

Rise is a magazine by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

# Rise

ISSUE NUMBER 4, SUMMER 2006

BY AND FOR  
PARENTS IN THE  
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

## Together Again

When children come home from foster care, parents and kids have to get to know each other once more. Parents who've been to rehab, therapy or parenting classes have changed, and their kids have had experiences in care that their parents don't know about or understand. On top of that, it can be difficult to deal with the anger, guilt and anxiety you all feel, and to show each other the love and happiness you have inside.

In this issue, parents about what helped their families become whole again.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARTELL BROWN



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## Baby Steps

*I had to get to know my daughter again when she came home.*

BY SYLVIA PEREZ

When my daughter, Lydia, 5, came home after two and a half years in foster care, it was so different from having her home only on the week-ends. The best part was that we didn't have to rush spending time together, or deal with having to say goodbye on Sundays. She always used to say, "Mom, I don't want to go the other house. When am I going to come home forever?" It felt good not to have to tell her, "When the judge says it's time."

But for the first couple weeks she was giving 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 yell at her to do these little things, or tell her, "Go to your room." This little angel had a bad side I'd never seen.

### 'Does She Hate Me?'

One day she got mad at me because I was yelling at her to do her chores. She started throwing toys at me. I

didn't want to spank her, so I told my husband, Hector, to come and get her. His voice is so harsh and deep that he scared her into her room.

Then she started slamming her bedroom door. I was so pissed off that this little girl would challenge me that way. All I wanted to do was grab her by the arm and start spanking her. But I fear that if I discipline Little Mama by spanking her I will truly hurt her, and I really don't want to hurt her and make her scared of me. Even when I yell at her angrily she starts crying.

To keep myself from hurting her, I sat on the couch in my living room and just cried. I really cried hard, thinking, "All I wanted her to do was pick up her toys," and, "Does she really hate me so much to throw her toys at me? I worked so hard for her."

My husband went to her room and told her, "You see, Lydia. You made your mom cry. You have to respect

your mom."

I took a deep breath and waited for her response. Our house was silent for that moment. Then I heard her little feet coming into the living room. She came in silently, like she was scared of me, and I felt afraid of myself, that I had frightened her so much just with my words.

### 'Mommy? Mommy?'

Little Mama has long black hair and big, dark eyes. She looked up at me and said, in her tiny, squeaky little voice, "Mommy? Mommy?"

Her shoulders were down and her tummy was sunk as she approached, disguised as a little angel. I asked her, "Lydia, do you not understand why I'm upset?"

Then she started crying and hugging me. "Mommy, I need help picking up my toys," she said. At that moment, I stopped feeling so angry and just



True Stories by Teens

wanted to understand her and find out why she got out of control like that.

I told her, "You need to stop slamming the door, and never, ever throw things at me again."

**The Chore Chart**

She's never thrown anything since then. But our arguments scared me. I love her so much. I don't want these little things to turn into a fight.

We've been going to family therapy every week since she came home. So I discussed it with the therapist. He told us to make it little steps with her, and that all of us—me, Hector and Little Mama—are going through changes. He said it will take time for Lydia to adjust to our home and our different rules and schedules.

After that, I remembered something I learned in parenting class. The teacher said to make a chart of household chores. I decided to make one together with Lydia, and to give her a small allowance for each chore.

**Counting to 10**

We got some papers and markers to start. I put on one paper how much she could earn for each thing, like she gets 5 cents for feeding our pets, 10 cents to brush her teeth, 7 cents to wash her hair, and 10 cents to go to bed at 8:30 p.m. She put on the chart to dress herself for school and in her pajamas.

The chart is actually working. Getting her to do her chores is a lot easier now and she puts the money in her piggy bank.

But at times, her attitude with me still really makes me angry. If I tell her, for example, "Stop sitting on the arm of the couch!" she looks at me and rolls her eyes and says, "Mom, I'm just sitting."

It gets tiring repeating myself. So now I've learned to take a deep breath and start counting to 10. I only end up at number 5 or 6. I honestly don't know how I would handle it if I got to 10.

**Enjoying the Little Things**

The nicest part of our day is when I get Little Mama ready for school every day, especially doing her hair: putting the gel in, pulling it into pony-tails and then braiding them.

It feels good to do her hair, because when I was on crack, I honestly didn't care about her hygiene or how she looked. I wasn't loving her like a real mother should. I never took her out—not to the park, or shopping. I spent my time worrying about who

**Not an Angel, But a Good Kid**

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 together, 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 she's not a perfect

angel, but she is a good kid.

We still have difficult moments, but I'm getting better at staying calm. I'm grateful to have my husband. Even though I take care of Lydia most of the time, he and I discuss how to handle situations with her.

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 three fairy tales: *Little Red Riding Hood*, *The Ugly Duckling* and *Cinderella*. 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. When she sleeps she looks like an angel, protected by God.

I cried hard, thinking, 'Does she really hate me to throw her toys at me? I worked so hard for her.'



was going to watch her while I went outside to get money for crack.

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 waited four years to be able to be a full-time mom, to love her and take care of her every day. Spending time with her, I feel proud of myself for going through drug treatment, therapy and parenting classes so I could bring her back home.

**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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# A Safe Place to Connect

*How therapy can help your family heal.*

Adrienne Williams-Myers, program director of Project Safe at the Northside Center for Child Development, explains how therapy can support reunifying families:

**Q: How can therapy help families reconnect?**

**A:** When parents and kids are involved in the system, their world has been full of other people telling them what to do. Therapy is a time for them to focus on themselves and their goals. I help families identify their strengths, resilience and love for each other, and to really work on enhancing those strengths so they can stay together.

