't like mine?

A: I can never say that ACS won't use something against a parent, but if a parent has a good reason why another program will be better, she should say so. If you keep switching

over and over again, it might look like you're avoiding something, though.

Q: Do I get visits with my kids even if I'm in a residential treatment program?

A: Yes, you should have visits with

your kids no matter what. The foster care agency has a responsibility to arrange visits that work.

Q: Once I complete rehab, will I get my kids back right away?

A: Not always. Sometimes there's just administrative delays—a parent has done everything but can't get ACS and the agency to pay attention. Housing can cause a delay.

Sometimes there are other steps in your service plan, like therapy or parenting programs.

Sometimes programs don't consider you finished unless you have a job and an apartment, and it's not always easy to fit in a job with the other requirements of a case, like service plan reviews, visits and court dates.

If a program says you're not officially graduated, you should argue that you finished the treatment portion and are working on finding a job, but in the meantime, your children should come home.

Q: Will my children be removed if I relapse? How should I handle a relapse?

A: If a parent relapses and needs help, she should ask for help. Getting help should be the first consideration. Call your sponsor or someone you identified during treatment as supportive. They should understand that relapse doesn't necessarily mean the children are at risk. It's part of recovery.



ILLUSTRATION BY ROSA PERIN

'I Want My Life Back'

Crack was a mind shattering experience. All my problems went away. It was like a jolt, a sensation that was unbelievable. It took me on a cloud and made real life disappear. It only lasted for about five minutes, but then I wanted to go again and again.

Soon I realized I couldn't stop when I wanted to. I was afraid of who I was becoming. I started running out of money and couldn't always get enough for my kids to eat. And crack made me isolate myself from everyone. I just wanted to be in the house by myself, smoking.

Finally, I decided my drug use was out of hand. I told the judge in family court that I needed help with my drug addiction. The court sent me to the Family Treatment Program, where I joined a group for fathers

Sharing my feelings helped me see that I wanted my life back, especially my kids, and helped me make a plan for my future.

who had drug problems. It helped to see other men going through the same things I was going through. I also went to a program called Trinity House. There I talked about my innermost feelings.

At the time I was feeling the lowest about myself that I've ever felt in my life. I felt like a failure, an irresponsible parent. I felt suicidal. It seemed like life had no meaning anymore. I felt lonely, abandoned, lost.

I told the group how I got there, how

my drug use took over my life, how I lost my kids and my apartment. I shared about my childhood, my love life, my job. The things I shared with them I had never shared with anyone. Sharing my feelings helped me see that I wanted my life back, especially my kids, and helped me make a plan for my future.

Trinity House taught me how to stay away from the people, places and situations that triggered me to use. They made me feel like part of something—a family—again. I loved



ILLUSTRATION BY JULIE PROHM

the program and the people who gave me confidence in myself.

I feel proud of myself when I look back at how I hit my bottom in life and rose back up to stand tall and be strong in times of desperation and adversity.

—Clarence Davis
4 years clean

Beating Temptation

I tried many times to remove crack from my life. It was hard, very hard, because it was all around. My sister got high. My neighbors got high. Yes, I lived in the projects. With all 21 floors, I could get high in at least 15 different apartments.

People would come to my house asking me to get high with them, or yell from the window, "Robin, come upstairs for a minute." Temptation would lead me to whomever was calling my name. Depression and misery were no help. They took me deeper and deeper into a hole filled with drugs and alcohol.

Often I thought about trying to get rehab, but I thought that if I told someone, "I'm using crack," they'd put my kids into foster care. Once you let the system into your life they can do whatever they want to your family. Since I didn't want to lose my children, I just kept trying to stop using crack on my own.

I learned that, despite my past, I can cope without drugs or alcohol. I'm a loving person who has a lot to offer to others, especially my children.

Eventually, I lost my kids anyway and ended up in a shelter, where I learned about a residential drug treatment program called Willow Project Return. When they asked if anyone was interested in going, I raised my hand like I was in elementary school and said, "Ooh, ooh. I wanna go!"

I went to a neighbor's to get high for the last time. Then I checked myself into rehab for six months.

At Willow, I began to recognize that my addiction was connected to my depression, and to pain I felt in childhood. My parents were strict and hardworking, but they weren't the type to say, "I love you," and when

my mother got angry, she'd hit me with a belt and anything else handy. And for three years, starting when I was 11, I was sexually abused. That was a horrible experience for me.

At Willow, I learned that despite my past, I can cope without drugs or alcohol. I realized that I'm a loving person who has a lot to offer to others, especially my children.