By learning how they overcame the troubles that led to their separation, families can use their strengths to get through the confusing emotions and tensions that come with reunification.

**Q: What do parents and kids often feel when they've been separated?**

**A:** The parent usually comes in feeling a tremendous amount of guilt because she didn't do what she needed to do to prevent children from being removed. Mothers may also blame the system or the school system for making the call, or blame the other parent or relatives that didn't support her.

Sometimes mothers still feel angry that the way they punished their children was considered abuse. Many times they will tell us, "My mom hit me, my teachers hit me. What's the problem? I'm fine."



ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIEL MATEO

tape recorder and then listen to themselves. I ask them to watch each other communicate, including all forms of communication: words, body language, hugging and kissing.

I'll ask them things like, "How do you see yourself positively? How do you think mom or teacher sees you positively? Or how do you think your child sees you positively? Tell me six great things about yourself." I'll ask them to write it down and share it with each other. Sometimes they're kind of shocked to find out that mom sees them in a positive light, or that the other people in their family notice the same positive things.

At some point, I'll also ask the kids to say what they went through in foster care to help their parents understand that painful time. If it's too upsetting, they can write it down and hold it for a while before sharing it, or even mail it.

Therapy can help make a safe place for everyone in the family to express themselves, especially to express the anger in a healthy way. It's better if children and parents don't hold that anger inside or express it in blowups.

Therapy can also help moms work on the behaviors that will help their children trust them again. A parent who was using drugs or drinking usually was in the habit of making false promises and not following through. Moms can learn how to be there for their kids by making only the promises they can follow through on. Becoming a trusting family again really happens one day at a time.

**'I help families identify their strengths and use their strengths to get through the confusing emotions and tensions that come with reunification.'**

For the children, there's a lot of anger and anxiety about ending up back in care again. The little ones, especially, feel a lot of separation anxiety. They're anxious and fearful that the system will take them away again, and they've lost trust in their parents' ability to protect them.

Older children tend to be angry and to blame the parent. They need a period of time to get to know the parent again and to feel comfortable trusting the parent. If substance abuse

issues led to the child going into foster care, they need to be sure that mom is not picking up again.

**Q: What are some techniques that help parents and kids get to know each other?**

**A:** In family therapy, I help them get to know and trust each other, mostly by allowing them simply to talk and hear each other. Sometimes I ask them to write feelings or experiences down in journals, or to talk into a



# On the Right Track

*Working with your lawyer to get your children back.*

*Maxine Ketcher, senior staff attorney at Legal Services for New York City–Bronx, explains how your lawyer can help you get to reunification – and get the services you need to support your family.*

**Q: How do parents know they're on track to reunification?**

**A:** If you're on track, you should be getting increased visits, especially unsupervised visits. If your visitation isn't increased over a period of six months, even though you think you're doing well, you should ask, "What's going on? What are the differences in opinion between how I see my case and how the agency sees me?"

If you disagree with the service plan the agency has for you, you might want to ask someone you trust, "What services do you think I need or my family needs for us to get back together?" Work with your lawyer and the agency to come up with a plan that seems useful for everyone.

**Q: What are some reasons a case might not be progressing?**

**A:** Very often a block to reunification is that a family's service plan is not clear. Parents get caught up in this cycle of going to services without really knowing what they're supposed to achieve in order to come together as a family again.

It happens because the judge and people at the agencies start speaking in shorthand, or they don't understand the services that are available from all the different systems out there.

So the service plan might say "go to therapy," without saying what is supposed to be gained by going to therapy. If the therapist and the parent don't understand the goal, how can they work toward it?

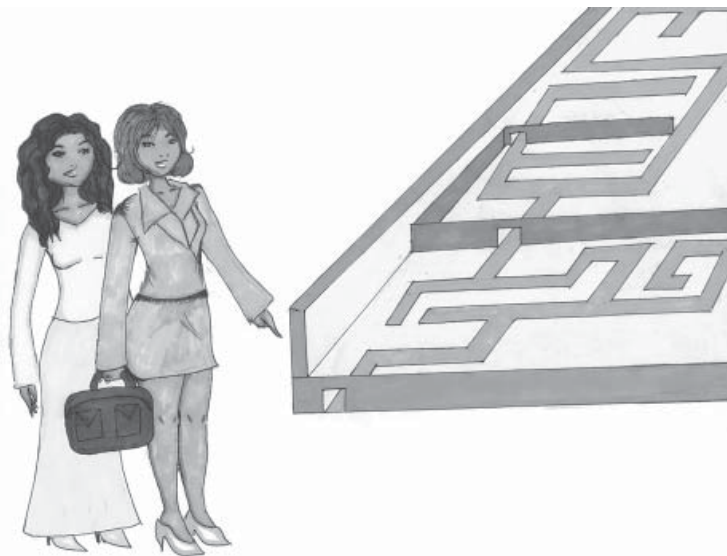


ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICIA BATTLES

**'Parents can get caught up in a cycle of going to services without really knowing what they're supposed to achieve in order to come together as a family again.'**

Or the agency says, "Take parenting skills classes." The parent says, "I went five times! Why are they still telling me to go to parenting skills?"

Lawyers can work with parents to get the agencies to give a clearer statement, like, "The reason we want you to go to parenting skills classes is because we want you to learn to take care of your child with ADHD," or some other emotional or mental health issue.

Then the lawyer or social worker can help develop a more appropriate service plan, because most parenting skills classes are not going to teach that. A parent might need a homemaker service through the Office of Mental Health, or some other support service where the parent and child learn life skills together.

Unless you have a really good advocate to sort that out, it can be hard to make sense of what you really

need to achieve to get your children home.

A parent's attorney should sort out what ACS or the agency is really concerned about, explain the holdup to their client, get their view on it, and work to solve those issues by getting the parent the right services.

Other times, the attorney tries to get the agencies to understand that certain improvements they'd like to see might not happen, but that won't necessarily mean the children will be at risk of harm.

For instance, when agencies are dealing with parents who are mentally ill, they often think, "They can't be with their children, because we can never tell when they'll decompensate [fall apart] again." But there's a lot of mentally ill people doing fine out there, and mental illness should not be a barrier to reunification if the parent is getting the right services and

has a plan for handling the situation if she starts to have problems again.

The attorney's job is to say, "Hold it, this issue not going away, so how are we realistically going to deal with it?" Just because someone is mentally ill or mentally retarded, for example, doesn't mean they can't take care of their children with appropriate supports.

**Q: How can parents work with lawyers to make sure the reunification succeeds?**

**A:** When children end up coming back into foster care it's often because there's some failure in connecting to services. The plan is for a certain support to be in place, but it doesn't get in place at the same time the children actually return home. A child might have some adjustment difficulties and the mom says, "I think my child could use more therapy, or we both could," but the first therapy appointment available is two months away. That's not going to work, but that's a reality.

The best case scenario is for the lawyer and parent to sit down before the child comes home and decide what supports are needed. You don't want to have too many services or too few. At best, we'd also make sure the providers are appropriate. Just like someone might test two or three doctors or therapists before choosing a person to see, parents should go check out the agency, school, or clinic they're expected to turn to.

Often the clients will accept whatever's suggested, and agencies often don't feel comfortable with people moving around and finding the best fit, but it's important to do that if you can.

Sometimes, you also have to say, "Is this really the right thing to do? Do we want to slow the reunification

down a bit so we can make sure the family has the supports to stay connected?" Sometimes you get resistance from the agency or the child's representative, but that might be the best thing to do.

There's also pressure sometimes not to give the parent certain services because of where the money is going to come from—whether it's foster care money, preventive, aftercare money or what. But a family is always entitled to the 20 preventive services

outlined in the state regulations, so attorneys need to say, "Sort out where the money is going to come from, but the families are entitled to these things."

**Q: What should parents do if their families are having trouble after the kids come home?**

**A:** After some time apart, it will be an adjustment for a family to be back together. Usually there's a honey-

moon period that's more positive than later on when the family starts feeling comfortable with each other again.

But it's a very difficult thing for parents or even children to say, "Hey, we need some extra help." There's just so much pressure on everyone and they fear that if something is not going right it will raise the question, "Should the children remain at home?"

I would say the best way to handle it is to go to your attorney, because your attorney can maintain confidentiality. She is still bound by attorney-client privilege. The attorney may be able to reach out to various services to see whether an agency will be helpful or harmful. Attorneys are not trained to support families in crisis, but we are trained to protect our clients and get them the help they need so they're not in a worse legal situation down the road.

## Taking it Slow

*I have farther to go before Barbie comes home.*

BY BERTHA MARQUEZ

Unfortunately, many times when children go into foster care, the relationship between parents and children grows worse instead of better. Parents are usually stressed and angry that the system has invaded their lives. Often kids are too. They take that anger out on each other. Instead of communicating the right way, parents and children let the anger take over.

But I've made efforts to prove to my daughter that although I was using drugs and she's now in the system, no one and nothing is going to get in between our love.

When I visit Barbie at the agency, I am always on time, and Barbie and I play and color together. We talk about the things that are important to her and her growing up to be a responsible young lady. For her birthday, I bought cake, soda, candy and pizza for all the kids at the agency. Whenever I see her, I hug her a lot and I look at her with love and grace.

Until recently, I had visits with Barbie just once a week, but now I've received permission to have her for entire weekends. That means she could come home soon, but I am

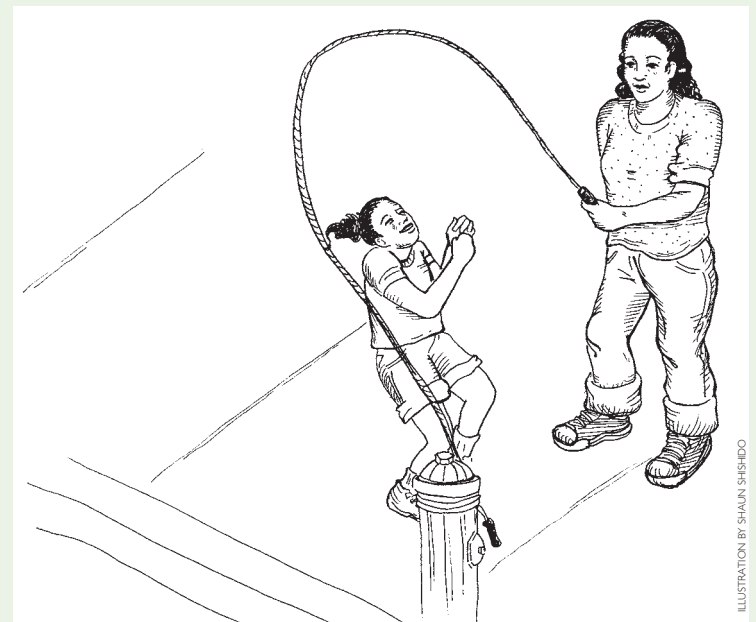
not rushing to have my daughter come home with me.