I felt comfortable expressing my feelings at Willow. I could talk about what I was going through because the staff were ex-addicts. They kept me motivated and busy. When I started to feel down on myself, the groups and chores took my

mind right away from my negative thoughts.

Sometimes I thought about the people I used to get high with and knew that's what they were doing at that very second. I thought about the places I used to go to get high and knew that at least one person was there getting high. Then I thought about how getting high kept me from getting the things I needed and wanted—an apartment so my children would have a home to live in, and money in my pocket for things we needed.

When I graduated, we had a ceremony. We lit candles and knelt to say a prayer. I said, "If I ever get high again, make this light blow up in my face." Later, at times when I did want to get high, I'd picture that.

—Robin Wiley
12 years clean

Conflict Resolution

Naomi Weinstein, director of Phoenix House's center on addiction in the family has been training substance abuse treatment providers to better understand child welfare issues. Here, in her own words, she explains how the training will help parents.

Treatment and child welfare don't usually get along too well. In treatment, the client is an adult and your sympathies and work are to advocate for the client. In child welfare, the social worker is concerned with the child. That leads to conflict, because parents and children may not have the same interests.

Then there's media scrutiny. Every single thing ACS does has the potential to land on the front page and for people on the case to get fired. Treatment people don't understand why ACS is so cautious. If a mother in a treatment program relapses and harms her child, ACS will be blamed by the media, but no one wonders what that treatment agency was doing.

We're trying to fix things so that parents in treatment are not caught between two conflicting systems.

Finally, many treatment professionals were once addicts who had their children removed in the past. They haven't gotten past that, for good reason.

There's been a lot of hate on both sides. We're trying to fix that, so parents in treatment are not caught between two conflicting systems.

Training and Changes

Now substance abuse agencies are going through rigorous train-

ing. We talk about everything: ACS' policies, legal systems and structure, the Department of Child Protection, contract agencies and preventive services, family court, confidentiality issues, and special issues like visiting policies, housing, adolescent development, trauma, domestic violence and permanency options.

I've seen treatment providers make a lot of changes.

We have one agency that's building an outpatient treatment facility. After we talked about visiting, they stopped the architecture plans midstream and said, "Let's make this child friendly." They realized they needed things like private visiting rooms.

Another guy heard the presentation on visiting, and was so moved. He was like, "We're doing this all wrong!" He went back to his desk and wrote a policy on visitation. It was amazing!

Flipping the Script

Now we're trying to start a reverse program—training about treatment and drugs for the foster care agencies.

I want foster care agencies to

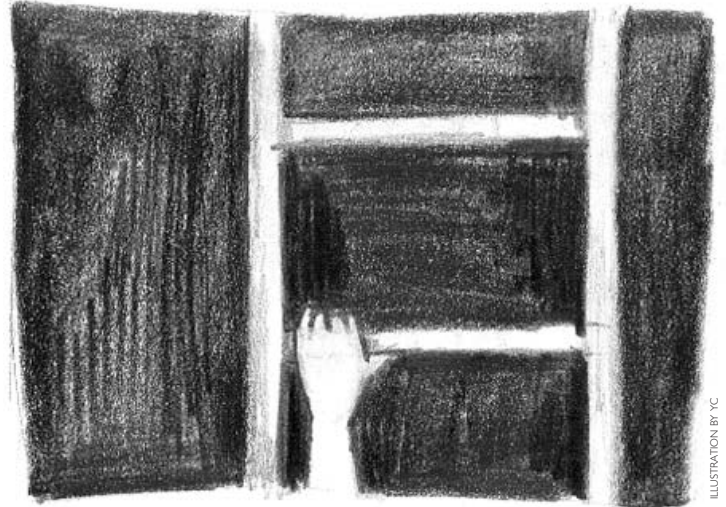


ILLUSTRATION BY YC

better understand treatment options so they can refer parents more intelligently. In the old days, you'd go into a child welfare agency and they'd say, "You need treatment! Here's a list." They'd give you an outdated list of placements and phone numbers and you'd go on your merry way!

If the parent actually made it to a treatment program. The program might say, "You've already tried outpatient seven times! You need long-term residential!" That's changing, but referrals could be a lot better.

I'd like child welfare agency staff to visit treatment programs, learn what it's like, what do they do, what might be best for certain parents.

They also need to understand issues that affect reunification, like relapses. What does it mean when a parent relapses just before reunification? It means

they're scared out of their wits. Child welfare agencies need to ask: Why? How can we make this work?

New Standards

I'm hoping this training will build connections so that when child welfare workers and drug treatment workers have questions, they know who to call. The child welfare worker might say, "I don't understand why it's so hard to get off methadone. Let me call someone at Phoenix House." Or the treatment provider might say, "How come these people are talking family preservation? This parent is nowhere near ready for that."