I still feel like there are many issues I need to work through. I still struggle with depression and anxiety, so I would like to go to therapy. I have also suffered some episodes of domestic violence that I feel I need to deal with. All of the services I have received already have helped me, but I still have farther to go.

I want to be more confident that I am ready to care for Barbie. After all, I have never dealt with the stress of having her home while I was clean, and I fear that I could overwhelm myself and relapse. I don't want to do that to myself or to Barbie.

Even though she seems strong, I know that Barbie is affected by all that she's gone through with me. I think if she came home and had to live with the fear of being removed again, that would be a tragedy. I don't want my daughter to feel like life's so hard that she could drown in a glass of water.

When Barbie was home with me last weekend, we had a wonderful time. We cleaned her room and painted



it two shades of light pink so she could feel comfortable and happy sleeping there. I also bought her the Power Puff sleeping accessories and I put up a poster of Mickey Mouse, because that's what I like, and she put up a poster of her favorite rap group. Then we went downstairs to jump rope.

But when Barbie and I went outside and I told her to put her jacket on because it was chilly, Barbie refused.

She gave me a little challenge. It was just a small thing, but I became nervous and distracted. I remembered when I was getting high and I would tell her to do something and she wouldn't.

At those times, it felt like more than I could deal with, but now I know that it shouldn't be. Still, I have those old feelings with me so I know I need help to learn how to deal with situations like those.

# Making My Son Proud

*I had to prove I could be trusted.*

BY ROSITA PAGAN

My son Louie has been a good kid ever since he was small. He rarely complained about anything. He was one of those toddlers that clings to the mother. Wherever I went he was there. Summers when I was outside playing spades, my son was curious so he kept pestering me until I taught him how to play. When we were short, my son would fill in.

As he got older, Louie loved basketball. He filled his room with posters of Michael Jordan. His dream was to become a great basketball player.

## Keeping His Distance

Then, when Louie was 12, some terrible things happened in our family. We found out his younger sister was being sexually abused by her father during weekend visits. Louie became angry. He blamed me because, as he put it, I allowed the courts to give her father visitation rights.

Even therapy did not seem to help my daughter. Seeing her suffer without knowing how to help her recover, I got stressed out and began to drink.

When I began drinking, Louie kept away from me. My son shut me out so he could take care of himself. I became aware of his feelings toward me when I realized he didn't introduce me to his friends anymore. In my stupor, I felt angry at him, not sad.

## My Son Stayed Focused

Louie would ignore me and go outside to play basketball with his friends. He would never invite his friends over because he didn't want them to see me drunk. He wouldn't return to the apartment unless he knew that I was passed out. He rarely spoke to me when I was awake. My son was ashamed of me and the way I was wasting my life away.



ILLUSTRATION BY GABRIEL MATEO

Despite everything happening at home, Louie kept himself focused. He always attended school. (Looking back I realize that school was an escape route for him.) When my children were removed and placed in foster care, Louie stayed with my sister and never gave her any trouble.

While he lived with my sister, Louie would only come see me when I was sober. Then he would ask me, "When are you going to get your life together?" or, "When am I coming home?" I would respond with, "One of these days." I figured I didn't have a problem. I felt I was having fun and he wanted it to stop.

## Back in His Life

Finally I went to rehab and got my act together, so Louie began to allow me back into his life. The day I came back from rehab, I saw Louie outside hanging out with some friends. As soon as he saw me, he ran to me,

hugged me and introduced me to his friends. I knew right there and then that he was meeting me halfway.

Soon after that I decided that it was time for me to express my regrets to my two older children, Louie and Rosemarie. I sat with them and told them, "You know I love you all, but I was not myself while under the influence. I know I must have embarrassed you while I was drinking and you probably hate me for that. I can't make up for the lost times but I would like a chance to make it up to you guys. I'm really sorry for what I've put you through and I promise I will work hard not to let alcohol come between us again."

Rosemarie said, "Mom, I understand why you went there and I feel your pain. Let's try to start a new OK." Louie did not say much only "Don't let it happen again."

Later on Louie let me know how upset he'd been with me. He came to me one day and expressed to me the anger he'd been feeling all those years. He said things like, "Now that you're sober don't go messing up like before. Don't lose this apartment or the girls again."

## Meeting His Girl

Soon my son began to trust me and let me learn about his life. He had a girlfriend that he'd been dating since junior high school. I didn't even know about her, and Anita didn't know Louie and his sisters were in foster care.

The first time I met Anita was at a street fair. It was the Puerto Rican Day festival on 116th st. I was talking to some friends when my son asked if I could take a walk with him. I said, "Sure."

We went down the block and I noticed a very pretty young lady just standing there. We approached her and Louie said to me, "Mom, this is the love of my life, Anita. Anita, this is my wonderful mom."

She hugged me and gave me a kiss. I felt weird because my son was in a serious relationship and I'd missed it. He'd already been dating Anita for two years! But when he introduced us, I knew my son was proud of me for turning my life around.

## Game Day

One day Louie asked me if I could attend one of his games. I said, "Sure."

That Friday I got all dressed up and went to see him play. My son played a good game. His school won. Afterward, he came to me all sweaty and hugged and kissed me and introduced me to some of his friends. That was a good feeling.



# Home at Last

*A new law lets 'legal orphans' return to family.*

Then my son's high school graduation came up. Louie's father came from Florida to attend. His sister Rosemarie asked Louie for his basketball jersey and she took it in and made it into a short dress. All of us attended the graduation – me, my two girls, my grandson and Louie's father.

During the ceremony they gave out a trophies. The first went to the best spectator who attended all the basketball games—that was Anita. The second trophy went to the MVP and best player—Louie!

## **Making Him Proud**

My son's determination has also inspired me. Last year I decided that I wanted to do something to better myself. Louie keeps a steady job, and I wanted to work, too.

I joined an organization that helps parents advocate for themselves in the child welfare system. Then I applied for a parent advocate position at a foster care agency. After the interview, the lady told me I was hired. I felt numb and still feel numb. But I was calm enough to tell my son about it.

I called him and told him, "I got hired!"

"I want to hear about it tonight," he said.

When he got home from work he said, "Mom, tell me what happened." I explained and he said, "I'm so proud of you," and handed me a \$50 bill!

I'm happy that I can make my son proud of me because I'm so proud of him.

*In January, California's state legislature passed a law allowing teens in care to ask the courts to allow them to return home years after their parents' lost their rights. The new law applies to teens who seem destined to remain in foster care until aging out, and whose parents' circumstances have changed. Miriam Krinsky, director of the Children's Law Center in Los Angeles, explains how and why the Center advocated for this law:*

Over the years we've heard from youth in long-term foster care who are considered "legal orphans." These are teens whose parents' parental rights were terminated, but they were never adopted. Their only plan was to stay in foster care until they aged out. So they have no legal biological family connection, yet they have no other family connections, either.

In July 2002, there were 5,846 legal orphans in California who were not yet living in adoptive homes. For nearly 1,000 of these children, adoption was no longer even the goal of their case plan. Many of these youth told us how disconnected it made them feel to have no legal family at all.

We've learned from teens and from studies that many of the teens "orphaned by the system" will go back to their biological parents when they leave care, because that's the only connection they've known. But since it's not a legal decision, the system does not do anything to help them reconnect after years of separation, or to provide support to the parents.

If we could take a second look at the decision to terminate a parent's rights, that would give us the ability to revise that decision if, years later, the child might be better off return-

ing to the biological parent. That would allow the system to actually support these families in reconnecting. But the law didn't allow the courts to take a second look.

We found some cases where the possibility had been considered. For example, a parent had relinquished her rights believing that her child would end up in the care of a close family friend. But after a few years the family friend passed away. The judge couldn't reverse the decision, though. The judge had to say, "I really wish we could go back, but the law doesn't allow us to do it. This is an injustice."

In one wacky case, we learned that a parent had mental health concerns that led to the child being in foster care, but the child was in long-term care and desperately wanted to reestablish their connection. She also wanted to make family decisions the parent wasn't capable of. In the end, the child adopted the parent. We've also heard of parents adopting their own children. Those are crazy scenarios.

So a few years ago, we put together some facts and an analysis of the problem we wanted to convince the California legislature that the courts need a legal way to revise the decision to keep a child and parent separated if their circumstances have changed.

At first there was a lot of concern from adoptive families and adoption advocates. They worried that if parents could just come back in the picture at any time, people thinking about adopting from foster

care would not want to begin the process of adopting a child, only to get their hopes dashed. That might mean that fewer kids who really do need to be adopted would get adopted.

We proposed a law that is carefully crafted so that we don't get in the way of parents seek to adopt. Basically, there's a few restrictions on asking the court to reconsider.

First, that process needs to begin as a request by the child, not by the biological parents. Everyone felt that it was important that a teen is choosing to ask the court to reconsider.

Second, there needs to be a passage of time. It can't be a quick, "Gee, on second thought, let's rethink that."



ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICIA BATTLES

Finally, the court needs to make a finding that it's in the best interest of the child. That means the parents' circumstances would have to have changed, and that the child, who was once

considered adoptable, now seems unlikely to get adopted.

The legislature went along with the bill we suggested, and it became law in January. Now we can address the legal orphan problem.

I'm not aware of any other state that has this kind of law. But now that California has found a way to legally reconsider the options for teens who have not found permanent connections in foster care, I hope other states will pass similar laws.

# Paying for the Past

*After years in foster care, my son came home angry. Could we be a family again?*

BY CARMEN LYDIA CABAN

On December 8, 2000, my 15-year-old son was discharged into my custody after spending a long time in a residential treatment center. I thought everything would be good. I had wanted him to come home for so long. But his anger soon overwhelmed me.

My children were taken from me when my son was 5, because of my drug addiction. In foster care, Luis' anger just grew and grew. He was angry at the system because he was separated from me and from his siblings. And he was angry at me because he depended on me and I let him down.

I said I would never be like my own mother, who'd neglected her children out of frustration with my father, an alcoholic. But trying to hide the scars of my past, I slipped and allowed myself to fall deep into a life of drug abuse, which in turn hurt my children.

## Ready to Come Home

While in care my son was fighting and threatening kids because that anger kept growing. But at 13 he began to calm down because I was finally succeeding in conquering my drug addiction. He realized that if his behavior improved, he might have a chance of coming home.

He started following the rules at school and he and I attended family therapy, too. His anger was the topic we discussed most of the time.