Now the child welfare system is going to make it a priority to work with drug treatment providers who have gone through this training. We're working on setting standards for "child welfare friendly" treatment providers, so parents end up there.

A Second Chance

My mom's addiction hurt me, but we've found a way to be close.

BY KAREN HAYNESWORTH

When I was little I would sit in my room and wonder why my life was not like other children's. I would see kids with their parents, doing things that my mother would not do with me, like going to the park and shopping, and I would feel sad.

My mother and I did those things together when I was very young. But once I got a little older she would just come and go.

My grandmother usually looked after me when my mother wasn't there. I often asked my grandma, "Where is Mom?" She would not answer me. It was the same thing day after day.

'Your Mother Takes Drugs'

Then one day I saw my mother and I asked her to stay with me. My mother said, "I have to handle some business."

I asked, "Handle what?" She ignored me and left.

I turned to Grandma. "Grandma, what business does Mom have to handle?"

She said, "Your mother takes drugs."

I didn't know what to say.

She continued, "I'm tired of not saying nothing. You were going to find out someday."

I always wondered why my mother was not taking care of her responsibility to raise me. Now I knew. But I didn't like the information. I began to get upset. I felt that my mother didn't want me as much as she wanted her drugs. If she did, she would not be spending more time with them than me.

My Heart Felt Complete

Soon my mother's addiction got worse. Every night she came home



high or drunk and I could tell. She would stutter her words and be hard to understand. Then, when I was 9, my grandmother was no longer able to take care of me, so the city decided to put me in a foster home, and over the next few years I moved from home to home.

At first, I saw my mother every two weeks. I was always excited to see her at our visits. She would be at the agency first to surprise me, and would bring me lots of toys and gifts. When it was my birthday, she had a birthday party for me at the agency. She decorated the room with balloons and I had a big cake.

It felt so good to see her. Whenever my mother was around me, something in my heart felt complete. My mother never missed a visit and she always said she loved me no matter what.

But when I was 11, she stopped

coming. Later I found out that she hadn't been attending her court dates, and she lost her rights to see me. But at the time I did not understand what was wrong. All I knew was that my mother stopped showing up. This was the hardest time for me.

'I'm Sorry'

Luckily, when I was 13, I moved in with my cousin, Michelle. My cousin did many wonderful things for me. She became my role model. But maybe most important, Michelle allowed me to have a relationship with my mother, even though I wasn't supposed to visit my mother.

The first time my mother came to my cousin's apartment, I gave her the biggest hug and kiss. It was like a part of my heart had been cut, but when I saw her it healed.

As we spent more time together, I started to tell my mother about the

problems I had to face in the foster homes. I wanted her to know what I had been through. She got upset any time I told her they mistreated me. She said, "I am sorry you had to go through this."

We also talked about the problems she had to deal with. I learned that what started her on drugs was that some of my brothers died in a fire before I was born. She couldn't take the pain and turned to drugs.

My mother admitted that she had a problem with drugs and told me she struggled to get clean. I respected her for saying that and it meant a lot to me to hear. Some people who are addicted to drugs won't admit it's a problem. Some won't own up to how their problem has hurt their children. My mother did both.

Willing to Fight

Since then, my mother has gone to a drug program and recovered from doing hard drugs. I know it was hard for her because getting away from drugs is not that easy for anybody, but she was willing to fight. She still smokes weed on occasion, but stays away from the rest.

Somehow I have managed to not hold a grudge against her for not being able to raise me, maybe because she seems truly apologetic that she couldn't do it for me, and because I understand a little bit about the pain she was going through with my brother's deaths that made it hard for her to cope.

We have a good relationship and it's still growing. We see each other every weekend. I let her know I forgive her for what she did, even though I will ever forget what happened and what I've been through. I believe God has given our family a second chance to start over and be close.

My Little Angel

I promised my daughter that I'd beat my crack addiction to mother her. It took a few years, but I did it.

BY SYLVIA PEREZ

When I got pregnant in January, 1999, my husband, Hector, told me I needed to stop smoking crack if I wanted this baby. Four months later, I finally stopped.

I'd had four children before Lydia, and lost them all to foster care. I was determined to do right by my daughter. Before I went to the hospital to give birth, I even changed my last name so that when the hospital social worker cleared me for discharge, my past ACS cases wouldn't come up.

My Little Angel

When Lydia was born on Sept. 22, I was so happy. She was 7 lbs. 7 oz. and born clean.

That day I made a promise to Little Mama (that's what I call her) and to myself that I would always take care of her. I knew it would be hard because my craving for crack was always in the back of my head.