## About to Explode

For the first few months that my son was home, everything did seem OK. But then, suddenly, Luis became very rebellious. He felt he could stay home, not attend school and smoke marijuana. And his anger was explosive. He would push holes in the wall and destroy property in my



ILLUSTRATION BY SKYLER KANE IRASHER

home. Even when he stayed to himself, I could feel that he was about to explode.

When I tried to tell Luis that he couldn't keep behaving this way, he didn't listen. Maybe he thought he had come home to the same old mother he knew before he was taken from me, the mother who got high and allowed him to do whatever he wished.

## I Felt Devastated

As our home became crazier and crazier, with yelling and even some physical fights, I began to feel very guilty and very angry at my son for not letting me be a parent to him. I felt devastated.

My main concern was that my boy was riding on a path to devastation. I wanted to tell him about the many times I put my life in danger as a teen just to get back at my own mother.

**My main concern was that my boy was riding on a path to devastation. I wanted to tell him about the many times I put my life in danger as a teen just to get back at my own mother.**

I was angry at her and I wanted her to feel pain, and the only way I knew how to do that was to make myself suffer. So I'd stepped into the streets to see all that life had to offer and got caught up with some wild kids who were dangerously violent at the sound of a heartbeat. I didn't want my son to suffer like I did because he couldn't deal with his anger at me.

But he wasn't going to hear a lecture from me.

## Time for Tough Love

Eventually my son's rebellion had me so overwhelmed that I thought the

system might be the only answer. I was afraid he would think I was giving up all hope in him, so I didn't ask for my son to go back into care, but I did tell the caseworker honestly about the problems we'd been having.

Eventually the authorities came on their own to pick him up because of his failure to attend school.

As he walked out the door, I held back painful tears and sorrow. I stopped Luis as the worker was taking him and said, "Luis, I love you and I'm just trying not to allow the streets to take control of my son the way it



took control of Mommy.”

As I watched out the window, I thought he might glance at me but he didn't. I understood. What was happening to him was his worst nightmare. It was mine, too. It felt like my past was repeating itself and I was losing one of my babies to the system once again. I just hoped that one day he would forgive me.

### **‘Mom, Do You Love Me?’**

Then one day, after Luis had been in care a few months, the social worker called. My son had gone AWOL. I felt heart-broken. I felt like I was losing my son more and more.

A short time later, though, he showed up at my house. I kept trying to talk some sense into his young mind. Finally he said, “Mom, I respect what you are saying, but I still will not be returning to the system. I am going to take care of myself.”

A month and a half went by without a word from my son. Then one cold night he appeared at my friend's house. I saw my son dragging his body up the stairs. He was so exhausted he seemed intoxicated.

The feelings that came over me made me stand still, numb, not knowing what to say to him. I just stared and had a flashback of my own life as a young girl in the streets.

My son said to me with a staggering voice, “Mom, I love you, I miss you. Do you love me? What did I do wrong?” He kept repeating these words over and over again.

Then he said, “Can I have a hug?” I held him close to my body and embraced him as I cried silently, holding back tears.

I wanted to help my son, but I didn't want to take him back without any promises that he'd change. So I asked Luis to come upstairs and I asked my friend, “Please talk to my son, I cannot stay. I have to go.”

### **‘I Have Faith in You’**

About a week later, I received a call from the preventive worker that my son had requested a meeting. When I arrived, he said to the worker, “I want my mother to give up all her rights to being my mother.” Then he turned to me and said, “So what will it be?”

I replied, “My son, my rights will terminate the day I die. Until then you are stuck with me.” After that, he stomped out of the office.

A couple of months later he had a court date scheduled. I did not expect him to show up, but then I heard him whisper behind me, “Mom, is it over? What did the judge say?” I looked back at him and he looked frightened.

The worker turned to me and said, “Remember, be calm. Tell him how you feel and what you would like from him. I have faith in you.”

### **Making it Work**

I asked Luis if he wanted to walk alongside me to Chinatown. He agreed.

At first he only said a few words here and there, but after a while he broke down and told me what he was up to and of course it was no good. The most painful piece was when he confessed he was sleeping on the train, with no place to go and no one to turn to, just the negative associates he met along the way.

This time around, I decided, my son and I were going to make it work, even if I died trying.

### **Getting to Know Each Other**

He came home soon after, on March 4, 2002. For the moment, our relationship is better and so is his behavior. Every night when he comes home we talk about how his day went. He says he's working helping out a friend with cars or distributing fliers.

I'm not sure I always believe him. He might be, but he also might just be playing around with his time. Still, we've made an appointment for him to start a program to get his GED and to get drug counseling, and I hope that will give him some structure in his life.

In the past, when he left his stuff around the house, I'd get mad, but now I've learned not to be bothered. When he breaks other rules, like coming home late or smoking pot, we talk about it and usually he apologizes.

### **Hurts Take Time to Heal**

After doing some soul-searching, I've also had to realize that there's a huge gap in our relationship created by those eight years that my son was in foster care. When parents and children are reunited, both sides have to face more than they bargained for.

As parents, we have to deal with our children being angry at us for failing to be someone they could always rely on. Those feelings do not go away easily. And we also have to deal with the anger we sometimes feel toward our children, even though we don't want to.

Living with my son is like starting all over again. Luis has had to get to know me and I've had to get to know him.

## Reducing the Risk

### *ACS' efforts to support reunified families.*

When children return home from foster care, they're happy to be a family again, and fearful that the stresses that broke them apart once before could tear them apart again.

Every year, about 13 percent of children who have gone home end up going back into foster care.