It turned out to be a lot harder than I'd thought to keep that promise. But I still think of Lydia as my little angel. I've been able to make my life much better since she was born.

When I was 5 years old I was abandoned by my birth parents and adopted by a couple who changed my name to Lori Anderson and physically, sexually and emotionally abused my sister and me. I had no memory of my birth family. But when I was 10, my sister told me my real name was Sylvia Perez.

Alone and Ashamed

I started using drugs when I was 11 years old. First it was alcohol and cigarettes. By the time I was 14 I was sniffing cocaine, smoking marijuana and drinking. I was thinking a lot about why my real mom left

me. Soon I ran away to look for my mom.

Over the next few years, I ended up in a shelter, different foster homes and girls' homes, and locked up for nine months because I stole \$2 from a social worker's purse. By the time I was 17, I'd come to New York City with an abusive boyfriend. We started smoking crack and dealing it as well. I used because I never felt loved.



Little Mama frosts cupcakes she baked with her mom.

Every year on my birthday I feel so alone, without a mom or dad to call and say, "Happy birthday, Sylvia. I love you."

My birthday came when Lydia was about a month old. I felt anxious and depressed. Hector and I thought it would be OK to use just that once, because we could leave Lydia with his sister and have a fun night that didn't put her in danger.

So we took the train to Harlem to buy the drugs. It was dark and on the way to the building I was nervous,

with my stomach twisted in knots. I spent \$150 in one shot. Then we jumped in a cab to go to a hotel.

Weak With Temptation

I regret that night 'til this day. Now I see that I was weak with the temptation, and that all that money went to waste. I could have spent it on the baby, buying her clothes or little toys. But I let my selfishness and addiction take over.

After that, I started smoking again.

Never Again

I will never forget her little face on the day of our first visit. I could see that she was tremendously hurt. All I could do was grab her and cry with her. I was so sad that my selfishness hurt her so much. That day I made a new promise that I've been working hard to keep: that I would never again be selfish in a way that would hurt her or my family.

After Lydia got taken, Hector and I were desperate to find out what we had to do to get her back. We went to a conference at the foster care agency. Hector and I had asked my sons' adoptive mother, Tamara, to come with us. I hoped that Lydia could be placed with Tamara instead of with strangers.

The caseworker asked Tamara if she could take Lydia that day. "Yes, as long as Sylvia and Hector do what they have to do to get her back," Tamara said. I was so relieved.

Treated Like a Criminal

After that we discussed the case plan. We had to complete a drug treatment program, do domestic violence counseling and Hector had to go to anger management.

I felt angry at the conference. It felt like ACS treated me like a criminal. The caseworkers never looked at me directly. They were hard on me about my drug abuse, and they made Hector and me sign a contract saying that we would meet their demands.

I was very angry at myself, too. It was just unbelievable that I had put myself through this ordeal again.

I Am a Good Person

After that meeting, Hector and I went to Lincoln Recovery Center (an

outpatient program) in the Bronx. We were required to do a urine test every day for one year, five times a week.

In the beginning of rehab I was totally uncomfortable being with other addicted women and their attitudes. But I learned a lot in recovery. I learned that my addiction was a disease and that my focus in treatment was to learn more about myself.

I learned that I am a good person and can be responsible. I realized I could stop prostituting and lying all the time, and that Hector and I could begin to trust each other. I felt good about myself for the first time.

Showing My Love

In parenting classes I learned that I could become a real parent to my daughter and have family activities with her and my husband. I learned about unconditional love and how to show Little Mama my love, so she knows that I do love her.

In May 2001 we got unsupervised weekend visits. For those two years, I couldn't wait for Fridays.

I got anxious by Wednesday. All I could think of was kissing and hugging her. I loved talking with her on the way home, planning what we would do together for the weekend.

On Saturday we went to Bible study. I loved being there with her, letting her know that God loves us. For the two hours that we were there, I felt that everything was OK.

Some afternoons, Hector and Little Mama would color together, and she made sure he stayed in the lines. They watched Nickelodeon together and talked, little conversations about

what was going on with each other. He's a very protective dad with her.

Keeping My Sobriety

By Sunday it was time to say goodbye. Then I just waited for Fridays again.

As time passed, I became so proud of myself. I have come so far, learning how to be a responsible mother and an honest wife, and keeping my sobriety.

After two years and 11 months of fighting to turn our lives around, Hector and I got Little Mama home. On March 25, 2004, we went to family court. My heart was pounding. I was praying, "God, please give me a chance."

I will never forget her little face on the day of our first visit. I could see that she was tremendously hurt. It was a wake-up call that we needed to get ourselves together.

The judge told us, "Stay away from drugs if you want to keep her home, and don't want to face me again in this courtroom." My God, all I could do was cry. I couldn't believe that she said the words I'd been waiting for so desperately.

Then the judge joked, "Please advise your client not to cry in my courtroom."

My lawyer laughed and said I was going to make her cry, too.

I thought that once Lydia was home for good, our family would feel perfect. But for the first couple weeks she gave me a really hard time. She didn't want to brush her teeth or wash her hair. She totally refused to pick up her toys. I had to tell her, "Go to your room." This little angel had a bad side I'd never seen.

Sometimes we had arguments and we both ended up in tears. Our arguments scared me. I didn't want every little thing to turn into a fight.

Luckily, ACS required us to go to family therapy every week for a year after Lydia came home. So I discussed it with the therapist. He told us to make little steps with her. He reminded me that Hector and Little Mama and I are all going through changes.

The therapist said it would take time for Lydia to adjust to our home and our different rules and schedules. He was right—it took a long time for Little Mama to settle down. But there has been so much to celebrate, too.

I love getting Little Mama ready for school every day, especially doing her hair: putting the gel in, pulling it into ponytails and then braiding them. When I was on crack, I honestly didn't care about Little Mama's hygiene or how she looked. I also wasn't loving her like a real mother should. I never took her out—not to

the park, or shopping.

Being a sober mom is 100 percent better. I make sure she eats well and that I have food in the house, and that she takes baths and washes her hair. I take her to the park. We play together—hide and seek and follow the leader—and then we get an icee and sit in the grass watching soccer or baseball games.

I feel grateful that the judge finally gave my husband and me a second chance to be parents, and proud of myself for going through drug treatment, therapy and parenting classes so I could bring her home.

Giving and Caring

My parenting has gotten a lot better in the months since Lydia first came home. We eat dinner every night now, sitting together at the table to discuss our plans for the next day.

We bake cakes, make arts and crafts projects and talk about little things she's thinking about. I love her personality. She's very giving and caring.

When she acted up, I had to realize that Lydia's not a perfect angel, but she is a good kid. We still have difficult moments, but I'm getting better at staying calm.

Lydia's bedtime is the best time of the day for me. At about 8:30 p.m., she and I go to her room and read fairy tales. We hug and kiss and she says her prayers. After she lies down, she always calls to her daddy for a cold cup of water.

We are all together as a family when we put her to bed. She looks like an angel, protected by God, when she sleeps.

ABOUT **Rise**

Rise is a magazine by and for parents who have been involved with New York City's child welfare system (ACS). Its mission is to provide parents with true stories about the system's role in families' lives and information that will help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

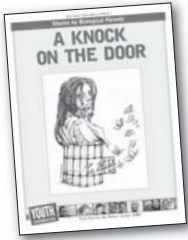
For more information about Rise, or to join the writing staff, please call Nora McCarthy at (212) 279-0708 x113. Or find Rise on the web at www.youthcomm.org/rise.

Most of the stories were written by participants in the writing

group run by the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP) and Represent magazine. CWOP is an advocacy program that teaches parents about their rights. For more information about CWOP, call (212) 348-3000. Represent is a magazine written by and for youth in foster care nationwide. For more information about Represent, call (212) 279-0708.

Rise is published by Youth Communication, which is dedicated to publishing stories by those whose voices are rarely heard in the media. It is funded by the Child Welfare Fund.

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'Do You Love Your Children?'

BY ROSITA PAGAN

In rehab, everyone would introduce themselves like, "I'm so-and-so and I'm an addict," but I didn't believe I was an alcoholic, so I would say, "I'm Rosita," and that would be that.

Then one day the director of my rehab group asked me, "Do you love your children?"

"Yes, I do, very much," I told him.

"No, you don't," he replied.

"How can you stand there and tell me I don't love my children?"

"Because if you did love your children you wouldn't need our services."

I felt stunned, like someone had hit me over the head with a rock. He was right. His comment made me feel I needed to get serious about my rehabilita-

tion so I could love my girls like a real mother should. I finally realized that my drinking problem was serious, and that my girls were removed because of my actions.

Soon after, when it was my turn to introduce myself, I said, "Good morning, my name is Rosita and I'm an alcoholic." To my surprise, the group started clapping and saying, "She finally admitted it." That was a great feeling. I think they were just waiting for me to come to my senses.

In rehab, I learned to love myself again and to feel strong despite feelings like shame, betrayal and worthlessness. I learned that, while drinking, I couldn't be of any use to anyone because my main concern was getting drunk. By staying sober, I could connect with and take care of my kids.

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