In part, that's because caseworkers often find it difficult to continue working with families after reunification, since they begin working with a new family with children

in care right away. And families needing more support often fear turning to preventive services because they worry that their children will be removed again.

But in the past year, New York City's foster care system has spent millions on new programs to strengthen families so kids don't re-enter foster care. These programs—called “aftercare”—are designed to better prepare fragile families for reunification, and to continue giving support once kids go home.

Nancy Martin, an assistant commissioner at ACS, said she hopes parents and foster care agencies will begin to see aftercare services as essential. “Even though reunification is a good change, it's still is a big change, and it's understandable that families might need help working through the transition,” she said. “Crises happen in all families. We hope aftercare will help families move through those periods without seeing the problem escalate.”

# Loving Letters

*Reconnecting with my mom through the mail.*

BY ERICA HARRIGAN

My mother and I use letters to catch up on lost time and heal from our painful pasts together.

For years my mother and I had lost contact completely. I was taken from her as a young child, and then again when I was 12. (My dad split from the family when I was little.) I've been in foster care since then, and during that time she lost her rights in the court.

But last year I wrote a story for *Represent* and sent it to her in the mail. My story described the two years I spent in a mental hospital as a child, and my struggles to deal with the effects of my mother's explosive temper and drug abuse. I also wrote about nights I spent sleeping in the hallway of our building, which led to me getting sexually assaulted.

Even though the story described the pain I went through, I sent it to my mother so she could see how well I was doing, and to show her how proud I was of my writing. I wanted to let her know that I still wanted her to be a part of my life despite the mistakes she made raising me.

## Patching Things Up

I was unsure if it was a good idea to be in touch. The court demanded that my mother stay away from me, and I feared that if the judge found out that my mother was back in my life, I'd be in trouble.

But taking the risk was worth it. When my mother wrote back, I felt like a piece of my broken heart was repaired and a part of my pain was wiped away.

In my letters since then, I've let my mother know that I am not angry at her for what I went through in foster

care, but I am angry at her for not taking care of her responsibilities. It was hard for her to support two kids, but everybody struggles and that isn't a reason to skip out on your kids.

I also let her know that I appreciate that she is now trying to make up for the bad things she did.



## 'It Hurts to Remember'

From my mom's letters, I've found out that she went through similar experiences to me. She wrote:

"I am very proud of Erica Harrigan. I can't believe I lived to see our daughter in the youth magazine telling true stories. I'm sorry I had to hear about our young lady being abused and raped as a child. All my life I was being abused and raped also.

PS—Keep up the good work writing stories and letters."

Another time she wrote:

"You are a good writer. I hope you're in the next issue. I understand that it hurts to talk about the past, because it hurts to remember the pain. The courts have demanded that I face my fear. I've been sent to support groups for sexual abuse, and handling rejection and abandonment. All of us hate to talk about these painful problems."

## The Same Pain

Reading her letters, I was glad that my mother could understand my pain growing up. I felt less alone knowing we'd been through similar things.

Writing to my mother also has given me a better insight into why she



I wanted my mother to be a part of my life despite the mistakes she made raising me. When she wrote back, I felt like a piece of my broken heart was repaired.

used to drink and become angry and violent when I was younger. She had her own problems to deal with on top of mine. Knowing her struggles, I felt I could forgive my mother and feel less hurt and anger, and that we could build a better bond together.

rather than react in a violent manner when someone ticks me off. I was also proud to see that my mom is working on her anger, too.

## 'Hugs and Kisses'

My mother seems to feel sad about the way she parented me when I was a kid. She wrote:

"Dear Erica, I hope you're doing fine. I miss you...I tried to be a good mother...I love you for being a nice daughter. I'm happy for your new life. When you grow up to be a mother one day try to be better than Joann Harrigan Norman. Remember to set rules for your children. Hugs and kisses, Your mother."

She told me to set rules for children (when I have them)

because she didn't do that with my sister and me. We had no curfew, chores, or discipline. That caused me to become out of control. She set no rules partly because she was checked out, but my mother also wanted us to have the freedom she didn't have growing up. I get the impression that my grandmother didn't play no games.

## Trouble All Around

Despite enduring a lot of violent behavior when I was living with my mom, I also experienced painful things living in foster care. Sometimes I feel I would have been better off



ILLUSTRATION BY KAROLINA ZANIBENCO

## Hot Tempers, Short Fuses

Soon my mother sent another letter, this time about anger. Like my mom, I struggle with blowups:

"...Don't let nobody or no one push your buttons. Your mom and dad, we both have hot tempers, short fuses. If you find yourself getting anger problems—count to 10, think first. Use writing to get inside your heart and soul. Every day write a line saying something good about yourself."

My mother's tips actually work! I've been trying to follow those tips

# Building Bridges

*Helping families communicate and connect.*

*BridgeBuilders is a new program to help teens at JCCA's Pleasantville Cottage School, a residential treatment center in Westchester, reunite with their families. Sandra Rhodes, director of permanency planning at Pleasantville, describes how the program helps teens and parents work out their conflicts:*

Sometimes there's no real reason a child is still in care except that visits don't go well. It used to be very hard for us to work with families to make the visits better, because the kids are up here in Westchester all week long, and the families can't come up here much.

The BridgeBuilders are people we've trained to go out into the home on the weekend, up to four hours each day. The BridgeBuilders identify what's going well with the family, how they're communicating and what are some of the hot spots.

## **A Goal of Harmony**

We go out there with a "harmony chart" and we sit with the family and say, "Let's identify your strengths." They each say what they like about each other. Often they hear things they didn't know the other person thought.

Then we ask, "What do you see as things that interfere with you achieving harmony in the household?" It's almost always the same things. The parents say, "She's disrespectful, disobeys curfew, doesn't go to school." The child will say, "She treats me like a baby, there's no trust, she gives me no money, my curfew's too early."

We work with them to come up with a compromise that will help them reach their goal of harmony. That's not something you can do in a day. The first step might just be for them to be able to say there's a problem without that being too much for family to bear.

We're working with a girl who is in the process of going home to an adoptive mom. There was a lot of conflict over curfew, respect, housekeeping, the typical things. We talked with both of them about teenage development in general, but also the girl's feelings about being put in care in first place, and her concerns about her mom's commitment to her.

## **The Fear of Rejection**

That's a big part of what the BridgeBuilders try to do—help the parents understand what foster care has felt like for these teens. The kids on this campus have been in many placements, they've had disrupted adoptions. This girl in particular was adopted and then came back into care, so it's not first time she felt

with my mother than being placed in foster care. At least my mother has always loved me. She expresses that a lot in her letters.

She wrote:

"Hello, Erica, Just a few words to say I love you, I'm doing fine..."

And:

"I love you and Nicole with all my heart and soul. The real world is different than living in the Bronx. Please remember to write back..."

I loved how she told me, "The real world is different than living in the Bronx." She meant that when we lived there, everywhere you turned there was trouble. It was like a trap that led to failure.

## **We've Both Changed**

Now my mother has reunited with my father in New Jersey and she's sober and taking care of herself. My father has changed, too, and he saves my mother from failing. She needs my father to look after her and make sure she doesn't slip.

I am proud of my mother! She has grown a lot. She's laying low in the home, writing me letters and being the mother that I always wanted: loving, giving and helpful, just like me.

I have grown a lot as well. My lifestyle was once about being with different boys and running the streets. Now I am stable, living on my own with my boyfriend, Michael. I found the courage to change.

I did go through a lot in the past with my mother, but I'm hopeful now that we're both growing together, getting to know one another and dealing with our problems head on.



ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICIA BATTLES

abandoned and rejected. She's really worried it will happen again.

It's very common that kids who fear rejection to act out just to get the rejection over with. It's not just bad behavior—they're fearful, they're traumatized. It's not that the kids are actually thinking, "I'll stay out all night so she'll get rid of me," but if you keep asking, "Why? Why? Why are you doing this?" you eventually get to, "She doesn't want me anyway."

We help the parents understand that they need to convey to their kids: "It doesn't matter what you do, I'm never going to give up on you. You're coming back here. This is a journey with ups and downs."

## **Remembering Their Love**

BridgeBuilders is voluntary, but we've found that the families really like the support, and they worry about how they'll do without it. Say a family has a fight on Wednesday. If they know the worker is coming Saturday, they can hold it together until then. Our goal would be to gradually increase the time between visits, from a week to two weeks to a month, so the family can see that they can stand on their own.

We also remind them of how far they've come using the tools. We might say, "Next time you have a fight, write down what you did—how was it different than the fights you had before, when the kid would come back here with her garbage bags of stuff?"

We just had a family retreat for six families who have reunified. They went boating, swimming, horseback riding, and had amazing time for three days. We wanted to give the families an environment without the stresses of home, so they could relax and remember how much they love each other.



# 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.

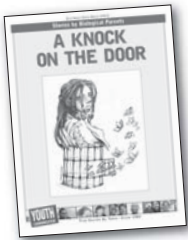
For more information about Rise, or to join the writing staff, please call Nora McCarthy at (212) 279-0708 x113. Or find Rise on the web at [www.youthcomm.org/rise](http://www.youthcomm.org/rise).

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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## Rebuilding Our Family

Last year my daughter sent me a poem called "Dear Mother." It began like this:

"Dear Mother, What happened to you? Why did you have to leave so soon?"

"Were you confused and didn't know what to do? Do you remember me? I'm sorry to say I don't remember a thing about you."

When I read her poem, I felt terrible that my daughter didn't know how much I thought about her, even though I didn't raise her because I was doing drugs. I became determined to let all of my children know that I knew I'd hurt them, but I loved them.

So last year, I helped organize a family reunion in Virginia Beach where I could reunite with four of my children who had been raised by my sister. I kept asking my sister, "Do they want to see me? How do they feel that I'm coming?"

My sister told me, "Relax, they are very excited. Just be yourself."

"Should I tell them what happened, why I wasn't there?" I asked her.

"They know, but it would be better if

they hear it from you," she said.

I could not wait for that day. I was preparing myself for what to say and do. Should I run and hug them or should I wait for them to come to me? Butterflies were inside my stomach.

I went with my husband and the two children I have at home: Tahjai, who is now 11, and Tyrek, who is 10.

When we arrived, I saw my first-born son and we ran to each other. I felt happy and overwhelmed at the same time. My children and I looked at picture albums and took private walks together and talked.

Before we ate we blessed the food. That's when I apologized to my children and my family for all the pain I caused. I also let them know that it wasn't their fault. I told them, "I got caught out there on crack cocaine and it was harder than I thought trying to get off. But I always loved you and never stopped thinking about you." We cried and hugged each other.

They told me that the past is behind us, and now that I'm back, we are going to move forward and build a family together.

—Tracey Carter

VISIT US ON THE WEB AT: [www.youthcomm.org/rise](http://www.youthcomm.org/rise)

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